

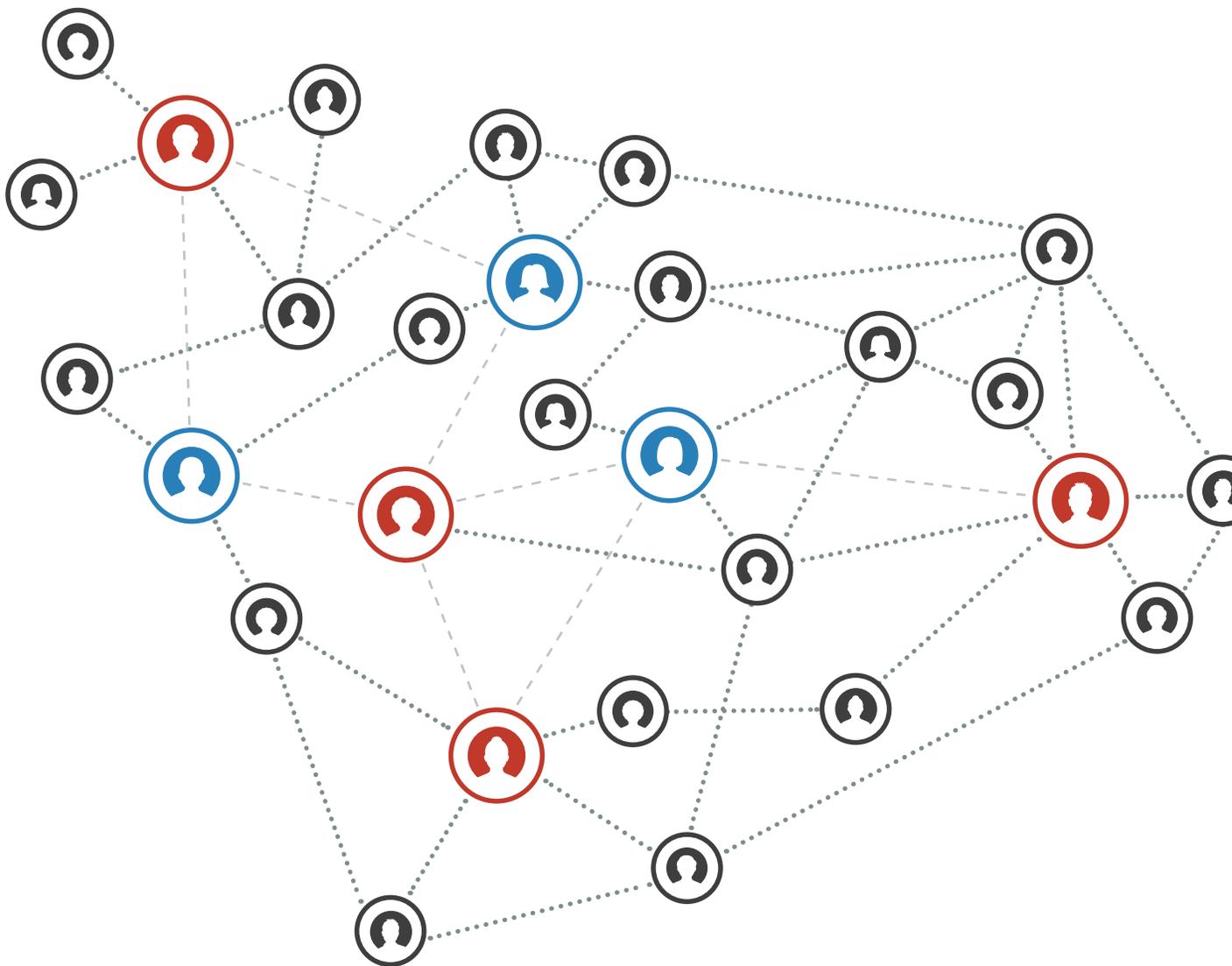
Part 1 of a Guide to Network Evaluation

## Framing Paper:

# The State of Network Evaluation

Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation

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# Introduction

In response to the growing interest of grantmakers and network builders, this paper examines the current state of the field of network evaluation. It discusses why network evaluation is of increasing interest to funders and to practitioners, and offers the field's current thinking on network evaluation frameworks, approaches, and tools.

