



A **Just Associates** session
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Your Net, My Work:

Pitfalls and lessons from coalitions, alliances and networks

Networks are a fact of life in women's rights advocacy work and social change activism. They offer vital linkages, alliances and communication, without which we are unable to tap and wield the extraordinary power of our numbers and diversity to advance our agendas and voices. But, our differences – as people, as leaders and as organizations – can be as powerful as our common interests. How can we understand and negotiate differences to build and consolidate the coordination we need for clout, credibility and size? How can we negotiate and coordinate our key differences in terms of size, style, funding, and more to maximize our connections and minimize the tensions caused by difference? This workshop explored these challenges through the insights and experiences of three women's rights advocates, and an experienced network evaluator.

Participants' *word associations* with "network":

multi-agendas	compromise
unequal	challenging
competition	trust
solidarity	strength

Panel

- Lisa Veneklasen** Just Associates, formerly Global Women in Politics Program; Women, Law and Development
- Everjoice Win** ActionAid International; formerly Women, Law and Development in Africa; Women's Action Group – Zimbabwe
- Lori Heise** Global Campaign for Microbicides, formerly working on violence against women and HIV&AIDS
- Jan Reynders** Independent consultant on international social change networks including AWID; formerly HIVOS gender specialist and head of Asia desk; Bangladesh rural development work.

Presentations

Lori Heise drew lessons from the experience of building the Global Campaign for Microbicides.

Context

Microbicides are products currently under development to prevent HIV and STD transmission that women can control; once available they would be applied vaginally. The HIV epidemic is increasingly feminized (up to 60% in many places), with married and young women especially vulnerable. In sub-Saharan Africa, six young women are HIV+ for every young man infected. Solutions exported by the US

(abstinence, fidelity, condoms) do little to protect women, who often do not have the power in their relationships to negotiate condom use or to abandon partnerships that put them at risk. Women are mostly getting infected by primary partnerships, which is the hardest place to introduce and sustain condom use because of trust issues.

Why is a global campaign necessary? Why wouldn't pharmaceuticals invest in new products like this? In fact to date, none have, in any substantial way. They don't see it as a moneymaker because they perceive microbicides as mainly a need for poor women. So, it falls to women, governments and foundations to make microbicides a reality. It took a while to build political consensus that such an innovation was necessary and possible. In the beginning, HIV/AIDS groups were not focusing on women's needs, while the women's movement tended to be wary of researchers as a result of the conflicted history around international contraceptive research, which focused more on controlling women's fertility than on meeting women's reproductive health needs.

Precursor

Recognizing all these elements of the situation, a group of women formed Women's Health Advocates for Microbicides (WHAM) in 1991 to exert pressure for research into new methods of HIV prevention. WHAM's aim was not just to critique but to change how science is done and who is at the table to make decisions about research. WHAM had closed membership and annual meetings, and focused on influencing one or two major actors.

By 1997, the field had changed dramatically. There was no longer a single entity to influence, so WHAM declared success, officially disbanded, and decided on new structure – an open coalition, more explicitly political, with political mobilization as its key feature.

Launch

In 1998, WHAM women launched the Global Campaign for Microbicides, with a three-pronged agenda:

1. to accelerate development on a woman-controlled product;
2. to democratize science, by influencing how science is conducted and whose voices are heard;
3. to create movements and dialogue across sectors (for example, among activists working on HIV/AIDS, reproductive health and violence against women).

The Campaign set out to be an umbrella for civil society activism – not a new NGO, but a shared idea that people could buy into; in other words, a movement-building agenda. This would only work with collective ownership, so the GCM focuses on creating and sustaining a sense of joint ownership. At the same time, the founders realized that the Campaign needed a small staff to support and catalyze action by and through its partner groups. The Campaign recognized that people might be completely behind an idea but lack the space, time or energy to implement it. The secretariat works to create materials and mechanisms to make it easier for individuals and groups to act on their commitment.

