

Network Management Tool XX

Networks Strategy

Summary

A strategy is a broad overall priority or direction adopted by an organization so as to best achieve its purposes. The network strategy should be a simple and facilitating resource, providing a framework of action and opportunities for members and interaction with partners, rather than becoming a constraining document.

This strategy takes the background basis from the network profile, SWOT analysis, mission, values and vision to identify priorities for the network and the strategic addresses those priorities in the form of objectives.

The strategy is not an objective, but a means to achieve one or more objectives. In simple terms, the mission and vision are seen as the objective and the strategy is the means by which the network will achieve them. The inputs to make progress in that direction are those which the network has and which will be articulated in line with the network values.

The strategy shows action oriented routes which the network work plans will follow. The strategy does not have a budget. The strategy or strategies identified will be effective by means of the network work plans which should capture these "action-routes" into daily activities and measurable achievements'.

Expected output

This tool aims to facilitate and guide the development of a strategy for capacity building networks.

Networks may wish to elaborate their strategy at various times: the outset of the network; after an evaluation, specially if this has lead to challenging recommendations; at the end of a major phase in a project, if the network was ran under a project framework; and if there are significant changes in the context (needs, alliances, commitments from governments, amongst others).

Contents

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- [A sample questionnaire for assessing the need for a strategy in networks.](#)
- [A guide for the process of elaborating a strategy.](#)
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Keywords: strategy, mission, vision, values, network profile, SWOT analysis.

Links with other management tools

A network strategy is closed related to many of the network aspects seen at the time of elaborating or revising the operational guidelines, presented in the tool for **establishing a network**. **Communications** and **knowledge management** are two more central areas for network management which need to be considered when elaborating a strategy.

I. What is a strategy?

A strategy is an overall approach. The strategy gives the focus to strategic elements that should be followed regardless of how much funds are available. It provides you with the big picture of what the network is there for and where it is going. A strategy is not an objective; it is a means to reach an objective.

A strategy takes you outside the day-to-day activities of the network and gives the focus to the situation of the network, identifying its strategic advantage, positioning itself for maximum impact with whatever limited resources, working with specific partners, targets groups or capacity gaps according to the sector analysis and developing the principles of the financing strategy.

Elaborating and agreeing on a strategy is about building commitment. And this is a key element for partnered and goaled approached endeavours as networks.

A strategy brings responses to:

- Who are we?
- What capacity do we have / what can we do?
- What problems are we addressing?
- What difference do we want to make?
- Which critical issues must we respond to?
- Where should we allocate our resources?
- What should our priorities be?

A strategy is a broad overall priority or direction adopted by an organization so as to best achieve its purposes. A strategy defines your overall program and organizational priorities and therefore suggests where your organization should be investing its resources now and over the next few years (Allison, M.; Kaye, J.: 1997).

Box 1. Elaborating the strategy

There are various times in the life cycle of a network where it makes sense to do or revise the strategy:

- At the outset of the network.
- After an evaluation, specially if this has lead to challenging recommendations.
- At the end of a major phase in a project, if the network was ran under a project framework.
- If there are significant changes in the context (needs, alliances, commitments from governments, amongst others).

The network strategy should be a simple and facilitating resource, providing a framework of action and opportunities for members and interaction with partners, rather than becoming a constraining document.

II. Does your network face the need to elaborate or review its strategy?

CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, has prepared the following questionnaire as a guideline to identify the need of not to review the strategy.

The questionnaire is intended to be completed by the management team of the organisation. In the case of capacity building networks, this could be done by the secretariat, steering committee, and some selected network members.

Where a statement has two parts and you would answer “definitely” to one part but not another, then go with the weaker response. So, for example, in the first statement, you may be able to answer “definitely” your organisation has a clear vision, but not be sure whether there is consensus about the vision. Your response then is “not sure”.

Score your organisation as follows on each statement:

- 1 = Definitely
- 2 = Maybe/Not sure
- 3 = Definitely not

If your total is 20 or more, then your network faces the need to elaborate or re-elaborate the strategy. If it is 15, or between 15 and 20, then your network probably would benefit from a strategy review. Under 15, then there is no urgency but periodic reviews (every 3 years) are still recommended.

