

Redesenvolvimento: training and empowering networks for development

Andres Pablo Falconer and Dalberto Adulis

In the development sector, the ideas of the *social network* and the *network organization* have become powerful inspirations and emerging paradigms for NGOs, campaigns, coalitions, movements and a variety of initiatives intended to promote societal change. This seems to be true in the authors' home country, Brazil, as well as elsewhere in both the developed and developing world. Led by accelerated technological advances in the direction of interactive communications, by trends identified in the social and organizational sciences (all broadly encompassed by the terms 'informational' or 'network society'), alongside with ideals of participatory, horizontal and multipolar organization, *network* and *development* are concepts that seem to have become paired. Manuel Castells (1999) argues that we live in a Network Society 'made up of networks of production, power and experience, which construct a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space.' In the words of Wilson-Grau (2006):

...in a globalizing world with increasingly effective means of communication, a network offers unique political and organizational potential. Social change networks can influence economic, political and cultural structures and relations in ways that are impossible for individual actors. In these networks, the members are autonomous organizations – usually NGOs or community based organizations – and sometimes individuals.

New networks emerge on a daily basis, the name is quickly tagged onto initiatives that in an earlier age would have been labelled otherwise – such as federations, umbrella organizations and social movements – and previously existing associative organizations reframe their identity and embrace the ideal of the network. According to Leon (2001):

In fact, when one speaks of network in social collectives, it is done in the most diverse way, ranging from those that adopt it like a mere name – imposed by fashion –, to those who embrace it as a new organizational paradigm – without necessarily re-baptizing them with that name.

Within civil society development organizations, the network is often loosely defined as a horizontal and democratic association of individuals or organizations under common ideals or goals. As Perkin and Court (2005) suggest, networks may be seen as 'structures that link individuals or organizations who share a common interest on a specific issue or a general set of values.'

The promise of the network is generous, combining autonomy, innovation and effectiveness. It is, however, a promise that often falls short. As Mulgan (2004) notes:

Networks are extraordinary ways of organizing knowledge, cooperation and exchange. They are far more effective means of sharing learning than hierarchies and generally better at adapting to change. But they remain poor at mobilizing resources, sustaining themselves through hard times, generating surpluses, organizing commitments, or playing games of power.

In short, at least in Brazil, where network has become a catchword, there is growing interest and multiple examples of network-type initiatives and organizations but, for the most part, experience shows that blindly embracing a new concept, without fully grasping its potential, its implications and its practical challenges may lead to frustrating results.

Could the potential within the concept of the network be unleashed to deliver its full promise? How – if at all – is it possible to train individuals in the art of managing – designing, planning, empowering, facilitating, evaluating – networks? How can the capacity of networks to operate effectively be built? Can this knowledge be disseminated to the broader interested public?

An introduction to *Redesenvolvimento*

These were the guiding questions asked by the creators of the *Redesenvolvimento*¹ Programme: a capacity-development programme on networks for development proposed and implemented by ABDL (Associação Brasileira para o Desenvolvimento de Lideranças), a Brazilian NGO with the primary focus on leadership for sustainable development. The programme, led by ABDL (www.abdl.org.br), relied on a partnership with another Brazilian NGO, RITS (www.rits.org.br), LEAD International (www.lead.org) and the AVINA Foundation (www.avina.net), an international private foundation agency with a strong interest in the theme of networks.

ABDL's own experience, through its association with the LEAD International network, was centred on the well-established LEAD Fellowship Programme which has identified, trained and connected more than 1700 emerging leaders in sustainable development in more than 70 countries since 1991. The LEAD approach, innovative in its multi-sectoral, interdisciplinary and 'bridging' character, has shown limitless potential by creating linkages between innovative practitioners and professionals, activists for sustainable development. But investment in ten cohorts of LEAD fellows have taught that, unlike it was believed in the more optimistic 1990s, networks do not 'just happen' by giving people an opportunity to connect. And when they do happen, the outcomes are unpredictable and, for the most part, far beyond the control of the inspirers of the network.

Redesenvolvimento represents a new generation of fellowship experience, focused on the reflexive purpose of learning and sharing the art and science of networks for development. It is targeted both at individuals participating in networks, and at the networks themselves. The programme, launched in early 2005, proposed a one-year

learning process consisting of four five-day training sessions, in full immersion, combined with face-to-face and virtual interaction between training meetings, culminating with an open event offered for the general public.

