Photo: MSH Staff

Strengthening Voluntary Network Management

The Network Strengthening Program

Author
Susan E. Pritchett Post

The USAID-funded Leadership, Management, and Governance (LMG) Project strengthens health systems to deliver more responsive services to more people by developing inspired leaders, sound management systems, and transparent and accountable governing boards with individuals, networks, organizations, and governments.

Background

Africa has experienced a dramatic proliferation of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the past three decades. Because such organizations are often very small, many like-minded NGOs form collaborative networks to amplify their ability to advocate to local governments and donors, and ultimately achieve their goals. Some networks are formed independently, and others are established at the recommendation of and with funding from donors like the Global Fund, USAID, and the World Bank.

It has generally been expected that networks not only provide economies of scale to their member NGOs, but also act as a communications platform for sharing best practices, policy changes, and other relevant information. Funders have also expected that the networks they support will, in time, become self sustaining.

To-date, most networks in Africa have operated using the very same management approach as the NGOs that make up their membership, with both unrestricted and restricted (project-specific) funding provided by donors in perpetuity. Yet, as member organizations, networks are distinct from NGOs and must be run differently. That is, networks must adopt entrepreneurial-style management practices if they are to achieve *organizational financial sustainability.*

Developed by USAID's Leadership, Management, and Governance Project, the Network Strengthening Program (NSP) was designed to introduce entrepreneurial management techniques to NGO networks. The NSP was piloted in 2015 and 2016 with two networks in Malawi: MANET+, which represents people living with HIV, and MANASO, which comprises health service delivery organizations focused primarily on HIV and AIDS at the community level.

Organizational Financial Sustainability

The ability of an organization or network of organizations to fund future activities and endeavors through a combination of earned income, fundraising activities, and financial support from the public sector.

facebook.com/LMGforHealth

@LMGforHealth

@LMGforHealth

I

The Network Strengthening Program

The LMG Project began development of the NSP by conducting an informal literature review and research into networks, and carrying out direct interviews with MANET+ and MANASO network members and managers. This included executive directors, program managers, financial officers, board members, and heads of committees. The findings informed the content of the NSP, with the following topics being selected for inclusion:

■ Clarifying the structure of the network;

■ Assessing the power and influence of network stakeholders;

■ Identifying membership and what members the network can best serve;

■ Comparing the benefits provided to the actual needs of members;

■ Exploring how members support the network through payment of membership fees, volunteerism, in-kind donations, and shared use of equipment/resources;

■ Assessing financial management ability;

■ Identifying resource mobilization possibilities;

■ Streamlining communication with members and stakeholders.

In the NSP, these focus areas are addressed through the course of two technical workshops. A preliminary phase is conducted prior to the first workshop and includes preparation and review of foundational network documents to help adapt the NSP to the specific network's context. As shown in Figure 1, the program is implemented in five steps including preparatory work, three workshops, and a follow-up phase.

The NSP is highly participatory, based on adult learning theory, and relates directly to the needs and desires of network management. It is designed to allow network managers to develop both short-term plans to address specific topics (implemented while they are going through the NSP) and a long-term plan that frames how they will strengthen their own networks in the 12 months following the program. The NSP facilitators and any identified team leaders from the network serve as coaches between workshops to help the NSP participants implement their plans.

Workshop I: Technical capacity building

Workshop I consists of four modules:

Module #1: Net-Mapping

Using the Net-Mapping approach, participants explore the structure of their networks within the larger context of internal and external stakeholders, and examine how these stakeholders influence (positively or negatively) the solutions to problems faced by the network. Created by Dr. Eva Schiffer in 2006 for the International Food Policy Research Institute, Net-Map is an interview-based tool that helps people understand, visualize, discuss, and improve situations in which many different actors influence outcomes. By creating "Influence Network Maps," individuals and groups can clarify their own view of a situation, foster discussion, and develop a strategic approach to their networking activities. More specifically, Net-Mapping helps players to determine what actors are involved in a given network, how they are linked, how influential they are, and what their goals are. The methodology was applied in the NSP with Dr. Schiffer's permission.
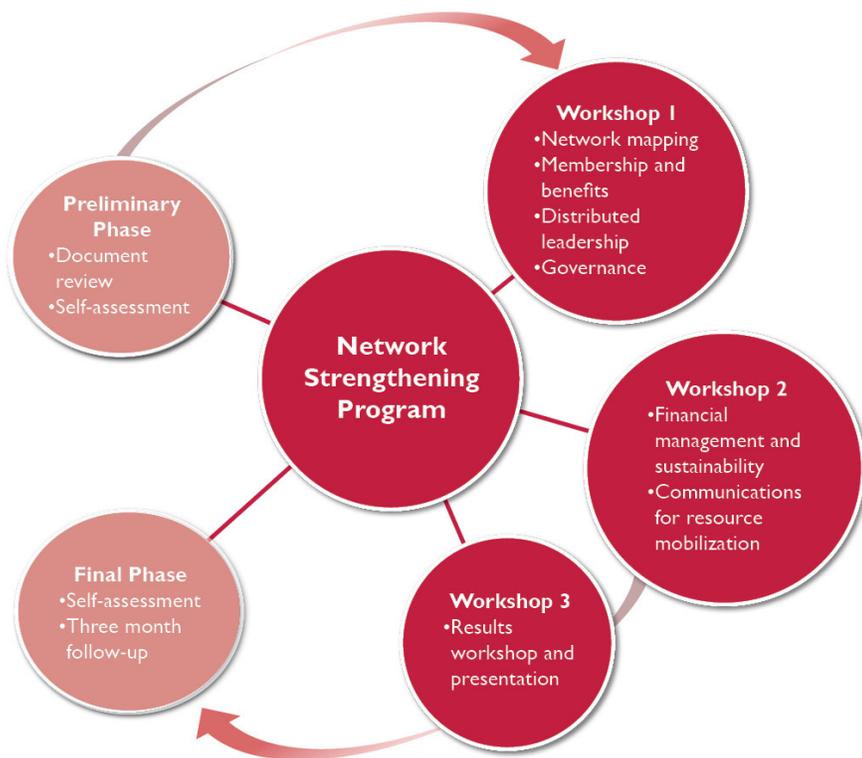

Figure 1. Implementation phases of the Network Strengthening Program.

