

Title

Resilience, Adaptability and Solidarity: Auto-Ethnographic Reflections on Four Years of Networking Energy for Development

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the development and operationalization of a specific type of social innovation: networks. It draws upon the authors' experiences as coordinators of the Low Carbon Energy for Development Network (LCEDN) and Wind Empowerment (WE) to offer a comparative analysis of two different organisations, which have the shared goal of facilitating access to sustainable energy by providing opportunities for knowledge sharing and collaboration between experts. As would be expected in the field of international development, the geographical and cultural distances between network partners are large, which presents particular challenges for the establishment and development of a network –the core task has been how to reduce such challenges to the minimum online, whilst not losing nuances and understandings of socio-cultural difference key to making such a network more effective. The paper offers auto-ethnographic reflections from the past four years, highlighting the key lessons learned and will be of relevance to those looking to initiate or sustain a network in the field of energy for development, or even development more broadly. Resilience (recovering from external shocks, such as unstable funding sources), solidarity (mutual support between members during difficult times) and adaptability (evolving with the changing interests of members and broader context) were three cross-cutting themes that were found to be crucial for the sustainability of both networks.

Keywords: network, renewable energy, community, LCEDN, Wind Empowerment, reflections, lessons

Full Paper

1 Introduction

This paper presents a comparative analysis of two networks designed to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration within the domain of energy for development; both networks were developed in a combined approach, firstly an effort to take maximum advantage of the online environment and secondly to recognise and deploy face-to-face events and meetings where these would be most effective. Both networks were set up to coordinate the diverse range of academic, practitioner, commercial, regulatory and other stakeholders within specific sectors of this rapidly growing field and to identify communities of interest and practice in civil society more generally relevant to the effective functioning of the networks.

1.1 Potential development impact

Networks represent a particularly relevant form of social innovation in the digitally enabled world proceeding from the ICT revolution in the mid-1990s, where communication between stakeholders on opposite sides of the world has become far easier. Whereas cyber-connectivity has acted to open up the potential for greatly accelerated global efforts to provide universal access to energy (SE4All 2015), both networks were built on the understanding that face-to-face meetings continue to be critical methods for connecting to the wider community, sharing the

lessons learned from the vast amount of field experience that has now been amassed (Creech et al. 2012) and networking on a personal basis. The establishment of the *Energy Access Practitioner Network* in 2011 as part of the UN Foundation's *Sustainable Energy for All* (SE4All) initiative illustrates not only the high level political support for such networking activities (SE4All, 2015), but also the urgency of developing them as rapidly as possible given the imminent threat from anthropogenic global warming. Nevertheless, the challenges involved in developing such networking activities remain great, particularly where the focus is on sharing lessons drawn from local level experiences with the development of small-scale renewable energy technologies. Globally, it appears that there are lots of opportunities for high-level policy focused networking, far fewer exist at the practitioner /research level where there generally remains lack of network structures and exchange opportunities.

1.2 *Research objectives*

Depending on the research topic, there are a wide variety of networks globally, serving different communities of interest (and varieties of different communities within those communities of interests) and with a wide variety of different objectives, forms of operation and levels of influence. The challenges of setting up, operating and evolving such necessarily trans-scalar networks to meet the shifting, occasionally divergent interests of their diverse memberships are substantial. This paper seeks to highlight the key lessons learned from four years of experience with two specific networks operating in the low carbon energy and international development arena:

1. Wind Empowerment (WE)
2. The Low Carbon Energy for Development Network (LCEDN)

Whilst there are key points of convergence between the two networks (as well as shared personnel), the two initiatives have quite different origins, memberships and objectives reflecting their different sectoral and geographical orientations; these different origins have constituted both strengths and weaknesses in terms of making the networks as generally relevant as possible. The first part of the paper presents a brief outline of the history and dynamics of the two networks, whilst the second draws out the key lessons learned during the past four years.

1.3 *Wind Empowerment and the Low Carbon Energy for Development Network*

WE is a global association for the development of locally manufactured Small Wind Turbines (SWTs) for sustainable rural electrification. It represents over 40 member organizations in more than 25 different countries, consisting of wind turbine manufacturers, non-governmental organizations, universities, social enterprises, co-operatives, training centres, as well as over 1,000 individual participants. WE was founded in 2011 at the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal in response to the growing number of organisations around the world that have begun to locally manufacture SWTs. Following that first meeting, members and participants began to communicate primarily through Skype, email, webinars, a shared document library and a discussion forum (with sections related to the various working groups that the network has established) hosted on the online platform, WindEmpowerment.org. WE members met at the network's second global conference at the National Technical University of Athens in 2014 and are preparing for a third event in 2016 to be hosted in Argentina.