The Campaign had specific objectives but recognized regional realities, and so was open to organic evolution. We figured out different levels of commitment – from signing a petition, or endorsing as an organization, all the way up through true partnerships in the coalition.

Today

The Campaign has over 200 endorsing organizations, of which 50 are implementing partners. There are small secretariats in DC and Brussels, another opening soon in India. In the US, we have 10 campaign "sites": cities with local coalitions convened by one or two partner organizations. Because research funding is linked to legislative politics in the US, there is a need for local constituencies. Through concerted advocacy, the amount of money invested annually in microbicide development has more than doubled from \$65 million in 2000 to US \$142 million in 2004.

Currently, five potential microbicides are in large-scale effectiveness trials. If one of these products proves effective, microbicides could be available in at least a handful of countries by the end of the decade. The focus now is trial ethics and accountability.

Successes

- Allowing for different levels of engagement has worked well. We formalized what those levels were, so that people knew how they related to the overarching structure.
- We avoided conflicts over membership by avoiding a formal membership structure. We put out a mission and a vision – if you agree, join us. (I have seen how hard it is for people to try to develop a joint mission.)
- The structure proved effective: a global steering committee with a small staff that helps service the global coalition.
- The staff is empowered to move on issues. A lack of clarity on what kind of decisions can be made by local groups is an issue in some organizations – but GCM established which decisions could be taken by whom.
- We invest in face-to-face meetings to build trust. It's expensive but there is no other way.
- We drew up a set of criteria to guide decisions on accepting funding and who to partner with.

Challenges

- Which messaging or framing issues are non-negotiable and where can they be adapted locally? In Africa, microbicides are clearly a women's issue. In the US, groups acknowledge that it is a women's issue, but declaring this will marginalize the campaign politically, so we have to put gay men's issues and rectal sex at the center.
- Money. We work by giving small seed grants to buy space for an individual to bring their organization along. How do we partner without becoming a donor?
- How to respond most creatively and effectively to spin-off groups? As the movement matures and groups define themselves, how do we keep information flowing?

Everjoice Win traced experiences from Women in Law and Development, a pan-African network, and a smaller, national body, the Zimbabwe Women's Coalition

Networks and coalitions are like sexual relationships: we love them and create them but we also hate them and often abandon them.

WiLDAF

Formed in 1990, WiLDAF made the law and development link, bringing together lawyers and development practitioners working on different issues to use the law as a tool for social change. By 1991/2, it had members in 22 African countries and a fully fledged secretariat in Harare, with a coordinator and staff to manage the network. Most of the work involved:

- mobilizing African women to develop a common agenda around law reform,
- training trainers to go out into communities to do rights education and
- sharing advocacy skills in countries and supporting advocates.

At the international level, WiLDAF mobilized African women to take part in UN conferences, Vienna, Beijing, etc. The network was fortunate in that sense, existing in that historical moment.

On the issue of identifiable leadership, the regional coordinator and country representatives sat on the WiLDAF board, the decision-making structure that kept the network going between meetings. Regional meetings were held twice a year – 22 women traveled to Harare or Accra twice a year for three days, a necessity for building trust and a common agenda.

The vision and mission were negotiated over a long period of time prior to the formal establishment of WiLDAF. By the time people came together in 1990, it was mostly to dot the 'i's and cross the 't's. It still took many days in conference – for example, one country almost walked out in protest over the location of the secretariat. Originally two coordinators were planned, one for West and East Africa and one for Southern Africa, but we ended up with just one coordinator. This too being about joint or shared leadership.

Challenges and problems

How do we keep networks going on a sustainable basis? WiLDAF worked when it had an external agenda – trying to influence the world out there. And the international conferences luckily provided that. However as those opportunities waned, our rallying point vanished, so we needed to find another catalyst in the 2000s. Do networks need an external agenda? How do you sustain the networking without that agenda? When there is nothing to eat out there, do we end up eating each other? When and how do we decide to stop?