Module #2: Membership and benefits

Participants create or refresh their network's mission and vision, align their network's membership criteria with these, and add criteria to reflect changes in membership or further diversify participation and expand membership as appropriate. Benefits relate to member needs—both current and future—and introduce the concept of mutuality.

Module #3: Distributed leadership

While typical NGOs operate within the context of traditional hierarchical management, networks represent an aggregate of equal partners. Module 3 addresses key success factors in the network environment: trust between all members; the ability to influence a situation where there is no power to instruct or command action; and coordinated action.

Module #4: Governance

Module 4 presents four governing practices: setting the direction; creating and maintaining a culture of accountability; stewarding resources; and engaging stakeholders. It also delineates the roles of the board and board members, as well as the relationship between the board and the executive director and secretariat. The board provides oversight and general direction, resolves high level issues, including ethical and financial/resource mobilization issues, and manages the executive director's performance. The director and secretariat are responsible for the daily operations and administration of the network: implementing projects, if any; providing the benefits to the members; maintaining contact with the members; collecting membership fees, if any; and maintaining financial and other management systems to ensure their integrity.

Workshop 2: Technical capacity building

Workshop 2 consists of two modules:

Module #5: Financial management and sustainability

The primary message of this module is that financial management is everyone's job. Participants explore the existing strengths and gaps in their network's financial management system and develop an understanding of the components of financial sustainability, including member contributions (i.e., membership fees, volunteerism, and infrastructure/equipment use).

Module #6: Communications for resource mobilization

Because the primary concern of the large majority of networks is how to achieve financial sustainability, this module presents stakeholder analysis and marketing using a unique value statement and outlines a process for developing and managing proposals.

Workshop 3: Results and presentation

Success in the NSP is defined as obtaining results related to short-term plans developed at the end of each workshop and implemented between workshops as well as preparation of a longer-term Network Strengthening Plan that is to be implemented over the succeeding 12 months. Each of these plans is based on learnings and actions developed over the course of the program. Both the results achieved to date and a summary of the longer-term plan (in terms of "what's next?" after the program ends) are presented by the participants to a group of internal and external stakeholders.

The final workshop contains an overview of the entire program and prepares the participants for their presentations.

Follow up

Three months after the results presentation, the network team reports back to the facilitators on progress made towards achieving results laid out in the 12-month Network Strengthening Plan.

Also, for monitoring and evaluation purposes, the facilitators would ideally re-do the self-assessment with the network members to determine whether or not they perceive improvements in the management of the network. The facilitators may also decide, as was done in the pilot program, to write a case study in lieu of re-doing the survey, depending on the circumstances.

Results

MANET+ and MANASO achieved a number of significant results after participating in the NSP, including **improved marketing information for awareness building and proposals.** Both networks created strong unique value statements to include in their marketing materials. One unique value proposition developed was the following:

> **MANET+** *coordinates PLHIV member organisations and advocates for policy, plans, programmes and their implementation to improve the quality of life for people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Malawi. Between 2013 and 2014, MANET+ members benefited from the network's successful advocacy to change from a toxic ART regimen containing stavudine to a tenofovir-based regimen, through participation in the Malawi Partnership Forum (MPF), the Global Fund*

Country Coordinating Committee (MGFCC), the National AIDS Commission Board of Directors and Quarterly Networking Meetings.

MANET+ provides a powerful voice for the needs of its grassroots members to improve the quality of life for PLHIV in Malawi and to contribute to the achievement 90-90-90 goals.

Join any MANET+ member organization and be part of the HIV/AIDS solution in Malawi!

Other results included:

MANET+

Replacement funding. MANET+ bid for and received funding as a Global Fund sub-recipient for network operations and for projects. Of three local organizations selected by the Global Fund, MANET+ was the only indigenous NGO. The others were local affiliates of international organizations.

New and diversified funding for members. MANASO member organizations whose senior managers participated in the NSP generated new funding for projects. For example, one member received €3,000 to implement a project in November 2016.

MANASO

Ability to match member benefits with funding sources. Prior to the NSP, MANASO was providing extensive member benefits, such as training, annual meetings, certifications of membership, signage, etc, and had plans to expand them without aligning the cost of providing such with available funding. Given a

significant decrease in funding, it was critical that the network decide what core benefits the network could offer based on membership contributions. The final resolution of this issue will be incorporated into a membership agreement.

Updated comprehensive directory of members, with current contact information, as well as mapped geographic dispersion. A database was designed to help the management stay in touch with network members and to promote improved communications among the members.

Next Steps

The NSP curriculum and facilitator's guide have undergone final revisions based on the experience of the facilitators and to incorporate what worked best for the networks. The revised NSP curriculum and facilitator's guide will be published in June 2017, and these publications will be available on the Leadership, Management and Governance Project (www. lmgforhealth.org) and MSH (www.msh.org) websites.

It is anticipated that established, emerging, and new networks will adapt the content of the NSP according to their needs. For example, networks that intend to remain informal would not need to use the content that addresses the needs of a more established network.

facebook.com/LMGforHealth

@LMGforHealth

@LMGforHealth