In contrast, the LCEDN was developed initially with a UK orientation, owing primarily to the UK focus of the original funder, the UK government Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC). The LCEDN was set up in the first instance to bring together the diverse and multi-disciplinary UK academic community working on energy and development issues and enhance its relationships with business, public sector and civil society organisations working in the same fields. Although the focus has become more international and outward-looking, the LCEDN remains strongly based in UK expertise in energy for development.

While the UK boasts considerable pools of expertise in both the energy and development fields, until recently, despite a supposed focus by UK universities on trans-disciplinarity, the two were rarely brought into conversation as a unified community of interest and practice. The LCEDN was launched in January 2012 funded originally by a fifteen month DECC¹ award and was centred on a group of five academic research centres that acted to facilitate a network of individuals and organisations concerned with promoting Energy for Development research in the UK and worldwide. The network aims to pinpoint UK strengths, identify where they could be deployed and highlight areas where expertise needs to be further developed, specifically through identifying commonalities of interest and getting disparate stakeholders with little/no knowledge of each other's work and interests to begin conversations and work out areas of mutual cooperation.

¹ UK Department of Energy and Climate Change

More recently, the LCEDN has also been actively seeking to promote collaborations between UK-based academics and researchers and research institutions from developing countries, as exemplified by its recent role in networking the 13 projects funded under the EPSRC²/DFID³/DECC1-funded Understanding Sustainable Energy Solutions (USES) research programme. The LCEDN has therefore begun to expand both its' membership database and mapping processes to include an international membership.

2 Methodology

In the organisers' response to our extended abstract we were asked to incorporate a short section in our paper devoted to the following questions: (i) what is, in your project or activity, the main factor of success in your training/knowledge transfer? (ii) What can you recommend to others concerning training/knowledge transfer? (how could your project or activity, in an ideal world, have the greatest impact?)

In fact, the main purpose of our paper is broadly to address the first of these questions, although we couch this somewhat more broadly than simply assessing the factors affecting the 'success' of knowledge transfer or training. We find these terms somewhat problematic since whilst both networks incorporate some elements of the provision of training opportunities and exchanges of experience and perspective we find the language of 'knowledge transfer' somewhat problematic, embodying as it does somewhat colonial notions of a one-way transfer of understanding or proficiency. As creatures formed by committee, but sustained through horizontal, transverse and vertical meshworks of interests for collaboration, the LCEDN and WE have inclusivity as an ethical premise, and as a consequence a strong focus on fomenting critical perspectives which attempt to deconstruct and challenge the over-riding anti-politics of techno-centric normativity which still predominates in much of the energy and international development debate (Dienst et al. 2013; Ortiz et al. 2012; Terrapon-Pfaff et al. 2014). Having assembled enough diverse participants to carry momentum forward, the frictions and tensions in the performance of networked innovation tend to become subsumed, or displaced to informal communications in both networks; it is however these very frictions and tensions which give dynamism to the network performance.

As a result, we focus the ensuing sections of the paper around 'key lessons learnt,' rather than 'successes,' with these being organised around a series of sub-sections discussing the key challenges experienced by both networks in their activities and how these have been addressed. We then move on to make some tentative conclusions about these experiences and the lessons that they may provide for other networking initiatives in the final concluding section of the paper.

3 Key lessons learned

In reviewing the literature on networks in international development, resilience, solidarity and adaptability were found to be three of the most crucial characteristics of enduring networks. Resilience refers to the ability to recover from external shocks, such as unstable funding sources. Solidarity is closely related, but refers specifically to the ability of network members to support each other and pick up the slack during difficult times. Finally, adaptability refers to the evolution of a network to meet the changing needs of its members within a constantly shifting internal and external environment. The following paragraphs present reflections on some of the key organizational issues that have affected the two networks – this is presented via a selection of auto-ethnographic reflections of organisational life in these agonistic meshworks as we refer to them above, drawing on the lessons shared between the two networks as regards a hermeneutics of decentralised resilience.

