

## **The facilitator role within learning networks at USAID**

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### **Abstract**

How can facilitation help to drive meaningful peer-to-peer learning in a formalized learning network? This article will explore the core role that facilitators play in implementing a learning network, as defined by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>i</sup> USAID's model of learning networks differs from other peer-to-peer learning opportunities, such as communities of practice, in a number of ways including selection of grantees through a competitive process, dedicated funding of learning network partners, and creation of deliverables within a designated timeline. This paper outlines three core dynamics that make facilitating learning networks at USAID distinct: 1) the organization of the learning network around evolving learning agendas that facilitate learning on multiple levels (organizational, network, and industry); 2) the time and process involved in the development and implementation of a learning network; and 3) the unique intra- and inter-personal dynamics of the learning network through the involvement of both the funded (network members) and the funder (the donor). In this article, the role of a learning network facilitator will be overlaid primarily with lessons learned generated from implementation of the Growing Organizational Value Chain Excellence (GROOVE) Learning Network.

### **Introduction**

Learning networks are one tool through which USAID has been supporting knowledge generation and collaborative learning within its more comprehensive Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) approach to development.<sup>ii</sup> Similar to concepts found in the field of social learning, learning networks commonly have a formalized peer-to-peer learning structure, such as the "networks for learning" idea outlined by Sarah Cummings and Arin van Zee (2005).

This article will provide a brief introduction to the concept of learning networks, as defined by USAID, and offer a framework for facilitators to consider when creating and implementing learning networks. This framework is based upon the experience of USAID, largely through the Growing Organizational Value Chain Excellence (GROOVE) Learning Network and the Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project. The paper will also highlight three core dynamics within a learning network that a facilitator should be cognizant of: 1) the organization of the learning network around evolving learning agendas that facilitate learning on multiple levels (organizational, network, and industry); 2) the time and process involved in the development and implementation of a learning network; and 3) the unique intra- and

inter-personal dynamics of the learning network through the involvement of both the funded (network members) and the funder (the donor).

## **Methodology**

The creation of this article was based on an extensive desk review of KDMD's work with learning networks and, in particular, with the GROOVE Learning Network. This experience was captured in both USAID's "Practices of Successful Learning Networks: Documenting Learning from the GROOVE Learning Network" paper and the subsequent Learning Networks Resource Center available on USAID's Learning Lab website. It also draws on experience from several people involved with the GROOVE Learning Network, including members of the KDMD support team.

## **Learning Networks at USAID**

Definitions of peer learning activities can vary greatly within the knowledge management and development sectors. Based on research done by Cummings and van Zee (2005), peer learning initiatives can be organized on a continuum, from informal "communities of practice" to more formalized "networks for learning," although development actors have coined numerous terms over the past few decades as they have explored different knowledge sharing structures.

A learning network is defined by USAID as a group comprised of a limited number of organizations brought together through a competitive grant process that agree to pursue a shared learning agenda over the course of a set time period around a specific technical topic. This learning network model allows for the development of iterative and strategic learning, while also promoting collaboration among development partners and donors. With a focus on learning at three distinct levels: 1) within a participating member's organization, 2) among members of the learning network, and 3) at a broader industry level: a USAID learning network supports the development of innovative approaches that can be replicated and brought to scale through knowledge sharing within a larger industry or technical area (Young, Wolfe, and Pennotti 2013).

## **USAID's Experience with Learning Networks**

In 2001, what was then USAID's Microenterprise Development office partnered with the Small Enterprise Education and Promotion (SEEP) Network to develop a preliminary learning network structure, called Implementation Grant Programs (IGPs), which was later re-named Practitioner Learning Programs (PLPs). At least thirteen more learning networks followed as USAID, SEEP, and other partners continued to develop and refine the approach (KDMD 2013).

In June 2009, USAID awarded a grant to four non-governmental organizations and private voluntary organizations: CARE, CHF International<sup>iii</sup>, Conservation International,

and Practical Action to support the creation of a learning network around the value chain development approach. Originally called the New Partners in Value Chain Development, but later re-named the Growing Organizational Value Chain Excellence (GROOVE) Learning Network, this learning network lasted more than three years and was supported by USAID's microenterprise development team through the KDMD project. The GROOVE Learning Network resulted in the development of numerous knowledge products focusing on issues related to capacity development/mentoring at the local level and monitoring and evaluation. These products were then shared with the larger value chain industry through several conferences and online platforms. The GROOVE Learning Network was developed based on the intensive research and knowledge gained from earlier learning network efforts that USAID had undertaken in the decade prior. During its creation and implementation, USAID developed a series of key characteristics for future learning networks:

- **Defined and finite group**, often assembled through a contracting mechanism
- **Shared learning agenda**, both at the organizational and network level
- **Specified timeframe**, often lasting several years
- **Three levels of focus:** organizational, network, and industry
- **Integrated approach to the knowledge cycle:** knowledge generation, capture, dissemination, and application
- **Dedicated resources**, such as time and cost-sharing arrangements
- **Clear and established deliverables**, often agreed to by the members as the learning network evolves

Included in the "dedicated resources" component is a committed and skilled facilitator who can help drive the iterative learning process throughout a learning network's six phases:

- 1) **Network Design** – Stakeholders interested in starting a learning network define the scope and focus of the learning network. Members are selected through a competitive grant process.
- 2) **Network Launch** – The learning network officially begins, and participating members initiate development of their organizational learning agendas.
- 3) **Organizational Learning** – Participating members pursue their organizational learning agenda. Support is provided from their peers within the learning network and from other technical experts brought in to support the group.
- 4) **Broader Group Engagement** – Knowledge sharing and learning grows among the participating members.
- 5) **Network Learning** – A formalized network-level learning agenda is developed and implemented. Members work together in developing a suite of knowledge products around their learning objectives.
- 6) **Industry Engagement** – The network's knowledge products are completed and shared out with the larger industry through a variety of communication channels.

### **Facilitation Skills within Learning Networks**

Members of a learning network may experience challenges in building a collaborative and trusting space that helps move the group towards achieving its objectives, especially as participants may see themselves as competitors within a larger industry or may not feel

comfortable sharing with donors. Including a facilitator to help build and maintain group engagement and define roles and responsibilities is one of the key drivers of success for a learning network (KDMD 2013).

However, the selection process and skills of the facilitator may differ among learning networks depending on the technical focus, timeframe, and number of partners involved. For example, USAID's GROOVE Learning Network had four different facilitators as the group evolved and grew throughout its three years. The GROOVE Learning Network also found that while having some background within the technical area of the learning network will be helpful for facilitators, it is often much more important for the facilitator to possess strong facilitation skills. Essentially, the facilitator must be able to "speak the language" of the network members but, more importantly, he or she must be able to clearly separate his or her role as a facilitator from that of a technical contributor in order to help maintain trust and credibility. Finding this balance can be challenging and requires a clear description of the expected role of the facilitator in the terms of reference (or scope of work) (KDMD 2013). A more detailed discussion of facilitation skills and responsibilities can be found later in this article.

### **Learning Network Dynamics**

To help drive a learning network to success and build a space conducive to collaboration and learning, USAID's experience with learning networks has shown that a facilitator will need to be cognizant of three core dynamics:

1. The organization of the learning network around evolving learning agendas that facilitate learning on multiple levels (organizational, network, and industry)
2. The time and process involved in the development and implementation of a learning network
3. The unique intra- and inter-personal dynamics of the learning network through the involvement of both the funded (network members) and the funder (the donor)

These dynamics will affect the skills, tools, and approaches that a facilitator will utilize at different times throughout a learning network. They are discussed in more detail in the sections below.

#### *1. The organization of the learning network around evolving learning agendas that facilitate learning on multiple levels (organizational, network, and industry)*

USAID's learning networks model is designed to have impact at three levels: organizational, network, and industry. To help achieve this impact, each participating member creates two distinct yet complementary learning agendas: one in the beginning of the learning network focused on its own organizational learning and one as the learning network develops that addresses broader learning in collaboration with the rest of the learning network. The organizational learning agenda ultimately feeds into the larger network-level learning agenda that is designed to address broader industry-wide questions or issues. These learning agendas provide a framework for learning network research and activities and give members a common understanding of the overall learning network objectives and goals.

Once the learning network is officially launched (Phase 2: Network Launch), the facilitator helps members adjust and refine their organizational learning agendas as needed and incorporate

interim activities and deadlines associated with the learning agenda into a workplan. Individual members primarily do this work, but the facilitator can contribute to this process by asking targeted questions and making suggestions to further build out the agenda. Examples of such questions may include:

- What topics/issues related to the overall learning network technical theme would you like to learn more about in your organization?
- What information will you need to gather or produce to dive deeper into this topic?
- What are the desired outcome(s) of your learning agenda research?
- Who are the key stakeholders (both internal and external to your organization) with whom you will need to interact to pursue your learning agenda?

Facilitated conversations around organizational learning agendas can help members dig deeper into the questions that they hope to answer with the support of the learning network and will better position them to see results.

Facilitators will also assist members in developing a network-level learning agenda. Although members will not actually begin focused work on this agenda until later in the learning network process (Phase 5: Network Learning), conversations and exploration of possible topics and questions applicable to the entire learning network will begin early in the learning network process. This learning agenda can be adjusted and refined at future points in time depending on the interests and findings that emerge from the pursuit of organizational learning agendas. Key questions that a facilitator will explore for the development of a network-level learning agenda can include:

- What are some common questions or issues that members have encountered around the larger technical theme of the learning network?
- What are the current gaps in knowledge on this particular topic for the industry?
- How would the pursuit of this learning agenda potentially help to address these gaps?
- How will we work together to accomplish these goals?
- How will the information and products developed by the learning network be used and/or disseminated?

