

## Form and Function: Research Policy Networks

We are constantly talking about *networks*: Banks use their *networks* to offer customers global services, airlines fly passengers all over the world via their *networks* of partners, news agencies use media *networks* to keep us informed every minute of the day, and terrorist *networks* threaten citizens around the world. Their importance extends to the development sector. They organise civil society to advocate for and implement change; they link the local with the global, the private with the public; and networks provide spaces for the creation, sharing and dissemination of knowledge.

In a way, networks seem to make anything and everything happen. But we have yet to understand what they are and what they can and cannot do. In the development literature a vast variety of policy and social network concepts and applications exists.

### Networks and Policy influence

The ODI, as part of its RAPID programme, has begun a long term study into the linkages between research and policy. Within it, it is addressing the roles that networks can play to make these links more likely. In Emily Perkin and Julius Court's (2005) literature review of networks and policy processes in development, many of the key emerging themes surrounding the subject were discussed. Perkin and Court show that networks can be useful as communicators or bridges between research, practice and policy. They found that networks can help researchers influence policy processes in several ways. This usefulness hints at the functions that networks can play.

### Why focus on functions?

The attention to functions is important for many reasons. Among them, as in any organisation, what a network does is related to how it is structured. Changing one without changing the other might lead to negative impacts on the networks and their objectives. Also, introducing new functions to certain networks might be counter productive to the achievement of the network's original objectives and those who depend on them. These are very relevant issues for research policy networks in the development field –in particular as they reform to better influence policy.

Also, traditional definitions of networks do not necessarily respond to the vast diversity that exists. These make assumptions about what different types of networks should be like rather than embrace their difference. A functional description of them could incorporate a much broader number of research policy networks; which carryout very different functions and roles, and are organised in many different ways, to achieve the same objective evidence based policy influence.

### Functions

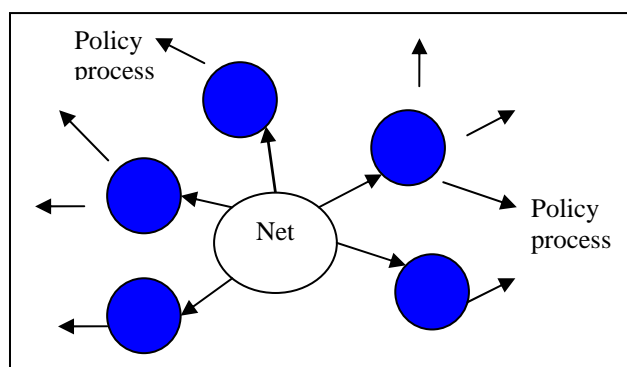
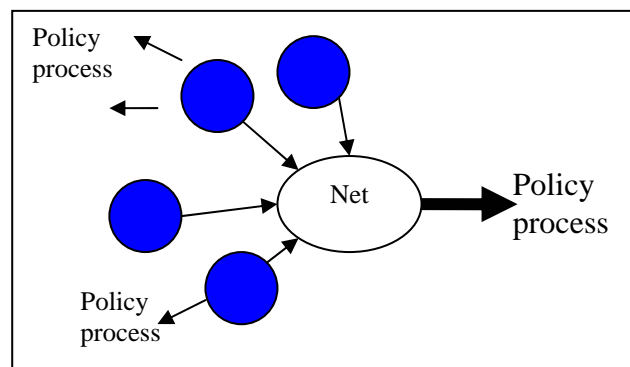
Richard Portes and Stephen Yeo's (2004; Portes and Yeo, 2001; Yeo and Mendizabal, 2004) suggest that networks can fulfil six, non-exclusive functions:

- **Filter:** To 'decide' what information is worth paying attention to and organise unmanageable amounts of information.
- **Amplify:** To help take little-known or little-understood ideas and make them more widely understood.
- **Invest/Provide:** Networks offer a means to give members the resources they need to carry out their main activities.
- **Convene:** To bring together different people or groups of people.
- **Community building:** Networks promote and sustain the values and standards of the individuals or organisations within them.
- **Facilitate:** To help members carry out their activities more effectively.

## Roles

Among research policy networks there are many fundamental differences. While some networks are, in fact, key agents of that change, others merely provide their members with the necessary support they need to pursue their own research policy strategies. So it is probably easier to think of the previously mentioned networks' functions within two supra-functions or roles: Agency and Support.

- The **Agency** role denotes a network that is charged by its members to become the main agent of the change they aim to achieve. Members may also carry out their own policy influence work.



- The **Support** role, on the other hand, works on the opposite direction. In this case, the network itself (as an independent entity or the secretariat) is not the agent of change.

In practice, most research policy networks have some characteristics of both. Recognising these is important to consider the functions they need to undertake.

## The shape of networks

Having defined the functions that networks can play, the next step is to determine the structural characteristics (organisation, skills, resources, etc.) that networks need to have to be able to follow up on them. For instance, what type of membership does a

network need to be a successful amplifier? Is it the same as the membership needed for community building?