Specifically, the paper addresses:

- **Why networks and evaluations of them are important**
- **What is unique about networks and the implications for evaluation**
- **What elements of a network can be evaluated**
- **What evaluation designs, questions, and methods/tools are relevant**
- **Challenges ahead for the field**

The framing paper can be used as a standalone document for funders, network practitioners, and network evaluators. It also was designed for use with [Evaluating Networks for Social Change: A Casebook](#). Both can be found at [www.NetworkImpact.org/NetworkEvaluation](http://www.NetworkImpact.org/NetworkEvaluation). Together, the two resources offer real-life examples of funder-driven evaluations of networks, including their methods and results.

This paper and the casebook are based on extensive literature and document review of different types of networks, both domestically and internationally, and their evaluations; and interviews with funders, network practitioners, and evaluation experts. The ideas presented here and in the casebook were then vetted during an April 2014 convening of leading network funders, practitioners, and evaluators.

## Why networks?

Not long ago, only a few funders, nonprofit organizations, and social entrepreneurs thought that they might increase their impact by building networks. Today, however, many in the social-change sector are recognizing the potential power of networks for achieving social change. Nonprofit organizations, funders, and social entrepreneurs are now building networks for the purpose of achieving outcomes together, especially when what is involved are complex problems with solutions that are not known in advance that must be invented, tested and scaled up. This has led to an increase in funder investments in the design, launch, management, and evaluation of networks.

Funders have different motivations for supporting networks. Some recognize that many of today's challenges are too complex and interdependent for individual organizations to address effectively; solving them requires sustained cross-sector collaboration that assembles and deploys a critical mass of capacities and resources. For others, there is a desire to reduce duplication and inefficiency in the nonprofit sector. Still others believe that boundary-spanning initiatives create the capacity to surface new and innovative solutions. As a result, some funders have committed to network building as a main strategy for achieving their goals, while others are pursuing experiments with network building to see if and how it might fit into their grantmaking approaches.

A number of funders have chosen to fund networks as part of a growing interest in supporting *collective impact* in the social sector, which involves “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.”<sup>1</sup> Collective impact requires a particular type of network, however. Networks supported under collective impact require a centralized infrastructure; a backbone organization and dedicated staff; a common agenda; shared measurement; continuous communication; and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants. This framing paper applies to networks funded under collective impact efforts, but it also applies to networks that do not possess all of these characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

The framing paper and accompanying casebook apply to networks that are the result of intentional efforts to use the potential of decentralized collaboration — member-driven networks—to promote social change. The promise of networks is threefold. They can:

- Assemble and disassemble capacity with relative ease.
- Adapt to emerging opportunities and challenges in their environment.
- Bring together novel combinations of talent and resources to support innovation.

<sup>1</sup> Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter, 36-41.

<sup>2</sup> FSG Social Impact Consultants released [Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact](#) that contains valuable advice for those interested in evaluating networks.

Networks come in many shapes and sizes. Choices about how the network is constructed are driven by the network's ultimate goal or intended impacts and a theory of change about how to use a network to get there. Networks might differ, for example, on the following characteristics:

- **Purpose:** They can have different purposes that range from improving learning or service delivery, to promoting innovation or public policy change.
- **Membership:** They can be made up of organizations, individuals, or both.
- **Sectors represented:** They can have members from a single sector (e.g., health, education), or from multiple sectors.
- **Geography:** They can be rooted in a particular place (e.g., a single community), or involve members across many locations.
- **Size:** They can be small or very large.
- **Funding source:** They can have support from national foundations, local community foundations, family foundations, or local, state, or federal governments.

While there are different types of networks oriented to different purposes, this paper is framed to be applicable to all types of networks. Choices about where to focus the evaluation might differ based on network type, in that some characteristics may be more important to evaluate than others. But the ideas represented here are intended to apply regardless of how a network is constructed and what its ultimate purpose might be.

## Why network evaluation?

Increased activity in network building is yielding new and practical knowledge about effective practices in network building as practitioners and funders report on their insights and struggles. This, in turn, has led to deeper questions: What are the key success factors in building a network? What should funders support — and not support — when they design their grants to networks? How can network builders and funders tell how well a network is doing?

Fortunately, some funders have invested in the evaluation of the networks they have supported. A 2010 report by Innovations for Scaling Impact and Keystone Accountability uncovered a “growing appetite for the monitoring and evaluation and impact evaluation of networks” and “an increasing number of methods, tools and

metrics that have been proposed, developed and piloted in response to this demand.”

