

Development cooperation in the network society

INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF NETWORKING FOR DEVELOPMENT

Author:

Fabio Nascimbeni, Universidad Oberta de Catalunya, MENON Network

fabio.nascimbeni@menon.org

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Abstract

The “starting paradox” of the paper is that in the past decades the social and economic dynamics of both developed and – to a lesser extent - developing countries have been changing as rapidly as never before, throwing concepts like information, knowledge and networking at the centre of the debate, and at the same time International Development Cooperation (IDC) has not been following this process at the same pace of change. What seems to be missing in many IDC conceptual frameworks and especially in many practical applications and projects is a sound, accountable and sustainable networking dimension, able to facilitate the production, accumulation and distribution of the most important asset in IDC, that is knowledge. The paper will argue that this component is key to uncap the potential of IDC of the 21st Century, and will propose some research lines in this direction.

Keywords: Networking for development, network society, knowledge sharing, international development cooperation, ICT for development.

The role of networking in the knowledge society

Few concepts embody the capacity to describe our world, as well as our perception of it, as the one of network. Every day we use transport networks, we rely on energy networks, we communicate through ICT networks, we collaborate in social networks, we work in enterprises networks. The concept of “network society” is today recognized, together with the ones of “information society” and “knowledge society”, is more and more used by sociology, economics and other social studies as a way to describe and understand our world and its dynamics. Among the vast literature that describes the raise of importance of networks in all spheres of our societies, we will focus on three fundamental authors: Castells, Benkler and Distler/Bressand, and we will point out some contributions by these three authors to the IDC discourse.

Manuel Castells is considered by many as the father of the concept of *network society*. In all his production, Castells claims that the new central role that information and knowledge have in all human activities are defining the emergence of the “information society” and, in terms of economic systems, of the “networked information economy.” In four conferences given by Castells in Milan, Rome, New York and Boston, whose text are collected in the Italian “La città delle Reti” (Castells, 2004), the author describes the importance that the network paradigm is acquiring today, specifically in the education world, in the enterprise context and in the urban planning area. The role of networking activities in the educational sphere is particularly interesting. What Castells claims about education is that education systems are based on institutions; education has to do with socialization and citizenship building and is strongly connected to employability and economy and that education has to do with meritocracy and with selection mechanisms. For this reason, the accent of policies and practices of educational settings should be put not only on the actors (institutions and individuals) but also on the relations among them, that is on the networking dynamics taking place in all educational settings. Another contribution by Castells stands in the recognition of the inner multistakeholder nature of modern networks: not only networks are built among similar actors (networked enterprises, networked civil society, etc), but among actors of different nature (Castells, 2001). In terms of IDC, Castells notes that those networks tend to create, below the old-fashioned third world, a sort of a “fourth world”: these networks link valuable functions, people and places, at the same time disconnecting other people and places of no interest for the global capitalistic dynamics. If the problem of the third world during the cold war was to be excluded by the global geopolitical dynamics, the issue with the forth world is to be excluded from global economic and social networks, therefore increasing the economic irrelevance and the social exclusion of a number of people and regions.

Another important contribution to understand the “networks-driven” change that is taking place in society is the one by Yochai Benkler. In his “The wealth of networks”, Benkler claims that not only networks are substituting most of the basic structures of the industrial society, but also that the presence of these networks is changing the very inner nature of human activities, impacting on concepts like property, time and space (Benkler, 2006).

In this direction, some dynamics that apply to society as well as to IDC are:

- - the raise of importance of non proprietary processes: “non-proprietary strategies have always been more important in information production than they were in the production of steel or automobiles, even when the economics of communication weighed in favour of industrial models”;

- - the importance of the individuals as knowledge creators: “what characterizes the networked information economy is that decentralized individual action plays a much greater role than it did, or could have, in the industrial information economy”;
- - the decrease of the importance of the classic “intermediary” figure (supporting bilateral processes and dialogues) and the raise of importance of the “facilitator” figure (supporting multilateral dialogue and networking);
- - the facility of coordinating efforts: “Individuals can reach and inform or edify millions around the world. (...) The fact that every such effort is available to anyone connected to the network, from anywhere, has led to the emergence of coordinate effects, where the aggregate effect of individual action, even when it is not self-consciously cooperative, produces the coordinate effect of a new and rich information environment”.

