

Learning About Learning: Lessons on Implementing a KM and Learning Project from the USAID KDMD Project

Learning Networks

What we mean by Learning Networks:

Learning networks are a core service of a knowledge management (KM) and learning projects and can be defined as bringing together a variety of stakeholders to generate learning around specific technical topics.

How it works:

Most donor organizations supply grants to partners to accomplish specific deliverables and alone that impact is often significant. The value of bringing these grantee partners together as a learning network, however, can exponentially increase their impact and leverage lessons and best practices for use throughout the field. Upon developing these learning networks, there should be clarity around roles and responsibilities with invitations attached to an expectation of what will be required in terms of participation and deliverables. Careful selection of candidates cannot be underestimated as it's critical to get the right people to the table who are willing to share and can add value to the conversations and resulting products. Consider proposal reviews, visits, and interviews with interested parties – after all, there is a level of panache in being invited to join these networks and candidates must demonstrate their vision, interest, and commitment.

Once a learning network is established, a strong, trusted, neutral facilitator is a must. This person will be able to ask tough questions and engage the group in ways that draw out their expertise and demonstrates progress toward their stated goals. Ask reflective questions throughout, since learning networks (just like any other KM and learning activity) should evolve and incorporate opportunities for growth and change.

In the end, all learning networks are finite but the process of creating and facilitating a learning network should be iterative. As one learning network ends and final deliverables are collected, give thought as to how their lessons and resources can be extended and to how the learning network experience can be translated to others.

Why it matters:

Learning networks provide a platform to share ideas and information that extend beyond the confines of any one individual or organization and can raise the level of knowledge and resources available to the larger field of international development.

What it looks like:

From 2009-2012, the KDMD Project managed the New Partners in Value Chain Development – later re-named to the Growing Organizational Value Chain Excellence (GROOVE) – Learning Network. A core feature of this network was to generate knowledge by coordinating efforts and collaborating on group deliverables to inform their individual grant projects and ultimately the larger industry on their developments. In this way, the network was extremely successful and continues to serve as an example of how a well-organized learning network can extend its benefits throughout the field.