3.1 Decentralisation

The importance of effective and open network coordination in facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration between network partners is undisputed, clearly the energy and enthusiasm of key individuals is extremely important, however concentration of power and know-how in one or two individuals can make the network particularly vulnerable and runs the risk of inviting failure through lack of ownership by members or the burn-out of the individuals concerned. Both networks have an extended management structure: the LCEDN has 2

² UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council

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coordinators, a network manager and a management committee, whilst WE has an executive board. It is a particular understanding of both networks that as membership grows both numerically and in spatial extent, different forms of decentralized coordination will become an urgent necessity.

However there is a limit beyond which decentralisation becomes counterproductive, especially in networks where large geographical distances between board/management committee members makes communication particularly time consuming. Getting this balance right is key. There must at some critical point be an inevitable trade-off between decentralization and functionality, which can only be resolved by a fluid, non-hierarchical approach to the understandings of coordination. The relationship between forms of coordination and management structures and the wider membership is also particularly important, as the network must stay in touch with the needs of the membership so that it can continue to evolve with their shifting priorities.

3.2 Challenging the technocratic status quo of renewable energy discourse

The importance of providing opportunities for real, effective interactions between sometimes antagonistic academic disciplines and between very different sets of actors (practitioners, academics, entrepreneurs, policymakers, technicians etc.) has been a *raison d'être* for both networks and in the case of the LCEDN this has been associated with a desire to challenge a somewhat technocratic philosophy within much of the energy and international development community. How though are such interactions to be nurtured and managed and towards what aims? Convoking diverse voices on emerging matters of concern, taking place in the plural, and in openness to multiplicity, networks such as WE and the LCEDN provide platforms and occasions for assembling perspectives to be shared in a strived-for common language. Like the lingua franca of the late middle ages, some important mileage can be covered with a communicative economy of needs and provisions, effective means of travel, tempting watering holes, and ethics of fair exchange. Interestingly, the LCEDN was first mooted by some strategic policy actors who struck a chord in different governmental, academic, NGO and tech-innovation fields. They found a fertile mix of embedded researchers, practitioners and critical thinkers, whose various and overlapping circles of knowledge and influence converged on the theme-problematic in focus.

It was perhaps crucial that a crossroad of knowledge systems was identified as the meeting place: where questions about renewable technology meeting energy scarcity in the livelihood systems of the poor are the issue. Of course some players might insist on a privileged institutional, disciplinary or policy vantage point, but the explicit need to move beyond failed techno-centric mantras, and the emptiness of assuming economic incentives look the same the world over, or are shared by worlds of gender difference, provided grounds for looking around at who could be invited to share perspectives that would make a difference. The format for exchanging concepts, case studies, and dialogues over diagrams, would need to be on the face of it symmetrical, rather than hierarchical. With the problem-framing explicitly sited in the economic 'valley of death' where technological innovation that has received publicly funded support then struggles for market up-take, a frontier zone of expert equivocation had been mapped out. No single viewpoint can rule, and the marshalling of complementary teams, and building blocks for possible pathways to low carbon transition, becomes a strategy for patience and generosity to others, while always benefitting from intelligible critique (see Box One for a personal reflection on some of the difficulties of these encounters).

Between the techno- and the economic in the updated standard model of growth lies a domain called 'social capital', wherein innovations, take-off, value-added and knowledge transfer come about under the enabling influence of not just 'know-how' but of 'know-who'. The catalyst that provides the social glue for making sense of the technical and the economic possibilities existing in global circulation is meshed in social worlds that are territories of difference, and cannot be hard-wired or be provided in de-contextualised self-assembly kits. The messages learnt from combining enquiry into technological practice as social life, and the study of poverty in the developing world as an effect of global inequalities, reveals multiple areas of struggle over knowledge and power, and unaffordable competition between mass-produced and hand-to-mouth livelihoods. This requires understanding how people appropriate stuff, status and respect in the mesh of their relational worlds. The functionality or affordability of any given technology is often not what it seems from the outside. Engineering certainly matters, but can risk untranslatability, as evidenced by rusting road-side gifts of equipment. Ethno-engineering is what happens when a technical sequence makes sense in the vernacular.

Relationships of trust and mutual curiosity, meshed by experiences of both surprising novelty and enduring relevance shape the protocols for progressive realisation of collectively directed goals. This holds for the task of being cognizant of the network's incorporative and disconnecting reformations, as much as it does for convincing a skeptical off-grid community that a labour-saving device will do as is claimed in enhancing conditions of

ongoing domestic life, while perhaps members migrate long-distance for work. It applies equally to the renovation and cutting of networks in the encounters of scrutiny by government, funders and those who look to pick winners for low carbon transition. The governance of a lasting idea can be sought in asking about the distributed conversations and practices of young and old, men and women who can find reason to translate a rejigging of the everyday world into a renewable habit of energy livelihood.