It all seems to be about networks and relations. Going a step further, Catherine Distler and Albert Bressand claim that the focus of modern societies has moved, with strong differences depending on geographical and economical contexts, from the individual to a technology-mediated relationship between individuals and between the individual and the world. This is true “in relationships among people, like on the Internet; or relationships among companies, like on an electronic data interchange network; or relationships among nations, like when central banks use clearing and settlement networks. Most of what is called information technology today has already outgrown the name and is now relationship technology (Distler and Bressad, 1995). This point is also extremely relevant for the networking dimension of development cooperation.

What the three authors agree upon is that virtually every sphere of human activity, especially in developed countries but more and more in developing ones also, is today working through and relying on networks: economy (how could a multinational company live without international networking, or how could an SME survive without local networking?), finance (how would a working day at the London stock exchange look without the support of ICT networks?), entertainment and leisure (would it be the same without Youtube?), daily communication (how would your life be without email?), social movements (without the internet the strongest campaign against McDonald’s would not have been fought) and to a lesser extent policy and citizens participation are based on technological, social, relational networks much more than ever. And the trend seems to go in the direction of giving more importance (and power) to these networks.

Another important reflection must be done on the speed of change. Not only change is happening towards network-based models, but it is happening much faster than before. A global reflection conducted by the Institute for Development studies reports that development researchers from all over the world perceive that global economic, physical, political and social phenomena follow some kind of Moore’s law, meaning that their speed doubles every 18 months (Haddad, 2006). It goes without saying that the adoption of networking and relational models proceeds at different paces in different areas of the world, and at the same time every sphere of human activity seem to have its own resistance to change. To make an example, business practices are rapidly and smoothly changing towards network-based practices, while sectors like education, government and development cooperation are much more resistant and slow to adopt networking models.

International development cooperation: an unchanging mechanism in a changing world

International development cooperation (IDC) can be defined as a set of actions (policies, programmes, projects, etc.) put in place by the so-called “developed countries” in order to improve the economic and social situation of the so called “developing countries”. From the vast literature on IDC¹, we will just extract some data and will extrapolate some reflections that will be useful to the purpose of the present paper.

The actors populating the IDC arena are many and of extremely different nature. A very incomplete list of the main development actors would begin, at least in terms of size and political influence, with the World Bank and its regional development banks, one each for Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. Other key actors in the IDC community are the major bilateral government agencies such as USAID, the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The European Union has a specific Development office (EuropeAid) and a specific fund, the European Development Fund; the United Nations have a range of aid organizations: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In the non-governmental sector, a full spectrum of NGOs, research actors, think tanks, consultancies, academic programs, technical support and training organizations, bursary management institutions and a host of private sector development contractors also comprise important elements of the IDC community. Finally, part of the IDC community are also the major private consultants such as Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Accenture, Deloitte & Touche, Ernst & Young and KPMG. Even this incomplete list adequately shows that development “stakeholders” do belong to all sectors of society, obviously bringing different visions, value-sets, practices and expectations into the process.

In terms of dynamics and figure, reading from the 2007 OECD Development Cooperation Report, some few data give a picture of the state of health of IDC. First, it must be noted that since 2003, official development assistance (ODA) has been on the rise in many of the countries where it is most needed, meaning the least developed countries (LDCs), the other low-income countries (OLICs) and the lower middle-income countries (LMICs). In parallel, both donors and recipient countries have made considerable efforts to improve the quality and effectiveness of ODA. There have been notable improvements, for example, in the way aid is delivered and managed in the health and basic education sectors. Nevertheless, in 2006, the total ODA provided by the members of the DAC (Development Aid Committee) fell to USD 104.4 billion, 4.5% lower than in 2005, this being the first fall since 1997. (OECD, 2007)

Looking at the many actors involved as well as at the many programmes, projects and initiatives in place, the sensation is that a lot of things exists and do have an impact, but do not seem to work in an articulated – or in a “network-based” – way. The paradox is that, while in the past decades the social and economic dynamics of both developed and – to a lesser extent - developing countries have been changing as rapidly as never before, throwing concepts like information, knowledge and networking at the centre of the debate, IDC has not been following this process at the same pace of change.