Statement	Definitely	Maybe Not Sure	Definitely Not	SCORE
The network has a clear vision of what it wants to achieve and there is consensus around this vision.				
Value issues are often discussed in the network and there is agreement on the values base of the network.				
The current mission statement of the network reflects clearly what the network does, for whom, and why it is important.				
The network regularly reflects on its strengths and weaknesses and on the opportunities and threats in the environment.				
The network has clear goals and objectives for what it wants to achieve				
The network finds it easy to prioritise, making a distinction between what it must do, what it should do and what it would like to do.				
The network has clear indicators by which it measures the impact of its work.				
The way in which the network is structured internally makes sense in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.				
The work done by the network fits together coherently – the different areas of work fit well with one another.				
The external and internal contexts in which the network operates are relatively stable and there have been no major changes in the past year.				

Total score:

III. Elaborating a network strategy

In principle it is important to acknowledge the lack of a perfect blue print for what a strategy is suppose to have. The best strategy will be the one responding best to the network identity, this will be find both in its membership base and the context.

Still, it is recommended that a strategy for capacity building network covers some basic areas:

Many capacity building networks may find an advantage to share their strategies, as many common things will be found. However, the ultimate version of a network strategy will be tailored to the specific situation of each particular network.

- Develop a network profile: basic information about the network.
- Articulating the network mission, values, and vision.
- Identifying strategic objectives
- Needs and steps for implementing the plan.

1) **Develop a network profile: basic information about the network.**

The first content of a strategy presents a description of the network. A strategy drives the network into the future from its current position. For the strategy to go well, you need to include certain background information which “set the stage” for action. Without this background, the network has no grounding.

Expected outcomes: i) A brief description of the network and its context (a couple of pages are enough, keep it simple and focussed); ii) A SWOT analysis table.

Tip

Go back to the **tool for establishing a network** to refresh basic network elements.

Refer to your network operational guidelines and various reports. Most of the items which should be described in the network profile should be available already. However, elaborating them in the form of a summarized and precise description is a challenge and an indicator which will tell if all those elements have been well conceptualized.

i) Network profile

Elements to be included in the description (consider an estimated length of 2-4 pages).

- A brief summary refreshing the network foundation: date, members, driver, overall goal.
- An understanding of what the network is: definition, legal structure, geographic and thematic coverage.
- What does the network do: a precise and concrete description of the services and products the network develops.
- How does the network works: a summarized, and precise description showing the network operation in practice.
- Target groups: For capacity building networks they should be divided in two levels:
 - Potential members and partners: who they are?; and, how do they participate?
 - Beneficiaries and clients: which target groups?
- Financing sources: a brief description showing the financial sources which enable the network to operate and deliver activities and products.
- Other relevant issues: relationship with Cap-Net, collaboration with other networks in the region and other partnerships may be included, reference to projects.

ii) SWOT analysis

Once you have gone through the items mentioned above and you have a synthesis of the network, you will be able to elaborate a SWOT analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

It is common to mix opportunities with strengths, or weakness with threats. The correct way of doing it is to consider that when looking for opportunities and threats we are looking at external forces (those which do not depend on the network); when we look at strengths and weakness, we are looking at internal forces.

Box 2. Elaborating a SWOT analysis

Knowing the external forces:

1. What has happened in the past three years in the external environment that could affect our work as a network?
2. What are the challenges and threats coming from the external environment we face as a network?
3. What are the opportunities coming from the environment we should be taking advantage to: a) make us more sustainable?; and b) help us achieve our vision?

Thinking about the network:

4. What are the important strengths of our network?
5. What weaknesses are preventing our network from achieving its vision?
6. Do you think we are clear about our vision, mission, and values?
7. What challenges have we failed to meet in the past two to three years and why?
8. What challenges have we met well in the last two years to three years and what has helped us to meet them?

Source: Adapted from CIVICUS, Strategic Planning Toolkit.