**Box One: The Difficulties of Disciplinary Co-Habitation,
by Ben Campbell, LCEDN National Co-Coordinator**

Resistance to symmetrical knowledge exchange can be a habit that runs deep. Certain disciplines require insistent repetition of the value they can bring to interdisciplinary teams, or to asking questions about technology transfer. In one busy conference hosted by LCEDN, my attempt to put some thoughts to the room about gender, poverty, and institutions that can assist livelihood justice in renewable energy development met with a muttered response: “You don’t need anthropologists! All you need is technology that works”. Such moments of insight into others’ professional and epistemic worlds remind me that the transformational element of collaborative knowledge exchange includes learning to reflect on whose worldviews needs to be anticipated and pre-empted, if the perspectives I aim to put out there have a chance to be heard. Of course, as a wise head once said, it is best to describe the journey of enquiry, and let the listener come to the intended conclusion in their own time.

In my research fieldsite in northern Nepal, another example of resistance came in a conversation with a technician working at a seasonal yak cheese-making facility. At the suggestion that biogas could work as an alternative fuel source to wood taken from the national park’s forest, he insisted it could not work on account of the altitude factor, which would not be conducive to anaerobic digestion. As an ethnic and linguistic outsider to this northern district he held a fixed notion of its people’s backwardness and illiteracy. Here was an example in microcosm of a general perception of a naturalized condition of underdevelopment presented in a cultural overlay that would perpetuate regional and ethnic discrimination, if not challenged by the local village herders taking a willing part in trialling the biogas initiative, in a networked alliance with local leadership, a technical NGO, and an approachable anthropologist.

3.3 *Diversification of funding sources*

The stability of funding sources was also found to be a common challenge for both networks, particularly in terms of securing funding for the day-to-day operation of key network activities. Financial uncertainty makes planning for the future of the network, let alone its expansion, difficult, especially regarding events and the human resources required to carry out the ongoing activities of the network and both networks have been affected by periods where funding has dried up or changed in amount, source and form. In light of this, both networks have made significant efforts to diversify their funding sources and build up an operational reserve that is capable of continuing the core network activities during difficult times; that being said, the LCEDN in particular remains significantly dependent on the strength of its established relationships with particular funders (DECC in the case of its initial phase and DFID in relation to current activities – see Box Three).

3.4 *Surviving “communication droughts”*

The varying commitment of network partners also presents significant challenges for both networks, particularly with international partners. Whilst in person events were universally acknowledged as the most effective way of building momentum, the real challenge is sustaining this momentum between events; experience from the LCEDN for instance indicates that such droughts can be minimized through persistence on the efforts of the coordinators, the active building-up of goodwill amongst key sectors of the network membership and through the relevance of its events and initiatives – it is plainly not enough merely to set up a network and assume dynamism will arise through spontaneous, latent goodwill. “Communication droughts” frequently bring both networks to a standstill and at times, have threatened their entire existence (see Box Two). Unsurprisingly, these droughts are most common at the midpoint between successive events. Different working patterns, time-zones, unfamiliarity with online platforms (and their own limitations) and electronic means of communication in general, as well as language barriers have all contributed to these extended periods of inactivity.

**Box Two: The Wind Empowerment association's near death experience,
by Jon Sumanik-Leary, Wind Empowerment Coordinator.**

WE was founded at the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2011 and until 2014, the network operated on an entirely voluntary basis. Whilst an initial flurry of activity established our online platform, WindEmpowerment.org, little knowledge sharing or collaboration actually occurred. In fact, activity ground to a standstill for around 6 months in 2013 as everyone was simply too busy with other activities that earned an income and the network very nearly died out completely. As I was fortunate enough to obtain a one year research fellowship, I already had a steady wage and could invest some of my time in developing the network so I put myself forward for the coordinator role. Unsurprisingly (due to a lack of alternative candidates) I was appointed the new coordinator and with the help of a team of dedicated individuals, we breathed life back into the network. However, progress was slow as for most of these people this work was done on a voluntary basis.

