

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF A NETWORK

Networks are a valuable asset for civil society organisations operating in Sierra Leone. By joining forces with other groups who have similar goals, you can share expertise, skills, experience and resources, and in doing so, take a step closer to achieving your vision.

WHAT IS NETWORKING?

Networking is the process of identifying, building and using connections with other individuals, groups and bodies whose work can complement your work, or vice-versa.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Being part of a network can be an invaluable way to advance your cause. By joining a network diverse groups can pool resources, information and influence in order to collaborate on initiatives, projects and campaigns, among other things. This is particularly the case when you find yourself working towards similar goals or in the same geographic region as other organisations. Put simply, it can prevent a duplication of efforts by groups working towards the same end or for the same beneficiaries, thus enabling you to save valuable funds and work more effectively.

As well as being a forum for dialogue and discussion, a network can also help you to capitalise on the skills and

experiences of others. It gives you an opportunity to engage with other groups who are more established or who have greater resources, knowledge and contacts. Networking is also a good way to raise the profile of your organisation and its cause. What's more, it allows you to build your skills, gain enhanced visibility and influence, and work together for a common purpose.



Joining a network enables you to pool resources, time and effort.

TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

FINDING A NETWORK TO JOIN

If you want to join a network, there are a few things you should consider. First you need to assess the environment: ask yourself, are there any organisations doing similar or complementary work to you, or with the same goals, target group or geography? Could these have an impact on your activities?

Do not just join a network for the sake of it. Once you know who is in your network, write down what you think you could bring to the table, and what value they in turn could bring to you.

Bigger networks — such as national or even global ones — are also worth exploring. Although some may charge a membership fee, they can be an ideal way of gaining access to larger, more established bodies, while also giving you an opportunity to learn about potential sources of funding that could benefit your organisation.

MEMBER EXPECTATIONS

As a member of a network, you should be:

- willing to collaborate and work in a team
- happy to commit to the network in practice, not just in theory
- able to articulate what you can contribute to the network (whether it is resources, reputation, connections, experience, skills and so on)
- aware of what you want to gain from the network
- open to sharing your resources and staff, as well as power and credit
- willing to speak with one voice on various issues
- open to new ideas and ways of working
- open to negotiating and engaging in dialogue on disputable issues
- able to commit to engaging with the network for a specified amount of time.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE NETWORK

- ◆ **Strong leadership:** good networks have a core group of leaders who help to set a clear direction, ensure accountability, maintain unity and keep things moving. Ideally, leadership positions should be rotated, so that different bodies get a chance to play a part in steering the group.
- ◆ **A shared and clearly defined purpose:** having a clear set of goals and aims is one of the most critical aspects of a network.
- ◆ **Clear values:** networks bring together diverse groups of all sizes with different views and opinions. That's why it helps to establish written procedures or a memorandum of understanding. This ensures all members are clear on goals, roles and responsibilities, and agreed ways of working (including decision making processes).
- ◆ **Transparent decision-making processes:** all members must be able to input (even if the final decisions are made by a leadership group).
- ◆ **Engaged members:** networks with members who participate and contribute consistently tend to do better than those with members with low levels of commitment.
- ◆ **Effective ways of planning,** so that the network members are clear on what actions are being taken, by whom and for what purpose.
- ◆ Ways of **measuring goals,** outcomes and member involvement.
- ◆ Frequent and productive **meetings and communications,** to keep members up to date and allow them a chance to interact.
- ◆ A balance of **meaningful discussion & action.**
- ◆ **Ability to manage conflict,** so that the network is cohesive rather than divisive.
- ◆ **Clear and accurate record-keeping,** with meeting minutes available to all members.

FURTHER READING:

- NGO guide to making connections: <http://bit.ly/1tu1vA8>
- United Nations Development Programme civil society toolkit for strengthening partnerships: <http://bit.ly/1sbH0vr>

POTENTIAL COSTS OF JOINT WORKING

It is worth being aware of some of the costs involved in joining a network. These include:

- A potential loss of independence: you will need to work as a team, and this means that you will often need to compromise on your preferred approaches or way of working in some cases.
- A need to invest resources—financial or otherwise—that may already be scarce
- A risk of bad publicity by association: if a fellow network member receives negative reception, this may in turn affect your own reputation.
- Some networks suffer from a lack of direction and leadership.
- A potential of reduced visibility for smaller members.
- A risk that your voice may be diluted or your message/direction altered to fit in with the majority.
- A risk of larger or more influential network members dominating or controlling the rest of the group.



TOP TIP: Do a cost/benefit analysis before joining a network. Providing all members are committed and clear on what is involved, the pros should outweigh the cons.

USING THE INTERNET TO NETWORK

Many organisations use the internet to share their message, communicate and network with others. If you have access to the funds, technology and necessary skills, then the web is an effective tool for telling your story and building networks — particularly on an international scale.

Corporate websites: If funds are available, having your own website is the most popular and easiest way to share information with a large audience. Particularly if it includes details on your mission, goals, activities, funding needs, impact and photographs/accounts of your projects.

Social media: Websites such as Twitter and Facebook allow you to set up free accounts, from which you can showcase your work. They enable you to highlight information about your organisation, learn about others in your sector, build connections and relationships, update people on your activities, and encourage others to interact with you.

ENCISS is supported by:



ENCISS is managed by:



1 Old Railway Line,
Brookfields, Freetown
www.enciss-sl.org
info@enciss-sl.org