Table 1. LA-WETnet SWOT analysis (2007)

Internal forces	External forces
Strengths	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational network in place. Number and relevance of members and partners. Capacity to leverage seed funds. Capacity to deliver in all Latin America. Recognised secretariat. Capacity to deliver a wide range of IWRM related subjects. Capacity to respond to local needs: use of local knowledge, participation of local organisations, language. Capacity to combine local and international knowledge. Very low operating costs (compared to international programmes or agencies). Partnership with Cap-Net. Partnerships with ArgCap-Net, Cap-Net Brazil, and REDICA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very high level of recognition at the regional and international level. Very high level of interest from organisations to participate in the network activities. Worldwide commitment with MDGs. No other similar IWRM and WATSAN capacity building network covering the entire region.
Weaknesses	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High dependency in seed funds received from Cap-Net. Membership is not formalised. Non clear roles or responsibilities assumed by steering committee members. The web site does not offer any tool to share information and use as platform. Planning is not continuous and this makes it difficult for fund raising. Communications after activities need to be improved to follow up results and monitor impact. Not enough funds available for the secretariat. This limits the capacity to drive the network forward as most time is based to day to day activities. Vertical alliances are sporadic. High dependency on the secretariat as network "engine". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low level of donor interest in Latin America. Low donor interest in regional programmes. Low level of understanding about the value of networks and their need for a secretariat. Low regional investment in capacity building. High dependency in public contributions from governments which do not offer a continuous and clear framework for collaboration and are subject of frequent shifts.

2) **Articulating the network mission, values, and vision**

Whereas the mission statement summarizes the what, how, and why of an organization's work, a vision statement presents an image in word of what success will look like.

The mission statement, values (or principles), and vision should also be available at the network constitution or operational guidelines. A mistake would be to take these for granted and not stopping at them to see how they read and look like after some time in action.

▪ **Mission statement**

A complete and clear mission statement should give an indication of:

- ✓ What the network wants to do.
- ✓ Who can be part of the network.
- ✓ The aim of the network.
- ✓ Where the network does operates.
- ✓ Which are the approach and central values.

▪ **Values and principles**

Values are strategically important as they drive the action of the network. They are wrongly used if they are just formal statements which later have no reality in the way the network operates. Therefore identifying and understanding the importance of the network values is challenging and exceeds a mere expression of good intentions.

The strategy of the partnership that makes up the Cap-Net Global Network has three basic guiding principles: local ownership; partnership among capacity builders; and demand for capacity building. These guiding principles have proved to be effective and continue since 2002 to form the basis for action within the Cap-Net programme.

Values, structure, and operations are in tight connection. Their analysis and review brings a basis for visualising the future network we want.

▪ **Vision**

The vision statement presents an image in word of what success will look like for the network. It describes organizational operation at its most effective and efficient level.

It is the end-result of the descriptive contents of the strategy. The contents that follows provides the justification for prioritising certain issues and then the strategy to address those issues emerges

3) **Identifying the strategy**

This strategy takes the background basis from the network profile, SWOT analysis, mission, values and vision to identify priorities for the network and the strategic addresses those priorities in the form of objectives.

The priorities and strategic objective are the means to drive the network from its current state into the elaborated organizational vision, using the network inputs.

The inputs used by the strategy are no others than the *inputs* the network has: membership, skills, visibility, reputation, impact, strategic position, funding; analysis of the sector in terms of capacity needs, emerging issues, priority target groups potential and actual partners.

How to do it?

The strategy is not an objective, but a means to achieve one or more objectives. In simple terms, the mission and vision are seen as the objective and the strategy is the means by which the network will achieve them. The inputs to make progress in that direction are those which the network has and which will be articulated in line with the network values.

The difference with a work plan is that this shows objectives which the network wants to achieve after its work, while a strategy is the overall planning which will enable the network to be efficient and be what members want it to be.

The strategy shows action oriented routes which the network work plans will follow.

For example, improving impact may be a priority that will be addressed by a strategy to strengthen collaboration with governmental and community organisations (aiming to reach various target

levels) and this collaboration should be seen in work plan and activities within these.