Based on a broad review of the literature and a series of case studies, we suggest the following criteria to understand the structure of networks.

**Roles and Functions:** What roles and functions does the network carry out? (Filter, amplify, invest/provide, convene, build communities and/or facilitates)

**Localisation and scope:** Where are the network and its members located both physically and thematically?

**Membership:** Who are the network's members and how are they related to each other?

**Governance:** What are the behaviours and processes in place within the network that govern its short and long term functioning?

**Resources:** Does the network have access to all the inputs necessary for its functioning?

**Capacity and skill:** Do the network and the network members have the capacity and skills necessary to carry out their functions and tasks?

**Communications:** Does the network have appropriate communication strategies to carry out its functions, thus amplifying messages outwardly or sharing messages and information within the institution?

**External environment:** What are the external influences affecting the network?

**Strategic and adaptive capacity:** Is the network capable of managing changes and shocks in both its internal and external environment? Can it manage those changes on its own or does it depend on others (partners, networks, donors)?

These criteria cover both the internal and external environment of the network and consider the structures and process that allow it to function and develop. Some of them are also stressed by more than one. In essence they provide a guide drawn from the literature and the understanding that the external and internal environment, and the network's content matter equally when addressing success on policy impact.

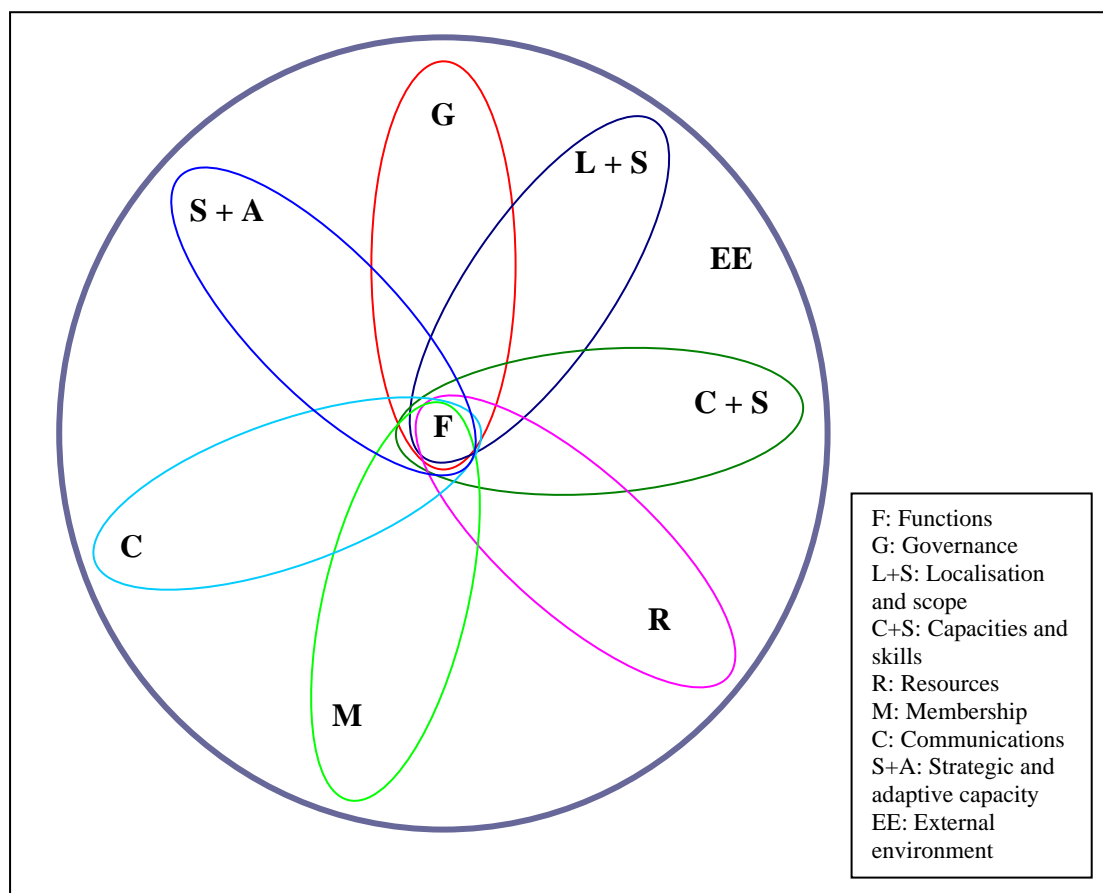
## **Describing networks**

A description of a network using the function-form approach would consider first its role; whether it is a support or agency network (or what proportion of each it follows). Within this, one would then consider the various functions the network carries out. With this information it would be easier to understand how these networks are structured to influence policy using research based evidence.

## Describing networks



## How the form helps define the functions of the network



### More information on networks

RAPID Networks Project website:

<http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/ppa0103>

Networks and Policy Processes in International Development: a literature review

[http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Publications/RAPID\\_WP\\_252.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Publications/RAPID_WP_252.html)

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