Throughout this process, the facilitator will need to keep the larger objectives of the learning network in mind with a keen eye towards the different levels of learning (organizational, network, and industry) that the network hopes to address. This requires the facilitator to constantly look for linkages between individual network members and also between network activities and the larger industry and, whenever possible, make connections between people, ideas, and information. Identifying similarities and linkages between organizational learning agendas can help to inform the broader network-level learning agenda. Even though each individual network member will have different learning objectives that they would like to pursue, reoccurring questions, themes, and issues typically emerge that can create a commonality among network members and inform a larger group learning question (or questions).

Similarly, during the development and implementation of the network-level learning agenda, the facilitator will think through possible linkages with the larger industry to ensure that network learning can make contributions to the industry at large. For example, a facilitator might suggest

certain types of learning products that he/she believes will effectively capture network-level learning and will be easily accessible to other practitioners. Or, the facilitator can help to drive discussions among network members about the "what next" question that often comes up in the last phases of a learning network. How will network members disseminate their learning? Who are some key contacts with whom network members can connect to share their work? What are some upcoming industry events where learning network findings can be shared? Constantly working within the three levels of learning can be challenging for a network facilitator since it takes time for the learning network to move through different phases but also extremely rewarding when things begin to link up and connect in regards to organizational, network, and industry-level learning.

*2. The time and process involved in the development and implementation of a learning network*  
After the learning agendas have been discussed and agreed upon, the facilitator will then provide support in the implementation of each agenda and in the creation of associated knowledge products. Bringing the group together in the development and completion of both organizational and network-level learning agendas is a long-term process, often lasting two to three years. Often, a facilitator will need to be more hands-on in the beginning as members are brought together to develop the initial framework and workplan. As the group continues to mature, the facilitator may be able to step back to be slightly less involved in the day-to-day operations, with some notable exceptions, such as facilitating check-in workshops. Towards the end, a facilitator might find that he or she needs to be more directly involved to help push the group towards the completion of the final deliverables.

The type of support facilitators will provide at various times will fluctuate between different learning networks, individual group members, and specific phases or activities of the learning network but can include providing additional technical assistance to members, facilitating discussions around common themes or issues, and keeping members on track with deliverables and timelines. Performing these facilitation tasks requires a facilitator to wear different hats throughout the life of a learning network. Some examples of these different hats include:

- **Project Manager:** The facilitator will help members define and agree to rules and norms for working collaboratively and outline roles for members early on in the process. The facilitator will also help members stay on track when pursuing their learning agendas and developing knowledge products by monitoring workplans and agreed-upon timeframes. It is helpful for facilitators to keep in mind that learning is an iterative process and often does not follow a prescribed path, so there may be times when adjustments to these timelines will need to be made.
- **Time Keeper:** Time may be scarce for learning network members, so careful planning and monitoring is required of a facilitator to ensure deliverables are met without added stress to the members. Keeping up the pace of work can be challenging over such a prolonged period of time, especially with competing work demands for each member. A facilitator may have to refer back to the workplans to track the network's progress and perform reality checks about the goals and deliverables. Routine check-ins with members, preferably in a group setting, is important to keep

the learning network on track. Facilitators may find themselves needing to help members balance competing demands and recognize when the group is ready to shift between phases.

- **Event Planner:** Establishing regular check-in meetings with members, many of who may be dispersed geographically, is an important part of maintaining a connection among group members and providing opportunities for developing knowledge products. Often, these check-ins occur virtually. For example, the GROOVE Learning Network met monthly using a web conferencing platform (KDMD 2013). For these virtual meetings, facilitators will help plan the agenda, with buy-in from members, and manage discussions.

At key points throughout the learning network, members will also gather for in-person sessions. These provide unique opportunities for building trust and solidifying consensus around particular ideas. Members typically convene at an official kick-off meeting to discuss roles, agree on expectations, and clearly define the objectives of the learning network. The group is often then brought back together at the mid-term point and towards the end of a learning network. Additional in-person sessions may also be agreed upon by the members, as was the case with the GROOVE Learning Network. During these in-person events, facilitators will help to ensure engagement is productive and that sessions operate smoothly for the members. At times, an outside facilitator may be brought in to help with these in-person sessions, as done by the GROOVE Learning Network, however the primary facilitator for the learning network will still play a critical role in supporting pre-event planning and maintaining post-event momentum.