After a period of some uncertainty, the field of network evaluation is starting to come into its own. Evaluators have begun to develop frameworks for understanding networks and how they develop that have helped to de-complexify networks.

At the same time, a mix of methods and tools — some specially designed for network evaluation, some borrowed from other forms of assessment — have been tested with real-life networks and have begun to teach the field a great deal about how to examine network development and performance. There is much to be learned from these emerging practices, and the accompanying casebook offers some of these lessons in greater detail.

### Previous Resources on Network Evaluation

- Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2011). *Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide*.
- Innovations for Scaling Impact and Keystone Accountability (2010). *Next Generation Network Evaluation*.
- Creech, Heather and A. Ramji (2004). *Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment*. Working paper prepared for the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

## What unique aspects of networks matter for evaluation?

Until recently, it was not unusual to hear that network evaluation was extremely difficult because of networks' inherent complexities. They are not like more predictable programs that can be implemented with predetermined plans. Unique characteristics of networks and their related implications for evaluation include:

- **Networks have numerous players, many of whom enter and exit the network.** Organizations or individuals connect in order to achieve a shared purpose over the long term. As a result, it is important to understand how players are connected and what each player is doing.
- **Networks are dynamic “moving targets” that adapt, often rapidly, to changes in their context or changes among their membership.** A network is a decentralized member-driven platform of relationships that evolves its capabilities and underlying structure of connectivity. Its success depends crucially on the degree to which it organizes connections among its members to produce unique, flexible capacities. Evaluating a network requires studying how decisions and activities occur in such a diffused decision-making model. It also involves recognizing that networks evolve through stages of development (more on this later).

- **It takes time to organize networks effectively and show results.** This means funders and evaluators have to reckon with their developmental processes and be patient about expecting them to have impact. Along the way to impact, however, it is possible to see what progress is being made.
- **Networks have a “chain of impact.”** That chain includes the network’s impact on its members, the members’ impacts on their local environments, and the members’ combined impact on their broader environment. Evaluations designed to examine impact must understand the relationship between these three and be clear about where their focus lies.
- **Network shape and function matter.** The network’s chosen purpose and structure are important influences on its developmental arc. The network’s purpose may also evolve based on member priorities. These characteristics are important to consider when designing an evaluation, and in setting expectations about what results can be expected when.

As this paper and the accompanying casebook show, evaluators are finding ways to address these complexities. Today these perceived difficulties are being tackled and approaches for addressing them tested.

## What should we focus on when evaluating networks?

Experience shows that three things matter especially to networks, making each an important focus for evaluation. Alone or in combination, they are potential responses to the question: What should be the focus of a network evaluation? The accompanying casebook features evaluations focused on each of these three factors or pillars.

- 1) Network connectivity.** Connections are the essential glue in a highly decentralized network. Networks bring people together to find common cause, and it is important to know if deliberate efforts to weave network members’ ties to each other are resulting in efficient and effective “pathways” for shared learning and action.

Network connectivity has two dimensions that can be assessed: (a) *membership, or the people, or organizations that participate in a network* and (b) *structure, or how connections between members are structured and what flows through those connections.*

- 2) Network health.** After the connectivity of members, a crucial factor for a network’s well being is its capacity to sustain the enthusiasm and

commitment of voluntary members and enable their ability to work as a *network* to achieve shared goals. Network effectiveness depends on much more than a network's ability to assemble relevant capacities and execute network plans. It depends on a network's ability to engage its members, sustain their engagement, and adapt as needed. The results from assessing a network's health can be used by network members to promote continuous improvement of network performance.

Network health has three dimensions that can be assessed: (a) *resources*, or the material resources a network needs to sustain itself (e.g., external funding); (b) *infrastructure*, or the internal systems and structures that support the network (e.g., communication, rules and processes); and (c) *advantage*, or the network's capacity for joint value creation.

**3) Network results.** Ultimately, most networks have a goal of achieving a particular type of social change. They come together for a purpose, and while network connectivity and health are important to their ability to achieve those results, it is important to know if the network itself is making a difference.

Network results have two dimensions that can be assessed: (a) *interim outcomes*, or the results achieved as the network works toward its ultimate goal or intended impact, and (b) the *goal or intended impact* itself (e.g., a policy outcome was achieved, a particular practice was spread, the community or its residents changed in a certain way).