One way to clearly understand the (in)capacity of IDC settings and practices to adapt to the changes described above in terms of network society is to analyse the most common critics that are made to IDC and to

¹ See for example Black, 2002, Lora et al., 2004, Michel, 2006, Sen, 1999.

look for “change evidences” in these critical points. This analysis will also give a first intuitive demonstration that that, at least in theory, adopting a network and relational based model can contribute to solve those problems. As a general introduction, one could say that the common perception of IDC by society is a rather negative one: the most common general critics being that the effort put in by donor countries is not enough or at least not enough with respect to the ambitious objectives set at international level², that the aid is too much linked to the donors’ economic and political interest, that most of IDC programmes and projects are weakened by unprofessionalism and corruption, and so on. An analysis of the most critic literature on IDC (Amin 2001, Black 2004, Reinert 2004, among others) shows that the “problems” of IDC are of three natures: ideological, when the object of the critics is the very concept of development aid and its starting assumptions, political, when the objective of the critics is the way priorities are decided and funding is assigned, and technical, when the objective of the critics is the way IDC programmes are managed in terms of actors involved, processes and dynamics.

The critics of the first kind touch upon the very concept of development aid, and claim that the whole “development circus”, meaning the vast group of development professionals, does nothing more than pushing a dominant western development model in a non-scientific and antidemocratic way. These critics, grounded on data that show how the number of poor people in the world has proportionally increased since the very creation of the development concept (Black 2004), are normally put forward by NGOs or activist groups. In our opinion, most of the times we are dealing with a communication problem, which prevents serious development actors to show their results and to change this negative perception, and at the same time with an accountability problem, which protects governments and development decision-makers from being monitored and punctually judged. Moving towards a “networked development cooperation” model would help in both these directions, since would facilitate open flow of information both by governments (that could be obliged to provide that by the network itself) and by development actors.

The critics of political nature have mainly to do with the agenda-making process of development cooperation: common claims are that most of IDC policies and funding decisions are driven by the economic and political agenda of the donors, and that the agenda of multilateral organisation is self-referential and self-oriented. Furthermore, it is undeniable that some kind of competition among donors is present (even if the situation is improving, mainly thanks to the OECD Office for Development Aid articulation work) and that the IDC policy community has not been able to put the general issue of development cooperation at the top of the policy agendas of donor’s countries. Also in this case, adopting a network based approach in the process of defining the agenda, even if it might not solve the problem, would contribute to transparency and accountability. To make an example, most of the times civil society representatives are invited to attend meetings where some kind of IDC agenda should be defined, but in practice do not take part in the agenda-building process.

The critics of the third kind are of technical nature, and have to do with the way IDC actions are planned, managed, evaluated, disseminated, sustained. The main recognised problems in this sense are the “atomisation” of projects, with the deriving overlapping and redundancy, the lack of continuity and sustainability of development actions, and the frequent adoption of actions based on a “technology transfer” paradigm, typical of the North-South cooperation schemes. In terms of evaluation of IDC actions, the focus is normally put on the results and not on the impact of the project, with cultural differences and adaptation needs not taken enough into account or at least not in a long-term perspective. Most of the times, reading collections of development cooperation projects is like walking through a cemetery: sustainable and alive actions are a rare exception, repetition seems to be the norm, evaluation based on data and long term needs is a mirage. Adopting a scheme based on networking can improve this situation, helping to avoid redundancy and dupli-

² To make an example, in 2002 Italy has committed to devote 0,5% of its GDP to development aid, but the assigned figure for 2008 is 0,2% and the revision for 2009 is 0,1%.

cation and facilitating the involvement of the actors that might guarantee that projects do not get lost after the funding ends.