Some possible strategies

The strategy should be looking to add value to what their members are doing: capacity building for IWRM and improved access to water and sanitation.

Possible strategies in networks might consider:

1. EFFECTIVITY IN THE NETWORK OUTPUTS

▪ **Strengthening local ownership:**

Support will be given to implementation of capacity building actions by members, strengthening over time their responsiveness to local needs and demands, and addressing their own capacity constraints. The sustainability of the network outcomes is ultimately anchored in its members, enhanced knowledge centres.

Training of trainers, exchange, international exposure, improved access to information materials and local adaptation of training materials are common working areas within this strategy. International or regional support will be channelled to fill skills gaps and build quality.

▪ **Build partnerships:**

Promote global linkages and exchange across the network, remaining open and inclusive. These network linkages, bringing in international partners, will bring coherence to capacity building actions maximising relevance, impact and sustainability. Good governance, accountability, and efficient communications will be promoted as means to enhance openness and collaboration.

▪ **Respond to demand:**

Carry out capacity assessments in order to direct capacity building action. This is expected to reduce the risk of unfocused action and provide a framework to channel support. Increased attention will be given to monitoring and assessment tools as a basis for determining the effectiveness, relevance and impact of capacity building actions.

2. DEVELOPING CAPACITY

- ***Sustainable management of water resources***

Priority will be given to capacity building actions that address the implementation of IWRM. In particular, the application of principles of sustainable management of water resources in water use (water supply, sanitation, agriculture) and the natural environment will be addressed. Prominence is given to water management strategies that contribute to the reduction of poverty. Capacity building will emphasise methodologies and approaches that contribute to effective water management institutions, especially at the river basin level.

- ***Sustainable water and sanitation services***

Improve access to existing state of the art training materials and draw more capacity building institutions into water and sanitation. The development of local knowledge is considered critical for sustainability and impact.

3. IMPROVED NETWORK MANAGEMENT

A network strategy may also consider specific management aspects which the network needs to improve its own efficiency and which will contribute to the more subject related issues. These might be:

- ***Network visibility and recognition***

The image of the network is strategic for network strengthening and development. The network operates in a context which is shared with potential clients (including donors) and potential members, partners, or allies. Networks should be able to gain from a differentiated image, as unique endeavors which they are. Improved communications, identity and visibility will all create value for the members.