Recruitment of participants and networks

The recruitment process is one of the most critical elements of the programme because of the influence it confers on the entire training programme. Participants were selected through a competitive process following the public announcement and launch of the programme which was disseminated primarily through a variety of NGO/civil society networks and alternative news media. Consistent with the focus on networks, rather than standalone individual applicants, only group applications were considered. Interested individuals were encouraged to present themselves in groups of two to four persons from a single network.

Networks were invited to nominate individuals with sufficient legitimacy and commitment to feed back into the network. The participating groups were selected based on the strength of the individual applications (i.e., the professional experience, demonstrated commitment to sustainable development, relative influence on social processes etc.), the relevance of the networks, as well as considerations of diversity of issues addressed, and ethnic, age and gender representation. While there was no minimum formal education requirement, in the course of the recruitment phase, it was ensured that applicants were comfortable with a learning environment requiring reading and ample use of abstract concepts. Beyond this, all participants were expected to be connected to the web and familiar with the use of computers. Although these are restrictive access criteria in a country marked by an already high bar of digital access, these are easily justified by the purposes of the programme. Given its specialized nature of the programme, and the fact that participants were expected to pay for their participation, the recruitment of the first edition was deemed a success, with more than one hundred individuals from 27 networks that completing applications. Each participant was asked to pay the equivalent of approximately US\$1000, which stands at roughly one fourth of the cost per participant. In practice, most participants secured funding from the networks, their employers, or – most frequently – donors and supporters of their networks.

The 24 chosen participants originated from six networks in fields as diverse as renewable energy, gender and communication, corporate social responsibility, local development, coastal and marine ecosystems, indigenous cultures. The six networks selected for the programme were:

1. AEC (www.cidadaniaempresarial.org.br), *Ação Empresarial pela Cidadania* (Business Action for Citizenship), a network of centres promoting corporate social responsibility in various Brazilian states;
2. COEP (www.coepbrasil.org.br), *Comitê de Entidades no Combate à Fome e pela Vida* (Committee of Entities Against Hunger and For Life), a nationwide network of public and private corporations established to mobilize institutions

to combat hunger and poverty, while fostering full citizenship for all Brazilians;

3. Cyberela (www.cemina.org.br), a project and network comprised of women and community leaders selected, trained and equipped to produce and exchange information with a gender perspective through community radio and the internet;
4. RCA, *Rede de Cooperação Alternativa* (Alternative Cooperation Network), a unique association of indigenous peoples' organizations and 'indigenist organizations;
5. Renove (www.renove.org.br), Renewable Energy Network, whose mission is to encourage the utilization of renewable energies to promote sustainable development;
6. *Rede Marinha-Costeira e Hídrica do Brasil* (Brazilian Marine, Coastal and Water Resources Network), established by the AVINA Foundation, involving 32 leaders with relevant experience in the field.

A seventh group was not a *bona-fide* network, but an inter-institutional learning community between four organizations, organized by proponent, ABDL.

Objectives and content of the training

The programme's three stated goals were: 1) training individual participants in the fields of networks for development, 2) strengthening networks through direct application of experience in the networks in which participants were involved, and 3) disseminating knowledge about networks for development to a broader audience, beyond the participants of the programme. The training curriculum consisted of concepts, skills training, exchanges, presented in a dynamic, participatory, workshop-style environment, with traditional classroom lecturing reduced to a minimum. Contents and activities revolved around four programmatic pillars of a) sustainable development, b) communications and participation, c) social and organizational networks, and d) information and communication technologies.

The four training events took place in total immersion retreats held in isolated locations, in a propitious environment for deep interpersonal exchange and full focus on the learning experience. Interspersed with these were follow-up activities which included reporting back and obtaining input from other network members, developing a 'project' or practical application to be implemented in the networks, as well as additional reading and preparation assignments for upcoming training events. A web-based distance learning tool, Moodle, was used as an environment for collaboration throughout the programme.