Although small, our first grant of just \$6,000 USD catalysed action within the network, in particular, due to the redevelopment of the WindEmpowerment.org site, which was outdated, slow, cluttered and extremely time consuming to add new content to. The remainder of these funds were shared between the coordinator (myself) and other members of the network who had the relevant skills and more importantly, motivation. This proved a highly successful method of motivating not only the coordinator of the network, but also the other members; our second global gathering, WEAthens2014, gave a huge boost to the network and a new Executive Board was elected. Fundraising for the event was unexpectedly successful, so the membership agreed with the board's recommendation to use the left-over funding from this event to cover the network's administrative activities in 2015, which coincided with the expiry of my research fellowship. The majority of these funds went towards the coordination of the network, which was expanded to 2 days per week on a trial basis from January-December 2015. The expansion in activity made an incredible difference to the pace at which the association worked, as having this time set aside for the core activities of the network enabled them to take priority over other things and therefore keep the key processes of the network moving.

The majority of these 2 days per week were carried out by the coordinator, however during holidays and busy times, other members of the Executive Board who had the relevant skills and experience were subcontracted to carry out specific tasks and given an allotted time allowance, for which they could be paid. All other activities of the Executive Board were carried out on a voluntary basis, which resulted in an expectedly low level of speed and accountability. During 2015, external funding was obtained for a pilot project and market assessment in Ethiopia. Three WE members were paid for the time that they put into this project and as a result, it was delivered on time and to a high standard.

The key message here is not that money solves all of a network's problems; in fact, receipt of funding brings with it additional complexities - discussions over who is paid, for what and how much have dominated the WE network for the last six months of Executive Board meetings, to the detriment of other issues. However, obtaining a stable funding source for the key coordination activities of any network is absolutely vital - it is the instability of funding and becoming accustomed to its' effective use that is problematic. This is especially true in networks where large geographical and cultural differences exist between network participants, as without the continual efforts of the coordinator to facilitate dialogue, very few other opportunities for communication between members occur and the network soon grinds to a halt.

Both networks found getting people from different backgrounds to work together challenging due to different working styles, interests and ways of communicating – in the development of the LCEDN, for instance, there has developed a fascinating set of issues concerning how to get physical and social scientists to learn to talk to each other and to understand that they have common concerns (see discussions above), and then to coordinate those nascent understanding with private sector and commercial actors. The coordination team plays a particularly important role here by identifying shared interests, making connections and planning activities to bring people together around these specific themes – what is also vital is to develop innovative methods of breaking down the barriers between 'silos of knowing' and not merely relying on tired old structures of event presentation. Once common themes have been identified, it is important that the network quickly evolves accordingly so that it can focus its efforts in supporting and showcasing this new group and cementing these new relationships before they fizzle out. The "network friendships" built in person at face-to-face events have also played a critical role in maintaining this momentum and identifying future areas for collaboration through ongoing dialogue.

3.5 Project Development: The Importance of Working Together

In both networks, experience has shown that the development of specific projects and initiatives have a vital role to play in the sustainability of the network, as this kind of focussed collaboration and shared experience also drives knowledge exchange. Whilst a shared interest may be sufficient to form a network and hold some preliminary exchanges, the opportunity to work together on a specific task really cements the relationship between network members. In Wind Empowerment, recruitment for the network's two development projects (pilot projects/market assessments in Ethiopia and Malawi) have seen a much greater response from the membership than any other activity. The members who participated in the projects all reported gaining significantly from the experience, both in terms of the development of their own personal skill sets and the understanding of the complementary skills of the other network members who they worked alongside (both of which greatly increase the potential for future collaboration). For the LCEDN, the role of networking the projects carried out under the USES programme has greatly increased the pace of knowledge exchange between network members (see Box Three)....

Box Three : Growing the LCEDN – A Network Without An Audience For An Audience Needing a Network By Jon Cloke (LCEDN Network Manager) and Ed Brown (LCEDN National Co-Coordinator)

The LCEDN was set up in 2011 to design, extend and enhance the impact and visibility of the substantial existing UK research base into the role of energy in improving livelihoods in the developing world. It was envisaged not just as a UK contribution to the UN Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) initiative, but also as a support to the UK DFID and DECC delivery programmes focused on addressing the energy shortfall in the capacity of the poor to access modern, clean energy for purposes of economic development, human welfare and environmental sustainability. The first phase, funded by DECC, lasted for 18 months and facilitated the holding of three major international events and the establishment of the basic structure of the network via support for two research associates. The network took off at speed, identifying an exceptional community of UK-based researchers, in the first instance through an extensive trawl of every university website in the UK. Having identified those individuals and then reached out to the policy, private and NGO sector stakeholders that we and they worked with, the LCEDN has tried to pioneer original collaborations across different sectors and between different disciplines, by implementing a programme of face-to-face and electronic interactions and coordinated dissemination activities.