Having looked at the three above critical dimensions (ideological, political and technical) of IDC, it appears that devoting more attention and resources to the networking dimension of development cooperation could contribute to solve some of the problems which put in danger the impact and functioning of aid policies and projects. Of course, networking is not a panacea of all these issues; to improve the situation it would be necessary to introduce networking mechanism in a gradual and context-sensible way, accompanying the process with a continuous and sound monitoring of the effects of these dynamics on ICD practices.

New ideas and developments: the central role of networking

Let's now move on the bright side of the moon, to present some interesting ideas and developments that are gaining ground among the professionals of IDC. We are convinced that these ideas, if properly “embedded” into mainstreaming development cooperation policies and practices, could “refresh” the IDC panorama, contributing the needed “move” towards a knowledge-based model that would fit the network society scenario presented at the beginning of the paper.

An interesting conceptualisation that seems to be in line with the change towards network-based development cooperation described above is the *human development paradigm* put forward by Nobel Prize Amartya Sen and somehow adopted by the UNDP. The strength of the concept stands in the fact that it grounds human development on the basis of the degrees of freedom (entitlements, capabilities) of a specific target individual and not only on the satisfaction of basic needs/human rights. This means that the opportunities that an individual has are the ones that can bring her/him to a better life and to other opportunities that from these derives. This paradigm goes somehow in the direction of assigning more importance to the networking aspects of development, since networking, as all activities based on information and knowledge, is about “empowering people”, a step forward with respect to – of course not a substitute of – basic needs like for instance with “feeding people”.

Another interesting concept is the one of *partnership for development*, which represent an important advance with respect to plain bilateral donation schemes towards a scheme that puts more emphasis on concepts such as communication, involvement of all stakeholders, trust. As the World Bank claims: (we should) treat partnerships as an organic process, in which trust is built over time, in which steps are taken to weave a “fabric of sustainability”; and consider how mutual accountability may be built (Maxwell and Conway, 2000). Examples of IDC schemes based on this concept are gaining grounds and should be further pursued.

A third important development has to do with a “paradigm shift” by some national agencies in charge of development cooperation towards a network-based model which puts knowledge and information at the centre of the development process. This paradigm, born out of the Scandinavian IDC tradition, is gaining ground in Europe. To make an example, in February 2008 public and private actors have met in Gijon, Asturias, to discuss a new model for the national DC strategy, called “*cooperation 2.0*”. Reading from the conclusions of the event, “The reticulation of cooperation is the answer to its evolutive adaptation to the environment of the Web Society. These are gradual processes that arise bottom-up, whether within an organisation or within huge international systems of cooperation. In such processes structures and dynamics of the cooperation evolve, fostering horizontal relationships, collaboration, and access to shared resources as well as to knowledge management.”

A fourth important development is the model of *south-south cooperation*. This modality of cooperation, which deals with development cooperation schemes between and among developing countries, started in the 70s as a way to push “south-south solidarity” for collectively influencing the international political and economic order and to show different possible development models (Schumacher, 1973), and is now – mainly thanks to the rapid development of economies like Brazil, India or South-Africa, gaining a new momentum, which brings to innovation and knowledge driven cooperation, based on mutual benefits in terms of economic growth and poverty reduction. One data can give an idea on the phenomenon reach: in the last ten years, de-

veloping countries have been increasingly investing in each others' economies, reaching a total of US\$ 47 billion in 2003 (OECD, 2007).

All these ideas embody a strong networking dimension, and go therefore in the direction of „modernising” IDC through the application of the change dynamics that affect our societies. In the next paragraph we will try to systematize these inputs in the new concept of “networking for development”, which represents a proposal to fully integrate in IDC practices and dynamics the potential of knowledge-based networking activities.

Introducing the concept of networking for development

The four ideas presented above are built around the importance of knowledge in IDC settings: if we want to substantially improve the way aid cooperation works as well as the way it is perceived by society, we need to move towards a paradigm that puts knowledge at the centre as the main asset produced by IDC. In other words, in a knowledge-based paradigm of development cooperation (able to follow the development of the knowledge society) knowledge is to be considered as essential resources for both personal and social development; as Labelle would define it “empowerment through information” (Labelle, 2003). The key point is the value of information and knowledge: the value of the introduction of networking seems directly proportional to the value that the information produced, shared and documented has for the participants in the development programme.