Facilitators must capitalize on these face-to-face meetings by creating agendas that reflect the current needs of network members and balance the time spent between structured and informal conversation. Often learning network members just need a chance to speak organically about experiences and challenges they are facing and the learning network facilitator should enable these conversations to occur while still driving key agenda points forward.

- **Researcher:** Even though learning network facilitators are not often technical experts, they can help to bring in expertise as needed. This can include reaching out to technical experts in the industry to participate in activities like webinars, email exchanges, brown bag seminars, or online discussions where the expert can participate in an “Ask the Expert” or advisory type of exchange. Facilitators can also identify and share relevant research to network members on specific topics related to the pursuit of learning agendas.

### *3. The unique intra- and inter-personal dynamics of the learning network through the involvement of both the funded (network members) and the funder (the donor)*

Learning networks may differ slightly in their development and organizational structure, but common within USAID is the creation of a learning network through a competitive grant

process. This means that applicants may be competitors within their respective technical areas. Members of learning networks may also find themselves in a closer working relationship with donors than they had previously experienced. This could complicate the goals of the learning network as members may be hesitant to share their experiences with their peers and funders, especially if these involve failures or proprietary information. A member may also have to demonstrate to his or her organization why it is beneficial to participate in what might be seen as a risky initiative (KDMD 2013). Young, Wolfe, and Pennotti (2013) spoke of these challenges within the GROOVE Learning Network and referenced two elements that are important for the success of a learning network, and which facilitators will play a role in helping to build: value and trust.

- **Value:** Facilitators may have to help members to think through the value of participating in the learning network and to help their organizations see this value as well. As found in the GROOVE Learning Network, at an individual level, some members saw the value and purpose early on and were, therefore, more proactive in their engagement. However, not all members of a learning network may see this value. Some members may feel constrained between their daily responsibilities and their commitment to the learning network. Organizational priorities may also shift throughout the life of a learning network. A facilitator will need to ensure that the goals and objectives of the learning network are clearly defined for members and consistently connect activities to the larger learning objectives in order to help instill a sense of value and commitment with members.
- **Trust:** As mentioned above, learning network members will interact on a frequent basis with both other members and donors. A facilitator must, therefore, work to build an open space in which members can feel comfortable and trust can grow. According to Stacey Young of USAID, "Quality facilitation of the network is important. People need to be supported in coming together and learning, and building the trust that makes that possible" (Young, Wolfe, and Pennotti 2013). One way facilitators can do this is to help members establish a memorandum of understanding outlining expectations and rules on how members will operate within the learning network. Setting clear roles and expectations can also help members feel more comfortable sharing in the presence of donors, as those who participated in the GROOVE Learning Network discovered during implementation of the learning network (Young, Wolfe, and Pennotti 2013).

Building both value and trust requires hard work on the part of the facilitator early on in the process. Establishing clear operating principles, expectations, and communication channels within which the group will operate will be important at the start of any learning network. Activities completed in the earlier phases of a learning network, such as during the kick-off meeting in Phase 2 (network launch) and the capturing and sharing of challenges and lessons learned by each member in learning journals during Phase 3 (organizational learning), can help foster this trust and further create value. Facilitators must then work to maintain this openness throughout the ebbs and flows of the learning network. Capitalizing on in-person meetings and events, such as the mid-term meeting, is a key opportunity for facilitators to check-in with members and adjust methodologies as needed.



Disagreements may be common among learning network members, and even possibly between members and donors, so a hands-on facilitator might also need to use both diplomacy and conflict mitigation skills to help preserve the open space within the learning network and manage issues as they arise. Reminding members of the norms agreed upon at the start of the learning network and keeping the flow of communication open and consistent will be important jobs for facilitators throughout the life of the learning network.

## **Conclusion**

USAID's learning network model provides a valuable opportunity for development organizations to build collaboration and further learning opportunities within a topical area. Key to the successful implementation of these learning networks is a skilled and dedicated facilitator who can build trust and value throughout the life of a learning network and help transition the members through the six phases of the learning network in pursuit of both their organizational and network learning agendas.

This said, the examples and experiences listed above are not expected to be standard across all learning networks. USAID encourages further discussion and refinement of this approach through the sharing of experiences with others involved in peer learning opportunities through the Learning Networks Resource Center on USAID's Learning Lab website. USAID will also continue to explore this learning network model and share best practices and lessons learned through the Feed the Future Knowledge-Driven Agricultural Development project.

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<sup>i</sup> Namely through the Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project, which was implemented from 2008-2013.

<sup>ii</sup> USAID encourages the inclusion of a collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) approach to development throughout its programming framework, the Program Cycle. CLA supports the organizational learning goals of USAID, allowing for development activities to maximize results through increased coordination with in-country partners and programmatic adaptation to on-the-ground learning (Program Cycle Learning Guide).

<sup>iii</sup> Now Global Communities.