In the course of the programme, the notion of networks was deconstructed and tinkered with from a variety of perspectives, from metaphors to analytical concepts to grounded practice. Emphasis was placed in reflecting from participant's own experience and on the relevant issues within the networks they represented. This led to lively, energetic, and sometimes tense events, as the groups attempted to grasp and

apply to their reality the ideas that circulated in the environment. A key element of *Redesenvolvimento* consists in establishing the linkage between networks and the application in development work. Therefore, ample time was devoted to explore this field, conceptually as well as from the direct experience of the participants. Thus, the diversity of themes and issues with which the participants were engaged provided a wealth of material for in-depth learning. The connection between concepts such as social capital, social networks and sustainable development became inextricable in the experience of the programme.

The four sessions were entitled ‘Networks: leadership and development’, ‘Communication and participation in networks’, ‘Participation and facilitation in networks’ and ‘Monitoring and evaluation of networks’. Typically, each session began with a module intended to step back and recover the previous activities, including reporting back on the inter-session activities. Workshops on the substantive themes of each session, such as participation, sustainable development, communications, systems thinking and evaluation, were typically conducted by invited trainers. In each event following the first session, two networks were invited to present a module sharing their experience on their respective themes (i.e.: water, energy, gender and communication). A ‘marketplace’ environment of ideas, opportunities and necessities was created, leading to numerous events of collaboration between the participants. Finally, each of the six network groups was required to complete a project, or practical application of their learning, within their network.

The fourth and final training event, held in July, 2006, in the city of São Paulo, was associated with a large, two-day, public conference titled ‘Networks for Development’, well attended by nearly 300 participants from different regions of Brazil and Latin America. This open event galvanized the growing awareness about the theme, bringing together leading thinkers and practitioners, who shared their ideas in plenaries, panel discussions and workshops designed both for experienced practitioners and interested neophytes in the field, offering a kaleidoscopic view of the theme.²

This public event was designed as an integral part of the programme, in part to counterbalance the small-scale nature of the course, and to disseminate the experience of *Redesenvolvimento* to a broader audience, making a significant contribution to the debate about networks and their application in development (the third stated goal of the programme). The conference is to be followed by a publication featuring the main presentations, case studies and findings of the *Redesenvolvimento* Programme. A second edition of the training programme, as well as other services, such as short courses and an ongoing forum are currently in development.

Outcomes and results

For participating individuals in the year-long *Redesenvolvimento* Programme, the outcomes were substantial, producing changes in the way they understood their work and the issues they promote. Even more significantly, the programme made a contribution to the issues the participating networks chose to address. One network learned, much to their surprise, that their apparently well-designed and adequately-

funded nucleus, or secretariat, was not only far from perfect but, in effect, actually hindered the functionality of the network. In the words of one of its members:

...were it not for the programme, we would be in the same position, with a new coordinator and the same mistakes (...); the programme resulted in the restructuring of the network and allowed its perpetuation.

In the course of the year, another network plunged into a governance crisis which eventually led to the demise of its executive secretary. This situation not only offered an invaluable real-life learning experience to the participants, but the programme was also able to buffer and minimize the adverse impacts of the crisis. According to one participant:

...[the programme] offered me great clarity (...) making my contestation even more incisive; theory helped me rethink and gave clarity in the facilitation or the network.

Less dramatically, but equally intense, one network dealt with the issue of distinguishing itself from the donor from which it originated it, while another sought to institutionalize itself as more than a time-bound project. As one member noted candidly:

...when I entered the project, it was not a network; at the time we were told that the group would need to behave as a network... I did not know what that meant.

In contrast, the longest-established and perhaps most successful network of the group, which was harboured primarily by public corporations, dealt with the challenge of renewal and invigoration in a context of years of excessive institutionalization. Quoting a participant, '[the programme] was an opportunity to break barriers in my work. I felt like a factory worker in development projects.' The ever-present issues of autonomy and power imbalances were most critical for the members of a network combining native indigenous Brazilians and *indigenists* (anthropologists and other specialists in indigenous peoples). In an environment of trust and collaboration, the *Redesenvolvimento* Programme resulted in more than a mere learning experience, but addressed key challenges of the participating individuals and networks.