How do we balance national and regional issues? Despite the board and secretariat structure, each country had its own nuances. For instance, there was a big debate about the Vienna Conference – is violence against women (VAW) our primary issue? Part of the network said “no, we’re focused on structural adjustment”. We negotiated by letting each sub-region decide which to research – VAW, structural adjustment, etc. But, then VAW got more publicity and funding and those countries that hadn’t focused on the issue felt excluded.

It’s important to have secretariats, because people are busy and members can’t put in enough time. But does the secretariat play a leadership role or only services the members? Who do you put in that position – someone to type, file, and keep the books? Or a feminist-activist to represent the network? Issues arise around power and visibility. Who becomes known? How do we share space? And the whole issue of resources: the network competes with its own members for resources.

Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe

This was formed around constitutional reform in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s, to ensure that women’s rights were included in the constitutional reform process, and was very specific and focused. (See the article in Oxfam’s *Gender and Development* booklet in the AWID pack.)

Today, the agenda around which we organized, that particular moment, has passed and the context has changed dramatically. Government formed its own constitutional review committee to rip the carpet from under civil society’s feet. The result was a whole negotiation within civil society around the insider/outsider debate, with the majority of the women’s movement deciding to stay outside. But activists we’d relied on, like lawyers and judges, crossed the floor and joined the government commission. This raised new issues about the women’s movement’s relationship with the state, which is particularly difficult in the context of Zimbabwe. Do we remain autonomous or become part of a larger attempt that could suck us into their vortex? This raised issues around values and ideology. These are core issues that you can’t negotiate. This goes beyond the NGO-speak of mission and vision. It was not simply about whether you like the ruling party or not. The conversation needed to be more nuanced to ask: “where do we differ with the ruling party on matters of values and principle?”

How long do coalitions last and how long should they last? How do we negotiate necessary changes? How do we negotiate less tangible/visible aspects of ideology and values, for which we have less language? Everyone recognizes the political fissures caused by that difficult moment, but we can’t go back to 1999. We want to say “we are all women, we’re friends.” We were such deep friends with the women who crossed the floor. But to this day, some of us are unable to greet these women and them us. We had suspicions about those relationships. Political violence also became a reality in our lives, there was serious repression at that period and these affected our relationships in the movement.

Jan Reynders proposed a series of points arising from his evaluations of 10–15 organizations over the last 10 years.

Your net, my work. Is it yours or mine? If it's yours, to what extent do I feel I'm really a part of it? If my work doesn't benefit this year, am I still part of it?

Is there a limited shelf life for a network? If we haven't achieved what we set out to do, should we disband and regroup?

There are no blueprints – networks are always different, combining common and individual agendas.

Why do people want to form networks? It is related to a desire for social change, because the new is not possible through the old systems, traditions and organizational structures and cultures. The NGO world speaks of “beneficiaries, bullets, target groups,” Mostly the “others.” But what if we can find new ways to meet and share, make change happen, which involves us and the others? The majority of the networks are women's networks.

A network needs some – or many – non-negotiable principles. A network is an affiliation of independent groups or individuals that come together for a common purpose. A network should acknowledge diversity as part of its strengths. No one size fits all: different approaches are needed to different countries and problem issues. We meet at the level of our commonality. Accepting our differences, we must seek, time and again, what keeps us together. The majority of strong networks emerged out of international conferences or campaigns – and on donor pushing. Our task to make this possible pitfall into a strength.

In networks organized around one issue, individuals may move on. Not everyone will be involved at the same time. For example, reproductive rights might be your organization's only issue or one of 25. All members contribute from their own context and knowledge. Enormous diversity calls for flexible decision-making across countries and other boundaries.

The membership issue is very important. What do members give and get? Many networks are all ‘get,’ and expect the secretariat to do all the work.