Since 2014, the LCEDN has changed course slightly in agreeing to mobilise the community of researchers (UK and international) involved within the 13 projects that have been funded via the EPSRC/DFID USES programme, when we were asked by DfID to facilitate those activities. At that point, one further funding bid had been turned down and the network coordinators and remaining RA were operating on goodwill and fumes

Critically, the LCEDN also made central to its development the involvement of postgraduates in order to provide a platform for future collaboration amongst young researchers across international borders facing the critical challenges of the mid-21st century energy, food and water nexus. So far, the LCEDN's value as a network of communities has been to connect innovations in low carbon technology to expertise about the distinct kinds of socio-economic and environmental factors that constrain access to energy where it is needed. It has done this by extending meaningful collaborations between UK stakeholders and colleagues in Southern institutions and between academic communities and the wider community of policymakers, practitioners, businesses and users – each LCEDN event is a veritable cosmopolitan babbling of synergies between different communities of interests and practices.

The future value of the network as a network lies in its ability to help improve the effectiveness of DFID (and DECC through the ICF) expenditure on energy projects across the developing world, through the dissemination of engagement opportunities (webinars, workshops etc., outputs etc. via existing LCEDN contact lists etc.), through informal reporting on social media, through regular communication about events, outputs through twitter, publicly accessible Facebook site and engagement with traditional media. To UK and international businesses and NGOs there is the offer of improved understanding of some of the major contextual variables for energy project initiatives, crucial local knowledge affecting the success of individual projects/investments and awareness of and access to vital research and project contacts; the same kind of (bespoke) service is offered by the network to national policymakers and local communities alike.

“Communication droughts” are arguably more severe for Wind Empowerment, as the geographic, lifestyle and cultural differences between members is much greater than the LCEDN, which is focussed on the UK academic community and has access both to more stable funding and the friendship of DfID. Many LCEDN members will regularly bump into each other at other related events and can simply pick up the phone at any point during the working day. However, for Wind Empowerment, this is not the case, as practitioners are generally less mobile than academics and the network’s 40+ members reside in 25+ countries. Previously long email chains and Skype calls were the standard, however it is easy to miss people off of email chains and time differences and varying work patterns make finding time for Skype calls difficult.

Whilst previous attempts to launch an online discussion forum prompted an initial flurry of activity, mailing lists have proved to be an invaluable tool for sustainable, inclusive communication as they are able not only to send email updates, but also receive email responses into discussion threads. This has acted to increase participation substantially, as users only needed to log onto the mailing lists once to sign up rather than regularly in order to check for updates. Some mailing list tools (like google groups) also have automatic translation, which is especially important for a global network like WE. The fact that all messages are archived allows anyone to join in the conversation at a time that is convenient to them. However integration of such mailing lists into the main web site, WindEmpowerment.org, could still be improved and unfamiliarity with this particular communication tool is still a major barrier to their use.

4 Conclusion

Network theorization has excited academics and researchers for a long time, two of perhaps the most famous schools of thought being Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and Putnam’s ideas on social capital encapsulated in ‘Bowling Alone’ (1995): “In its simplest but also in its deepest sense, the notion of network is of use whenever action is to be redistributed.” (Latour, 2011: 796). The existence and organic development of networks is a very different field for analysis, however, from how to create one for specific purposes; although the ICT revolution has expanded the potential and capacity of networks exponentially in the last twenty years, making them functional and operationalizing them is far harder. Depending on what it is for, however, a network requires far more than just a website and an email list – an audience or community for the network cannot just be assumed, moreover, it needs to be created and nurtured, based on shared interests, values and capacities.

Networks have the potential to make significant development impact by strengthening the capacity of their members through knowledge exchange and collaboration. However, forming, running and continuing to develop a network is not an easy task, especially when the geospatial distances between network partners are large (and whatever effect cyberspace may have in helping to diminish them), which is a fundamental characteristic of networks in the field of international development. This paper has presented key lessons learned from the experience of two networks, the LCEDN and WE, with the aim of informing the future development of other related networks in the field of energy for development. Further research using structured network analysis methodologies and comparisons to other similar networks could yield further useful guidance and we look forward to collaborating with others within such endeavours.

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