



# LEARNING NETWORKS: HOW ORGANIZATIONS LINKED FOR ENHANCED LEARNING ACHIEVE EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction.....	5
Research Activities and Methods.....	9
Achievements, Recommendations and Future Directions .....	20
Annex A: Thought Leader Survey .....	24
Annex B: Online Network Viability Evaluation Tool .....	29
Annex C: Online Evaluation Tool Comments .....	35
Annex D: Thought Leader Survey Respondents .....	39
Annex E: Small Grant Applicants.....	40

## Executive Summary

Over recent decades, international donors and NGOs alike have taken an increasingly networked approach to development policy and practice. This approach has emerged from a heightened awareness of the complexity of issues facing developing countries – HIV/AIDS, food security, trafficking in persons, etc – each of which necessitates a multisectoral and society-wide response. As a way of tackling these multifaceted issues, connecting people for knowledge sharing and learning has been shown to have a tremendous positive impact, leading to improved service quality, increased outreach, greater efficiency, and rapid dissemination of best practices.

In practice, however, the quality of interactions in networks varies widely, with significant impacts upon overall network performance. On occasion, performance can be so erratic that, in the words of one commentator, “some NGOs have begun to abandon ideas of organizational partnership and collaboration altogether.”<sup>1</sup>

Pact’s Capacity Building Services Group (CBSG) retains a firm belief in the power of networked approaches to development. We have experienced first hand the growth of powerful networks of interaction around HIV/AIDS in Zambia, natural resource management in Ecuador, and global capacity building on the Impact Alliance. As the dialogue on networking for development intensifies and reaches deeper levels of understanding, Pact CBSG and our peer-colleagues are seeking tools that can help to identify opportunities and improve network effectiveness.

To this end, Pact’s eleven-month *Learning Networks* action research program sought to assist both practitioners and funders in leveraging the power of networking to improve organizational performance and achieve cross-cutting goals. Activities focused on identifying and operationalizing a core set of characteristics that drive high performance in learning networks. The long-term aim of this approach is to develop user-friendly tools that foster deeper understanding of how to implement and sustain high performing learning networks.

Our research was based around the following key questions:

1. Which characteristics (such as leadership, strategy, commitment) are most highly associated with high performing learning networks?
2. Which of these high performance characteristics are most easily influenced through training, new technologies and/or other intervention strategies over time?

Pact’s approach to the first of these questions – identifying factors that improve network performance – involved the documentation of experiences through surveys, the testing of hypotheses using an online network viability evaluation tool, and the creation of a permanent online space for the posting of best practices and approaches for networking.

The approach to the second question – identifying characteristics most easily influenced through targeted interventions – involved a competitive bidding process for small grants to support the rapid testing of innovations related to network viability factors described above.

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<sup>1</sup> Ashman, D. 2006. *Closing the Gap between Promise and Practice: A Framework for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating Social Development Networks*. [http://www.impactalliance.org/ev\\_en.php?ID=9173\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=9173_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC)

Research activities were carried out by two coalitions of participants. One included researchers and thought leaders whose professional occupation is *studying, writing about or managing* networks for learning, and the second included representatives of NGOs, CSOs, local municipalities, and others who actively *participate* in learning networks. These two coalitions helped Pact to identify gaps that exist between network theory and practice.

The research produced a number of useful findings that have helped to generate a deeper understanding of how to implement and sustain high performing networks:

- Initial research findings facilitated the development of a pilot network viability framework evaluation tool which was made available via the Internet (<http://www.pactworld.com/network/index.php>). It is hoped that this tool is the first iteration of a potentially powerful model for evaluating and strengthening learning networks.
- Although networks of learning do exist, the term *Learning Network* is a misnomer for many of the networks targeted by this research. These networks, dedicated to specific objectives, frequently minimize “learning” as a distinct performance component. These networks are more accurately described as *Worknets*.
- Data generated from a review of networks and network managers and thought leaders allowed the research team to winnow the characteristics of high performing networks to five drivers: the relationship of productivity to effort, performance integrity, ownership, commitment of senior staff, and commitment of members. These factors are represented as:

$$\text{Network Viability} = \frac{\text{Productivity}}{\text{Effort}} (\text{Performance Integrity} + \text{Ownership} + \text{Commitment of Senior Staff} + \text{Commitment of Members})$$

- Of the approximately 115 users reviewing the research findings online, over 80% have endorsed Pact’s framework and applied it to their own networks. One participant commented that the framework had “correctly reflected our strengths and weaknesses and gave some thought how to overcome it.”