A single evaluation may focus on one, two, or all three pillars at the same time, and in fact many do. Choices about where to focus are typically driven by where the information or learning priority is given a network's stage of development (discussed more later), as well as what evaluation resources are available. If a network has limited resources, it is usually more beneficial to go deep on one pillar than to spread resources thinly across all three.

In addition, while the third pillar is labeled "results" because it refers to progress or changes with respect to the network's ultimate goal or impact, it is important to recognize that results also can be achieved for the other two factors. For example, if network connectivity changes in beneficial ways over time through shifts in network membership or structure, those changes might be labeled positive results in the area of connectivity. Similarly, if network health changes over time, those shifts might also be labeled results (positive, negative, or neutral).

The table on the next page offers the types of evaluation questions that can be pursued for each of the three pillars and their sub-dimensions. It also identifies the cases in the accompanying casebook that focus on each. The cases offer examples of evaluations that have focused on each pillar and their methodology for doing so.

## Three Dimensions of Focus for a Network Evaluation

Pillar	Focus	Example Evaluation Questions	Casebook Examples (evaluation funder)
1) Connectivity	<b>(a) Membership</b> <i>The people or organizations that participate in a network</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who participates in the network and what role does each member play?</li> <li>Who is connected to whom? Who is not connected but should be?</li> <li>Has the network assembled members with the capacities needed to meet network goals (experience, skills, connections)?</li> <li>Is membership adjusted to meet changing network needs?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reboot (<i>Jim Joseph Foundation</i>)</li> </ul>
	<b>(b) Structure</b> <i>How connections between members are structured and what flows through those connections</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the number, quality, and configuration of network ties?</li> <li>What is flowing through the network — information and other resources?</li> <li>How efficient are the connections the network makes?</li> <li>How dependent is the network on a small number of individuals?</li> <li>Is structure adjusted to meet changing network needs and priorities?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Barr Fellows Program (<i>Barr Foundation</i>)</li> <li>Safe Schools/Healthy Students (<i>federal government</i>)</li> </ul>
2) Health	<b>(a) Resources</b> <i>The material resources a network needs to sustain itself (e.g., external funding)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has the network secured needed material resources?</li> <li>What type and level of resources does the network have?</li> <li>How diverse and dependable are these resources?</li> <li>How are members contributing resources to the network?</li> <li>Is the network adapting its business plan over time?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Urban Sustainability Directors Network (<i>multiple funders</i>)</li> <li>RE-AMP (<i>Garfield Foundation</i>)</li> <li>KnowHow2Go (<i>Lumina Foundation</i>)</li> </ul>
	<b>(b) Infrastructure</b> <i>Internal systems and structures that support the network (e.g., communication, rules and processes)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What infrastructure is in place for network coordination and communications?</li> <li>Are these systems efficient and effective?</li> <li>What are the network's governance rules and how are they followed?</li> <li>Do decision-making processes encourage members to contribute and collaborate?</li> <li>How are the network's internal systems and structures adapting?</li> </ul>	
	<b>(c) Advantage</b> <i>The network's capacity for joint value creation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do all members share a common purpose for the network?</li> <li>Are members working together to achieve shared goals, including goals that emerge over time?</li> <li>Are all members contributing to network efforts?</li> <li>How are members adding value to one another's work?</li> <li>Are members achieving more together than they could alone?</li> </ul>	
3) Results	<b>(a) Interim Outcomes</b> <i>Results achieved as the network works toward its goal or intended impact</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are there clear signals of progress/interim outcomes for the network and are they understood and measured by members?</li> <li>Is the network making progress on interim outcomes that signal progress on the way to longer-term goals or intended impacts?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MA Regional Networks to End Homelessness (<i>Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation</i>)</li> </ul>
	<b>(b) Goal or Impacts</b> <i>The ultimate goal or results the network is after</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At which level(s) are impacts expected — on individual members, on members' local environments, and/or on members' combined impact on their broader environment?</li> <li>If the goal is achieved or ultimate impacts observed, can a plausible and defensible case be made that the network contributed to them?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Fire Learning Network</li> <li>International Land Coalition</li> </ul>

## How should we approach network evaluation?

**Intended uses.** Network evaluations can be undertaken for the same purposes as other evaluations. These include:

- Ensuring *accountability* for use of resources
- Examining the extent to which networks are achieving *results or impact*
- Using evaluation to support *strategic learning* and continuous improvement

No one purpose is better than the other and they are not mutually exclusive. But it is important to be clear upfront why the evaluation is being undertaken and who its users are, as those decisions affect later decisions about what gets evaluated and how. For example, if the evaluation is intended to support the network's own development and strategic learning, it is most beneficial to embed the evaluation early on in the network's development and have it regularly monitor and provide feedback on network connectivity, health, or results.