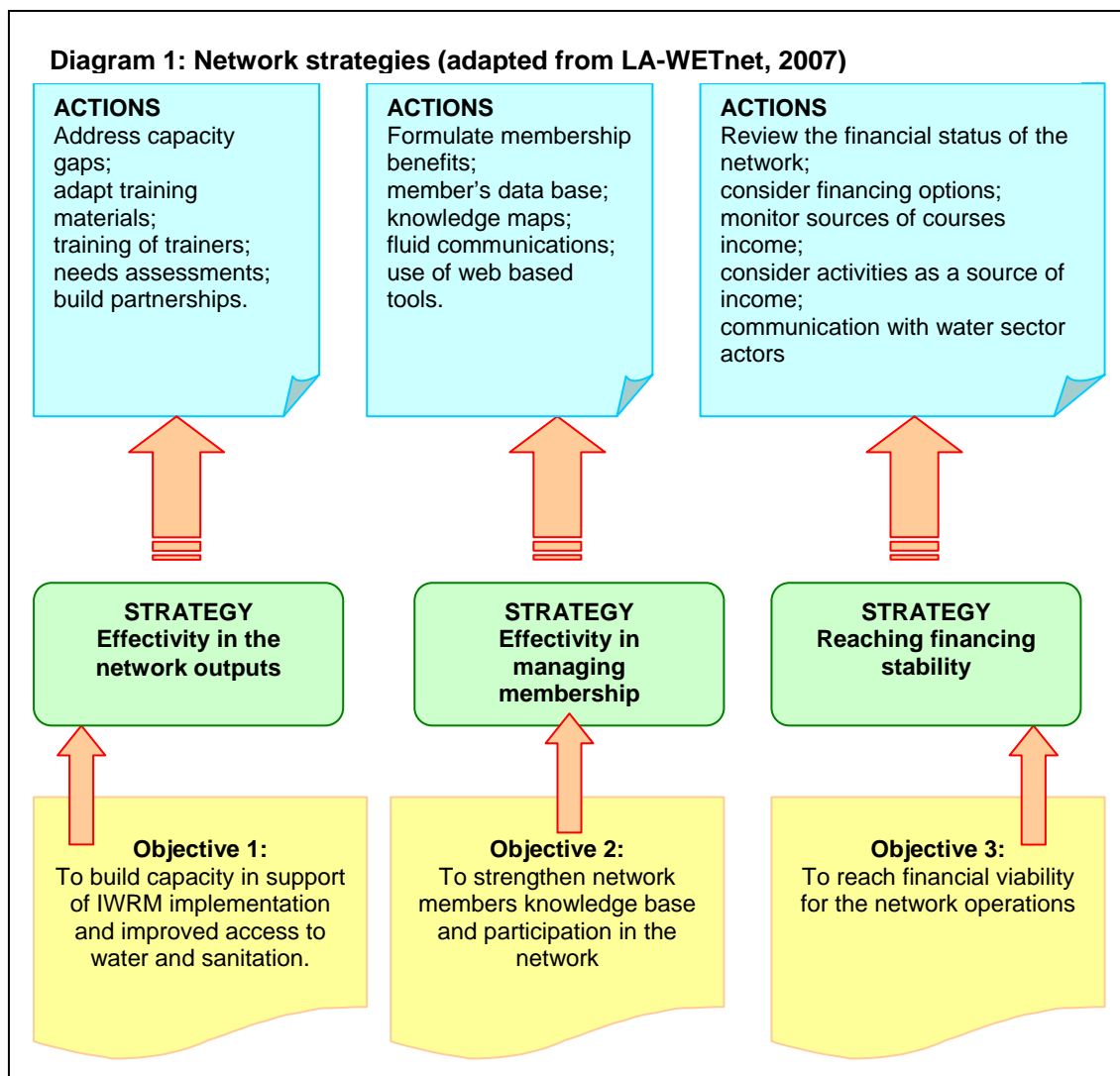
- ***Effectivity in managing membership***

The first and most important clients of the network are network members themselves. Being part of the network will bring them concrete benefits which may come in different forms as strengthening their skills and having access to knowledge sharing, amongst many others.

Open and inclusive networks bring the best contribution to IWRM expertise and capacity development needs at country level. Systematized and updated members' information should be available as this information is key for members and knowledge maps. Communication should be specifically targeted to members or else there is no value seen in being a member.

- ***Reaching financing stability***

Based on the network finance status consider different options for cost recover and income generation as a means to cover operational costs, in a framework of financial stability.



4) Implementing the strategy

The strategy or strategies identified will be effective by means of the network work plans which should capture these “action-routes” into daily activities and measurable achievements’.

The strategy does not have a budget. Strategies are like a compass showing the north where the network wants to go; it is the work plans which are connected to an available budget where the necessary inputs will be found.

The strategic elements should be followed regardless of how much funds are available.

The strategy will be implemented by the network as a whole, as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Roles and responsibilities in the implementation of the strategy	
Who	What?
Network secretariat	Coordinates and guides the implementation of the strategy This includes overall network management, work plan(s) preparation, facilitate that all activities are implemented, manage communications, contact donors and building partnerships. If one or more activities are decentralised, then the secretariat is still responsible to follow up and to offer assistance.
Steering Committee	Commitment action towards specific areas A specific steering committee work plan is recommended. They should stand on their particular value and from there aim for network

	development and strengthening.
Members	<p>Leadership in activities, commitment for continuous and collaborative planning.</p> <p>Members should be given the space, time, and incentive for an active participation. They are the foundation of the network. Management has to understand that asking for commitment and participation is not enough, members need to receive the opportunities for they high level of action.</p>

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