Pact will continue to advance thinking on network viability by engaging actively with the community of practitioners that have participated in the learning networks research. Together, we intended to seek out further verification of research outputs and to undertake additional research aimed at further deepening the understanding of short-term and long-term network success.

## Introduction

Although networking has been the subject of much discussion and research over the years, only recently have different types of networks – including social change and advocacy networks, sectoral networks, and service delivery networks – been identified and studied. As the dialogue on networking for development intensifies and reaches deeper levels of understanding, researchers and practitioners alike are paying closer attention to the distinguishing characteristics that differentiate networks.

One purpose that cuts across almost every network is learning and knowledge sharing. Dynamic learning networks enable people and organizations to exchange experience, strengthen capacities, and scale-up impact. Connecting people for knowledge sharing and learning has a tremendous positive impact on their ability to improve organizational performance<sup>2</sup> and achieve their goals. When learning networks succeed, the combination of people and technology produces networks of people who transform themselves into "worknets" – suborganizations or informal groups whose collective knowledge accomplishes a specific task. The key to this transition from the individual to the collective worknet is that its members have compelling reasons for finding others with knowledge to share who in turn have compelling reasons to share their knowledge when asked.<sup>3</sup>

In the course of researching what drives learning networks to extraordinary results, the Pact Capacity Building Services Group (CBSG) research team was encouraged by stories of worknets rising up within social change, advocacy, sectoral and service delivery networks, each promoting an environment of inquiry, entrepreneurship and experimentation. The more deeply we probed, the more convinced we became of the importance of new practices that can support organizations to become agile enough to adapt to new technologies and to participate in learning networks. No matter where an organization may be in time or place, networked learning is a potentially high yield, low cost investment that can improve program success dramatically.

In Kenya, for example, the Community Based Impact Assessment Network for Eastern Africa (CIANEA) has made substantial progress on its goals by employing a variety of knowledge sharing and external communication techniques. In disseminating information widely and from different sources, CIANEA has managed to keep close to the interests of its membership. Establishment of linkages and communicating with different partners on work already being undertaken by CIANEA has also ensured interest from key partners like the World Bank, USAID, regional governments, donors and NGOs.

In Zambia, the HIV/AIDS Learning Initiative (ZHLI) has fostered a culture of learning among Zambian NGOs and CBOs from different regions of the country as well as from varied social

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this research initiative, Pact will use the following definition of organizational effectiveness: "An organization's ability to fulfill its mission measurably through a blend of sound management, strong governance, and a persistent rededication to assessing and achieving results." From Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. <http://www.geofunders.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=268>

<sup>3</sup> Brook Manville and Nathaniel Foote, "Strategy as if Knowledge Mattered", Fast Company Magazine, April-May 1996.

sectors. The Sharing and Learning Teams (SALT) and Multisectoral Tools for Community Action (MTCA) are two major components of the ZHLI network that are clearly proving to reinforce the advantages of cross-organizational, cross-sectoral and cross-provincial collaboration on topics of importance to the network.

Tired of the invent-it-yourself model, partners of the Impact Alliance, a global network of institutions and practitioners dedicated to improving access to affordable capacity building services, have invested in a year-long collaborative development effort to design and pilot a tool for assessing and strengthening local government. The resulting innovation, the Good Governance Barometer, is a co-owned methodology that is benefiting from the network's global scale and multi-institutional presence in Africa and Latin America. Impact Alliance partners understand that the best innovations come from connecting ideas across organizations.

These three examples highlight the power of learning through networks. With support from USAID, Pact sought to shine a spotlight on the interventions that would improve the chances of networks like CIANEA, ZHLI and the Impact Alliance. Two questions guided this research:

1. Which characteristics (such as leadership, strategy, commitment) are most highly associated with high performing learning networks?
2. Which of these high performance characteristics are most easily influenced through training, new technologies and/or other intervention strategies over time?