Conclusions

The main recurring issues facing the participants can be summarized in four pairs of dualities:

1. *Structure vs. dynamics*: the permanent tension between the need to establish mechanisms, procedures and configurations to organize a network's functioning, and the volatility and constant renewal of a fluid form that evades structures;

2. *Coordination vs. participation*: all participating networks had some form of coordination or central secretariat created for the purpose of serving the network. Most typically, coordination led to excessive control, lack of participation on the fringes, power disputes, or other dysfunctionalities of coordination mechanisms;
3. *Resources vs. autonomy* which refers to the not always comfortable relationship between the responsibility and interest of donors/investors in the network and the legitimate desire for autonomy of the participants, (although often still welcoming the funds);
4. *Process vs. results*: the difficulty in focusing on delivering tangible results in a type of organization characterized by fluidity, absence of hierarchies and other mechanisms traditionally associated to productivity and outcomes.

The format of the training programme revealed several challenges that differed from those typically faced when working with other audiences such as traditional NGOs or development organizations, primarily due to the nature of the connection between the participants and the networks. While the link between the typical development worker and his/her organization is often of paid employment – albeit flexible – in the case of networks, this relationship cannot be assumed. In cases in which the link is very strong, such as with founders, donors or leaders of the networks, their participation often outweighs that of other individuals. More frequently, when the opposite occurs, the weakness and fragility of the connection between individuals and the networks result in the individual's participation not being legitimized, and their capacity to introduce change being limited. In at least three cases in the course of one year, participants disconnected themselves from the networks, for personal or professional reasons, in what seems to be consistent with the nature of the network organization. Another participant mentioned that he found more space to share his experience acquired in the programme with a network other than the one through which he had participated.

Future editions of *Redesenvolvimento*, bearing this first experience in mind, intend to place more emphasis on the coaching and mentoring component for the participating networks, rather than on the development of the capacity of individuals. New services, such as short courses, are to be offered to a broader audience, following this first edition of the programme, making the experience more widely available.

For individual participants, *Redesenvolvimento* consisted of a unique learning experience about the practice of development through networks. For the participating networks, the programme was a wakeup call to the challenges and potential of participation, innovation and effectiveness promised by the network paradigm. For the proponents of the programme, it was an exciting new page in capacity building for development.

References

Castells, M. (1999) *A Era da Informação: Economia, Sociedade e Cultura, Vol. 1 - A Sociedade em Rede*. Paz e Terra: São Paulo

Leon, O., S. Burch and E. Tamayo (2001) Movimientos sociales en la Red. ALAI, septiembre 2001. URL: <http://alainet.org/publica/msred/>

Mulgan, G. (2004). Connexity revisited. In: Network logic: who governs in an interconnected world? (edited by H. McCarthy et al) Demos. URL: <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/File/networklogic04mulgan.pdf>

Perkin, E. and J. Court (2005). Networks and policy processes in international development: a literature review. *ODI Working Paper No. 252*, Overseas Development Institute: London

Wilson-Grau, R. and M. Nunez (In press). Evaluating international social networks: a conceptual framework for a participatory approach. *Development in Practice*

Abstract

This case study presents the experience of *Redesenvolvimento*, a capacity-building programme for networks for development proposed and implemented in Brazil by ABDL. It introduces the justification and rationale of the programme as well as its main features, and describes the implementation of the first edition, carried out between July, 2005 and July 2006. The authors conclude by exploring the results of the programme among the participating individuals and networks, and presenting the main challenges found in adapting more traditional training models for application in network organizations.

About the authors

Andres Falconer is executive director of ABDL (Associação Brasileira para o Desenvolvimento de Lideranças) and Programme Director of LEAD Brazil.

Andres Falconer, r. Gomes de Carvalho, 837, ap. 104, São Paulo, SP, Brazil, 04542-003. E-mail: afalconer@abdl.org.br

Dalberto Adulis is Associate Executive Director of RITS (Third Sector Information Network, and consultant to ABDL.

Dalberto Adulis, r. Diana 715, 90A, São Paulo, SP, Brazil, 05019-000. E-mail: dalberto@rits.org.br

¹ *Redesenvolvimento*, in Portuguese, is a play with words combining *redes* (networks) and *desenvolvimento* (development), loosely translatable as Networks for Development. A different reading of the word reveals *re-desenvolvimento* (re-development).

² The conference 'Redes e Desenvolvimento', which took place 19-21 July 2006 was organized jointly by ABDL and SENAC-SP, a large Brazilian nonprofit. Information about the event, including programme, speakers, and audio recordings of the plenary sessions (in Portuguese) is available online at www.redesdesenvolvimento.org.br.