Experience shows that it is highly valuable for network evaluations to focus on supporting network members' own learning and knowledge creation rather than solely focusing on accountability or results. Networks often take on complex problems for which there are no clear recipes or formulas for success. In these instances, one of the most valuable contributions an evaluation can make is to document what is and is not working as it is happening in order to identify how strategies can be improved. To adapt effectively, networks need real-time feedback loops. Evaluation that supports regular cycles of learning and action can be essential to the network's success.

**Intended users.** Network evaluations usually have two main intended users – the funders who support networks or network practitioners themselves. Both audiences can be interested in using evaluation for any of the three purposes described above (although funders tend to be more often interested in using evaluation to examine accountability).

In terms of network practitioners, an evaluation's users can be individual network contributors or the overall collective membership. Networks depend on the voluntary contributions of individual members who produce value jointly. Evaluations focused on network practitioners as users should think about the information and learning needs of both perspectives. Methods like social network analysis, for example, a common tool used in evaluations focused on capturing network connectivity, attend simultaneously to the individual and the broader collective.

**Design.** There is no one right way to design a network evaluation. Decisions about the evaluation's intended use and users should drive design choices. Some basic lessons about design based on the three purposes outlined above have, however, emerged.

For evaluations focused on accountability, it is important to recognize that holding networks accountable to strict plans and timelines for progress may not yield useful findings since network strategies and anticipated outcomes are likely to evolve. Rigid assessment frameworks based on linear models of cause and effect run the risk of overlooking important unintended activities and outcomes and can stifle a network's creative impulses.

For evaluations that examine network results or impact, because of the complexity and evolving nature of the "intervention," most designs are necessarily non-experimental. They also tend to be conducted later in the network's lifecycle or retrospectively after an impact has been observed to see if the network played a role. These designs look at whether a credible case can be made, based on data, that the network *contributed* to its intended results or impact. Designs might use, for example, comparative or individual case studies that show how different elements of network practice fit together to produce results. They might also use techniques like contribution analysis<sup>3</sup> or process tracing<sup>4</sup>.

For evaluations that support strategic learning, designs for assessing complex systems or processes of social innovation, such as developmental evaluation<sup>5</sup> or the application of systems thinking can be particularly useful.

**Questions and methods.** Networks evolve. Typically they move through stages of development, although not necessarily at a similar or even pace. At each stage, the network tackles different concerns. As a result, evaluation questions and methods should differ accordingly and map onto these stages. These stages include:<sup>6</sup>

1. *Catalyzing*—Capabilities and expectations to work together are explored by potential members of the network.
2. *Launching*—Organizers identify the network's initial vision and purpose and develop an initial plan. Initial network membership is recruited and connections are cultivated.
3. *Organizing*—The network has secured resources and is piloting strategies and beginning to adapt these based on feedback.
4. *Performing and adapting*—The network is fully operational with key activities underway. Goals, strategies and membership often diversify as members seek and find different kinds of value from the network.

<sup>3</sup> Mayne, J. (2001). Addressing attribution through contribution analysis: Using performance measures sensibly. *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 16(1), 1-24.

<sup>4</sup> George, A., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>5</sup> Patton, M.Q. (2010). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York: Guilford Press.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2011). *Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide*.

5. *Transitioning or transforming*—The network is effective and sustainable or the network has lost momentum. The network as originally conceived terminates or capacities are redeployed.

The figure on the next page offers evaluation questions that are relevant at each stage. Questions related to network connectivity, health, and results are included. While there are no hard or fast rules, in general, evaluations in the early and middle stages of a network's development tend to focus more on assessing network connectivity and health. Evaluations at later stages focus more on their results. The diagram also features common evaluation methods or activities that might be used at each stage.