You need a basic understanding of what can be said on behalf of the network or membership, so that members or secretariat can respond to situations adequately. You must be able to be swift. This may require a different way of organizing and feeling the pulse of the membership. No hierarchies or chapters through which all network statements have to be approved. Horizontally, rather we have so much in common, and our non-negotiables reflect the common vision.

We are human beings so problems of power games emerge also in networks. Equality is not the norm anywhere, so we have to start afresh creating new ways of cooperating. International work across continents also has to deal with cultural differences: what is flexible in one country is considered chaotic in another. These are not easy issues to resolve – they take time and trust-building.

We need to accept what we achieved and failed in and dissolve as a network when it doesn't work any more or does not serve a common purpose. If others took it on, that's a success – but now we may need to regroup in a new shape. Continuing as a funded secretariat (jobs), rationalizing the need to exist is a danger to be aware of.

A history of donors' and international organizations' perceptions of networks:

In 1980–85, donors liked and funded international networks. Then came a period when donors said, “the same jetset are going everywhere.”

Around the 1990s, feminist-activist networks grew. Now, donors had problems with their own ability to see what was happening in these structures. They would fund secretariats of the international networks as if these were organizations in their own right, with the same reporting demands and impact assessment rules used from regular organizations. Donors wanted proof that secretariats showed impact. Secretariats felt under pressure to ‘prove’ their value and, in some cases, claimed credit for successes that were achieved by the members, rather than showing and claiming their role in capacitating members to do their own work better. Then it’s for donors to recognize the added value.

Donors were often unhappy with what they considered high overheads of the secretariats. But what is easily seen as overheads (telephone calls, travel, copying, documentation, websites, translations, etc.) IS the actual work of a network secretariat – for example, phone calls and other communication, linking people, giving information at the right moment. Donor education on these and other points takes time.

A new danger arose: the network became a fashion, especially if they were dealing with ‘fashionable’ issues. Donors started using network secretariats as easy in-betweens, saving on the donor’s overhead and workload. It’s easy for a donor – they give money to one institution, rather than many small NGOs so the donor agency’s life is easier. They make network secretariats perform as the filter and representative of the donor agency, make the secretariat responsible for channeling money and for chasing up members for reports. The donor channels their own overheads to secretariat.

The secretariat can become a problem in itself. It must register, but as what? Because it’s hard to register as secretariat of a network, it has to register as an NGO, and then it is seen and treated as an NGO. The secretariat behaves as an NGO – sustaining power and jobs. But it is supposed to be servicing a larger interest. “We’re sending information out – that’s enough.” How much of newsletter inputs, for instance do you get from members vs. what you write yourself as the secretariat? Have you become a service organization?

How to make a change? In donor agencies, many individuals want to become part of change. While there is no equality with donors, you can find donors who share similar principles and make them part of your campaigns. Not every donor becomes an activist – but some can.

Discussion

Sustainability vs ‘sell-by date’?

Do networks need to live for ever? As always, much depends on the context and purpose. Why was the network formed to begin with? Many are launched at conferences where people are heated up. Then, once the first line of founders move away or get busy, the network may lose its focus. How do we keep the vision of the founders alive and sustain what people got excited about to begin with? If you form a network to build up capacity, it might have a longer life span than a shorter-term campaign/advocacy network.

It would be useful to think of a network as born for a purpose, and then acknowledge when the purpose has been met. Who dissolves a network? There seems to be a sense of shame in admitting that a network went wrong or is no longer necessary. Among the practices we could take from the business world is the concept of an exit strategy, like a pre-nuptial agreement or renewal points. We need to be less afraid that things will not work forever.

The Zimbabwe Women's Coalition offers an example – it still exists but, Everjoice felt, should declare itself dead and re-form as something else. If a coalition is formed for a particular season and that season passes, it is critical to take stock and move on. Remaining stuck in the same space holding on to a coalition from last season will in the long term be unproductive.