But knowledge alone is not enough. On the other hand, producing huge quantity of information and data without clear mechanisms and strategies to use them can be counterproductive and create a feeling of overloading, especially when dealing with individuals – as in the case of the typical targets of development cooperation actions – that are not prepared nor “educated” to deal with such an amount of information. In order to fully uncap the potential of the “knowledge revolution”, we need to invest on the networking dimension of IDC: networks capable of facilitating information flowing and knowledge appropriation – and as last instance transformation of information into knowledge - should be built and maintained.

We will call this enhanced version of IDC “networking for development”. In broad terms, networking for development aims at building *development networks*, that shall then be in charge of running projects and development activities. The novelty stands in the fact that the networks are built *before* the definition of the projects, and not as ancillary elements to development actions, making sure that the knowledge sharing is present throughout the whole cooperation process and represent the sustainability and transferability guarantee of the whole process. Development networks shall be multistakeholder aggregations including donors, receivers and intermediaries as well as other involved actors, open to new members, in charge of defining their own priorities and of monitoring and evaluating the impact of development actions they are concerned with. These networks shall be the drivers, the monitors, and finally the owners of all the development cooperation process, and should be based on concepts such as trust, ownership of results, continuous involvement of users. The model is strongly based and relies on ICT-based technological and human networks which give priority to knowledge management, canalisation of social capital in and through the internet and implementation of multilateral actions with the participation of administrative authorities, civil society, companies, universities and other agents.

The networking for development model represents a step forward with respect to the ICT for development paradigm, meaning the use of Information and Communication Technologies in development actions, both as a direct tool for development and as a meta-tool to improve the efficiency of IDC processes.

If the classic IDC mantra was “don’t give a fish to the poor, give a rod and teach them how to fish” and the ICTD mantra is “give them a rod and some ICT, in order for the fisherman to be able to get information on fish market prices in different ports, on weather forecast, on all existing fishes species in the area, or on where to buy a better rod”, the networking for development mantra should be “give them a rod and ICT, and help them building a community of fishermen in order to exchange experiences and information, solve common problems together, help each other, be stronger in their requests to the government, etc..”.

Preliminary conclusions

As any new concept, networking for development should be the object of research and pilot actions.

In terms of research, putting the accent on communication and networking opens up a rather unexplored area of international development studies, that is the application of network theories and concepts to development actions. More than establishing new research lines in this direction, it would be interesting to embed this dimension in some running research actions in the field of IDC. To make an example out of the development research teams, which are struggling to fight against the problems presented in this paper, a very interesting case is the reflection that the Brighton Institute for Development Studies carried out in 2006 by organising 45 Roundtables around the world to discuss the state and problems of development research. These gatherings reflected on many development-related issues and the results of this reflection (Haddad, 2006) seem to confirm that the concerns on IDC described in this paper are shared by most researchers in the field. Strangely enough, the networking dimension of IDC, although appearing underneath many of the discussions, seems not to have had a relevant place in this debate, showing once more that, even in the cases when it is considered, it is perceived as an instrumental dimension to other development issues and not as a key leverage for development *per se*. Another key of analysis could be that networking is already perceived as a “ground condition” for IDC actions, in this case it would be necessary to spell this out and to ground it on research results.

From the point of view of the application of the approach, things are more complicated, since testing the networking for development methodology would need some “system changes” that are obviously not easy to happen. Nevertheless, some possible piloting actions, although limited in their reach, could be run under the umbrella of some European Commission programmes, managed under the EuropeAid office. In the last years, EuropeAid seems in fact to be succeeding in breaking one of the classic “taboos” of IDC, that is the need of starting any new phase of a specific programme by launching a new call for proposal. The new deal of EuropeAid is indeed to partly build on networks developed in the previous phase of the Programme, therefore applying – although partly and indirectly – the approach presented above. In this direction, it would be important to monitor the efficiency of actions starting from existing networks with respect to the ones starting from scratch, and to analyse these results in view of a broad application of the methodology.

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