## What challenges still lie ahead?

While a great deal has been learned about the effective practice of network evaluation, the field still faces important challenges. These include:

- **Continuing to develop suitable indicators and tools.** Ten years ago, Heather Creech and Aly Ramji said network evaluation was hampered by the absence of useful benchmarks and indicators.<sup>7</sup> Today, the field is much better able to differentiate signal from noise with frameworks and tools developed especially for networks. Constructs like network connectivity and health have been operationalized and tools developed for measuring them. But there is still more work to be done in this area, particularly in the development and application of tools and methods that are useful for networks.
- **Securing and then using evaluation resources wisely.** Evaluation resources for network evaluation tend to be limited, which makes it important to use them wisely. Developmental evaluations can be resource intensive, as can impact evaluations that explore connections between networks and their results. To get the maximum value from evaluation investments, funders and network practitioners need to think carefully about what kind of evaluation makes the most sense and when. For example, evaluation that supports strategic learning tends to be particularly beneficial early in network development, especially when it focuses on areas that matter for networks (like network connectivity and health). In addition, impact evaluations should not be conducted too early. Finally, once networks have been shown to be functioning well, it may be possible to limit evaluation to just a core set of measures that are needed to keep tabs on performance for regular reflection and continuous improvement.

<sup>7</sup> Creech, H., & Ramji, A. (2004). Knowledge networks: Guidelines for assessment. Winnipeg, Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development.

## Stages of Network Development with Evaluation Questions



## Evaluation Methods and Tools

### Stage 1: Catalyzing

- System mapping of the focus issue or problem and/ or important system players
- Interviews and/or focus groups with key stakeholders

### Stage 2: Launch

- Draft network theory of change
- Network connectivity mapping
- Survey of members' initial value propositions
- Analysis of network documents (statement of purpose, budget, business plan, etc.)

### Stage 3: Organize

- Network health survey
- Interviews and/or focus groups members
- Observation of network activities/meetings
- Survey members' value proposition satisfaction
- Analysis of network documents

### Stage 4: Perform/Adapt

- Adapting the theory of change as needed
- Network health survey
- Survey of members' value proposition satisfaction
- Analysis of network results and impacts

### Stage 5: Transition or Transform

- Survey of members value proposition satisfaction
- Interviews and/or focus groups with network members

- **Building evaluation capacity among practitioners.** Networks tend to prefer focusing scarce resources on making progress with network goals and not backward on reflection. Networks need explicit support for their participation in evaluation efforts. Some network evaluations are time-limited and led by external evaluators, others are designed and led internally by network members themselves, and still others use both approaches in combination. Regardless, building evaluation capacity within networks is important to ensure that internal systems for data gathering and reporting are in place and that feedback loops developed can be sustained.

As the examples in the casebook demonstrate, the availability of tools to assist networks in their evaluation efforts is growing, such as scorecards for assessing network health and the availability of network mapping software. As the network evaluation field grows, more tools that practitioners themselves can use, interpret, and apply will be needed.

- **Building evaluator capacity on networks.** Just as evaluation capacity needs to be built among network practitioners, network capacity needs to be built among evaluators. Many evaluators lack knowledge and skills in theory and methods that are particularly relevant for networks (e.g., systems thinking and mapping, organizational or social network analysis).

## Conclusion

This framing paper and accompanying casebook are steps toward trying to continue to build the field of network evaluation and to encourage funders and network practitioners to engage in evaluation efforts and to further innovate. The hope is that those working in this field will continue to share what is being tried and learned so the field can address the challenges cited above and ultimately use evaluation to support more effective network efforts.

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This network evaluation project is a collaboration between Network Impact and the Center for Evaluation Innovation.

## About Network Impact



Most people are natural networkers, but it takes real know-how and skills to develop and grow networks that achieve large-scale social impact. Network Impact is accelerating and spreading the use of networks to achieve increased social impact by providing consulting, tool-building, research and assessment services to support social-impact networks, foundations, and the emerging field of network builders. [www.NetworkImpact.org](http://www.NetworkImpact.org)

## About the Center for Evaluation Innovation



The Center for Evaluation Innovation is dedicated to pushing evaluation practice in new directions and promoting cutting-edge approaches. We develop and commission original research on emerging evaluation questions and challenges. We also ask people doing cutting-edge work to write about their experiences and findings. As new fields of practice emerge, it is useful to bring people together periodically to discuss and share what we all are doing and learning. We organize in-person and online conversations to accelerate field development and encourage new collaboration. [www.EvaluationInnovation.org](http://www.EvaluationInnovation.org)