These two questions are of great interest to both nonprofits seeking to more deeply engage in organizational learning, and to funding institutions interested in cost-effective investments that lead to program success. Underlying the two primary research questions are a number of secondary questions concerning which factors explain long term improvement in networking effectiveness and corresponding improvements in the capacity of participating organizations to access, produce, transfer and disseminate information that leads to extraordinary program performance. Key among these are:

- Under what conditions are learning networks most successful in the *short term*?
- Under what conditions do learning networks lead to *long term* change in capabilities and improve program success dramatically?
- Under what conditions do learning networks reach a “tipping point” after which growth in participation is exponential?

Pact explored these questions through an ambitious eleven-month research initiative designed to develop a deeper understanding of how to implement and sustain learning networks that catalyze higher organizational performance.

### **Defining the Terrain**

Despite the benefits and the critical timing of “the rise of networking”, there still exists a great deal of confusion and uncertainty about what precisely constitutes a learning network. Various authors on the subject differentiate between networks and networking. The term “networks”

usually conjures up some organizational entity, whereas “networking” refers to a way of designing processes, often for the purpose of learning.<sup>4</sup> Throughout this study, the term network is used to refer to a coalition of individuals and/or organizations that practices networking.

The term “networking” implies a set of transformational experiences resulting from the conscious efforts of certain social actors to build relationships with each other to enhance sustainable development.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, a clear definition should encompass both the activity and the motivation behind the network. Although in their most base form networks are essentially a communication device, they also have the capacity to transform communities working together to affect positive change. When functioning at optimal performance, networking “helps create a fundamentally new quality for human cooperation, and enhances inclusive thinking, creativity and dialogue.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, networking refers not so much to the creation and delivery of services, but rather the process of social learning, communication, and sense-making.<sup>7</sup>

It is important here to emphasize that networking is a means to an end, not an outcome in and of itself. As our research broadened, we discovered more and more network examples that defied the label “learning network”. We found that networks are frequently described by members in terms of their strategic intent — “sectoral”, “advocacy”, “service delivery”— and that networks dedicated to specific objectives such as reduced infant mortality frequently overlooked “learning” as a distinct performance component (**Figure 1, p8**). For these cases the research team has adopted “worknets” to describe networks that *incorporate* knowledge sharing activities as part of a larger objective. The term “learning network” is used to describe networks whose strategic intent is anchored entirely in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Key operational definitions that guided this research are listed in the “Definitions” text box.

Definitions
<b>Development Network:</b> a group of committed social actors who build relationships based on cooperation, inclusive thinking, dialogue and learning in an effort to enhance sustainable development.
<b>Networking:</b> a set of transformational experiences resulting from the conscious efforts of certain social actors to build relationships with each other to enhance sustainable development.
<b>Worknet:</b> Networks of people who transform themselves into suborganizations or informal groups whose collective knowledge accomplishes a specific task
<b>Learning Network:</b> A network whose strategic intent is anchored entirely in the creation and dissemination of knowledge.
<b>Networks for learning:</b> A general term incorporating both “learning networks” and “worknets”.

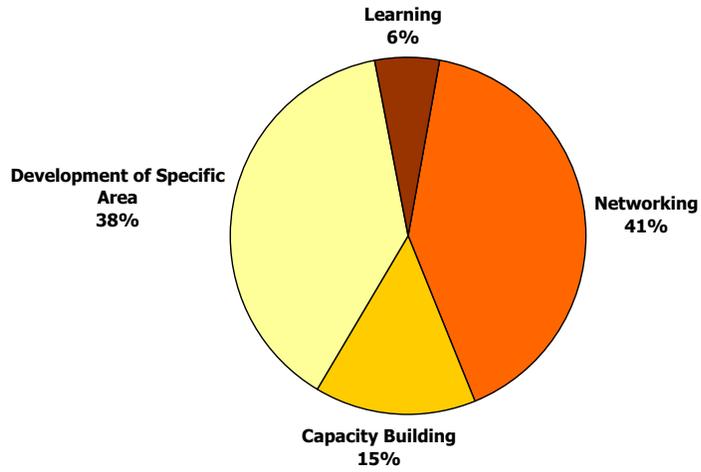
<sup>4</sup> Claudia Liebler and Marisa Ferri. “NGO Networks: Building Capacity in a Changing World.” 2004.