The consensus in the room, at least in principle, was that a time comes for a network to come to an end. However, this is trickier when the long-term vision has NOT been achieved, but people have changed or the moment has passed. Is there a point at which we have to rethink, agree that we cannot make this change? If we do not, and people drop out one by one, the end is seen as failure rather than closure. A lot of networks have closed shop by celebrating. This is a much better political approach. Or perhaps we should begin to look at a broader mission – so by the time we score on one issue, we have others to become active on.

Secretariat vs membership?

The “vexed” relationship between secretariat and membership can be defined in numerous ways and causes numerous issues. Does a secretariat proactively lead and initiate, or only serve the members? How much power should the secretariat have? Some felt that the secretariat is paid so it must push the organization – the members, board, and so on. Others suggested that the secretariat must have some degree of autonomous decision-making power, but also needs to see itself as accountable to or representative of the membership. A rotating secretariat is one idea: Treatment Action Campaign office-bearers are elected.

The secretariat is always an issue in networks – what is its role? Whom do we hire to work there? Will activists be “wasted” in administrative positions? Alternatively, do we risk having a staff who are non-committal and lack passion? Dichotomizing network and staff is dangerous because the staff are likely to bring an activist background. On the other hand, the members are often preoccupied, so the staff end up running the network.

Net-work vs own work?

Instead of supporting members' immediate focus and activism, networking and secretariats can pull people away from work on the ground. But the opposite can be found: network secretariats may start to have the same identity and functions as their members, including the direct implementation of activities.

“I ran a young people's network on AIDS, facing the tension between regional and national agendas. It's not always clear how rooted people's work is in local realities.”

“On the issue of whether a network needs an external agenda to work, at WiLDAF, West Africa, we didn't wait for the international agenda to bring us together – we look to the national situation for the focus for our work on women's rights.”

Is it true that the secretariat is always where the money is and where the ideas are? For example, in a network that exists to service members around training issues, will the secretariat always end up where the tools are produced and training is done? Or can it take a provocative and pro-active role as it sits on the center of the spider-web and has a better overview than many members?

Like many other issues, the potential for tension between secretariat (or hub) and members is reflected in questions of funding. Funders asking if they should fund one or the other (members or secretariat) were advised to fund both. In no way should the network supplant the membership – while it offers its own benefits, it exists for the membership.

Donors + funding

Not all donors are the same, and many allies and fellow activists can be found in funding organizations. Also, funders can be educated by confident networks that have done their homework and can make a good case for themselves.

For example, it is important to educate donor agencies on overhead vs. core costs. As Jan pointed out, “Some donors deceive themselves about how low their own overheads are, so they can’t appreciate and may not be aware of real overheads. Their phone calls are called ‘program work’. They need to understand that, in a similar way, communication is the core task of a network.”

One funder noted that many of the indigenous NGOs formed in Southern Africa in last 20 years are now being eroded by HIV and by crises that make people leave. “So we have a few core organizations left to do the work, plus burgeoning new, small organizations which might not be able to get funds. Networks to raise money might not be a bad thing.”

Sub-granting + back-donors

Jan pointed out that being a focal point or a donor representative is different from being a network – it’s more a way of raising and allocating funds. He gave the example of a Dutch institute that ended up – or rather was obliged – to administer funding to and reporting of other participants in an anti-trafficking network in Eastern Europe. It’s important not to mix network secretariat/ donor representative roles: with money vs. content divisions, money wins. The secretariat with financial power becomes king, whether they like it or not.

Others have similar experiences. To avoid tension over money, the Global Campaign for Microbicides used to give small amounts as seed grants, with no reports necessary. Then, a partner group was forced to close and GCM inherited its money. “We didn’t want to give the money back, but it changed things,” Lori said. “We exist within another big NGO, so reporting and other responsibilities cascade. We’ve asked donors to give the money to our partners directly but the donor won’t deal in those small amounts. So, we’re in a Catch-22.”

INGOs have become more dependent on inter-agency loans. In the 1980s, for example, Oxfam raised 20% of its funds from government or bilateral sources; now it has gone up to 45%. Governments pass on efficiencies by channeling funds through bigger NGOs, which then claim, for example, that “Our back-donors expect us to use logframes.” They don’t push back at back-donors.

One network considers itself fortunate in being funded by one donor, even though it advises organizations not to depend on one donor because they’re fickle and can seldom predict how long their own funds will continue. However, the alternative is donors with their own favorite methods and criteria. “It was bad enough when they used to want their own personal field visit, but now they each insist on highly elaborated evaluation tools.”

Evaluation + outcomes

One donor agreed that, increasingly, her organization is asked to show outputs to boards and trustees: “Give a benchmark.” While she personally did not believe in that, she was eager to learn creative, alternative ways to assess communication, meetings, and so on.

When a network is issue-driven, it is easier to show outcomes. But with more fluid arrangements, the whole is greater than the sum of parts. We lack a way to quantify the value of the network to its members. We don’t have indicators or benchmarks for that. We need instances of networks sustaining themselves vs. falling apart, ways to measure and mark the health and benefits of a network.

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) exists to influence ways of thinking, so it has needed less figure-based ways to evaluate itself. IDS now uses outcome mapping, deriving from the kind of behavior they are trying to see happen. Their donor, DFID, now accepts that approach.

“There is a way out, depending on how you position yourself as a network,” Jan said. “I wish networks would feel more confident about themselves. Donors exist because you exist – come up with your own, convincing plan. Pick your partners’ brains. Explain what you want to achieve and when/how you will respond. Do your homework about your NGOs and networks – we often collect information because donors require it, instead of to meet our own needs. If you are strong and principled about what you want to collect, how you are going to do, if you’ve done it – donors must agree to that. Explain to donors how you will evaluate yourselves. You’re not ‘a beneficiary’ – you are the one for whom they exist. Then you have to be good as well. And if you can’t do it, dissolve.”

Making change happen

We need to look at and document good practices, and question old-style egos and hierarchies. They’re not conscious, but unless people are trained, we fall back on old patterns of working.

Lisa VeneKlasen summarized and commented on key points from the discussion.

“Networks suffer from same problems produced by the general trend of depoliticization and NGO-ization that can weaken any type of social change work. We have to revisit and refresh the meaning and purpose of networks, coalition, alliances. To do this, perhaps we need to step back and ask what it means to build collective and alternative kinds of political power. The stories we heard here refer to processes of relationship-building, highlighting the need for face-to-face trust-building and good communication as the life blood of networks. Groups are strongest and richest when members are diverse and recognize – even celebrate - differences. In particular political moments that exacerbate political and ideological differences, we need to find spaces to negotiate opposing political perspectives and identify the minimum standards or values that bind us. Coalitions work best when values are clear and non-negotiable – only then can we have arguments and agree to disagree on some issues. The issue of making alliances and networks permanent is almost a contradiction in terms. Institutionalization is a tricky issue when it comes to collectivity. We come together around common agendas or against common enemies when the power of numbers is crucial. This may be a long-term prospect but more often than not, it is short-term in nature. For the GCM, it’s 20-year agenda and probably more than that. For the constitutional process in Zimbabwe, it was a particular moment over a given period. For WiLDAF, the general reason for a network continues, but the activities and agendas that glue and galvanize members have changed. When circumstances shift, we may need new players, new conversations, refined agendas and, perhaps, new structures. Here, the role of donors can be pivotal. What’s problematic is an emphasis on institutionalizing at all costs and the delivery of concrete outcomes within a two year period, rather than on the more difficult-to-measure issues of collective power for joint political action.”

Just Associates (JASS) is a fast-growing global advocacy and learning network committed to building movements for democracy, equality and justice by strengthening local and global civic organizations and leaders. In just 4 years of operation, JASS has become a recognized leader among women's rights and social justice advocates around the world for its innovative strategies, training and practical, cutting-edge thinking about social change.