<sup>5</sup> UNSO. “Optimizing Efforts: A Practical Guide to NGO Networking.”

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 4

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

**Figure 1: Network Objectives**



In answer to the survey question, "what are the goals of this network?" 6% of the 36 respondents identified Learning as a primary goal. By contrast, 41% of respondents identified Networking as a goal, 38% identified a Specific Field of Development, and 15% identified Capacity Building.

## Research Activities and Methods

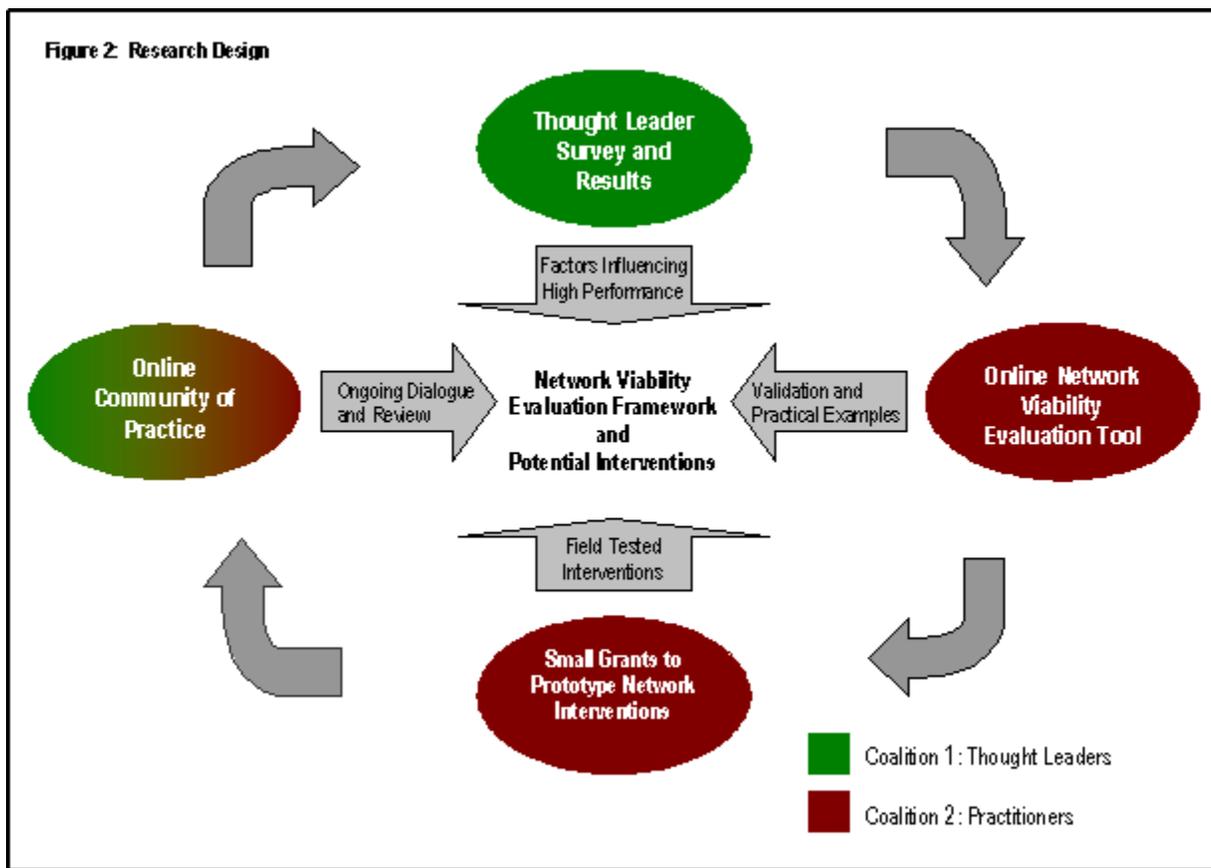
Pact's approach to identifying the factors that improve the performance of learning networks and worknets involved documenting practitioner experiences through surveys, an online network viability evaluation tool, and the creation of a permanent online space for the posting of best practices and approaches to networking.

Research activities were carried out by two coalitions. One coalition included researchers and thought leaders whose professional preoccupation is *studying, writing about or managing* networks for learning (Group A). This coalition was made up of academics, authors, and private sector representatives. The second coalition included representatives of NGOs, CSOs, local municipalities, and other individuals who actively *participate* in networks for learning (Group B). These two coalitions helped Pact to identify gaps that exist between theory and practice.

Key research activities included the following:

- Development and dissemination of a thought leader survey;
- Formulation of a Network Viability Framework;
- Development and dissemination of an online Network Viability Evaluation tool;
- Dissemination of small grants for testing of tools to support organizations working in networks

Figure 2 represents the key stages and activities of the research design.



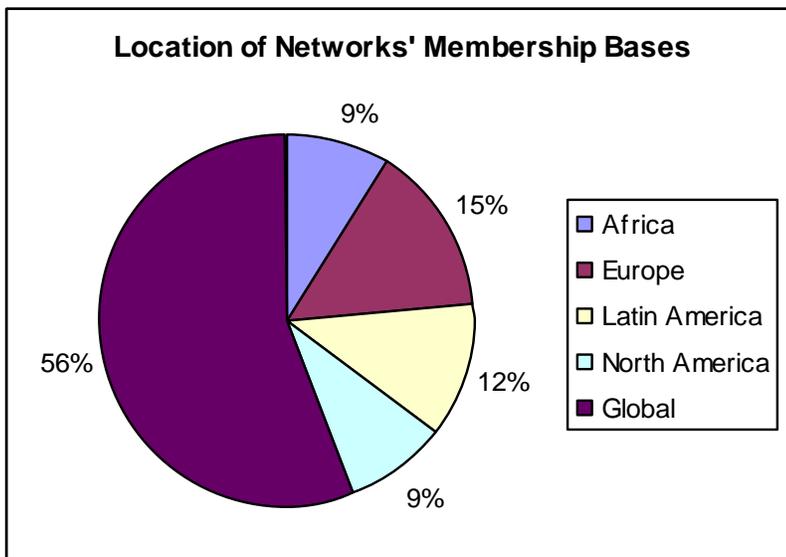
**Development, Administration and Analysis of the Thought Leader Survey**

Approximately 100 surveys were sent to Group A experts, who were asked to identify a single network with which they are most familiar. The survey required respondents to:

1. Rate the network’s “success” based on the degree to which it achieved its top three objectives. (They responded on a 7-point scale – 1 being “unsuccessful” and 7 being “highly successful.”)
2. Identify top performance characteristics from 64 performance attributes incorporated into the survey based on current literature on networks. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which these characteristics were present on a scale of 1 to 4 - 1 indicating the weakest presence, and 4 indicating the strongest presence.

Of the 40 responses received, 36 qualified as complete and suitable for analysis. (See Annex D for respondent information). More than fifty percent of the 36 networks represented in this phase of the study are global in nature, with membership extending beyond one continent. All of the other networks have members that reside in a single country or region. (See Figure 3). Total membership of networks participating in the survey is approximately 7100, inclusive of both individuals and organizations. Operating budgets range from less than \$50,000 to over \$1,000,000 (see Figure 4) representing a variety of technical sectors – such as health, trade, and local governance – as well as cross-cutting functional areas such as capacity building, research, and evaluation.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

Network Budget Size	Number of networks
Less than \$50,000	13
\$50,000 to \$199,999	9
\$200,000 to \$399,999	6
\$400,000 to \$1,000,000	5
More than \$1,000,000	3

Preliminary analysis of the thought leader survey data included cross-tabulations for each of 64 surveyed characteristics in relation to performance levels. Each survey item was anonymously coded with multiple descriptors that included process factors such as “lead in new and creative ways” (Liebler and Ferri’s “Generative Capacities” citation) as well as a more traditional references such as “productivity”, “strategy”, “management”, “governance”, “diversity” and “coordination”.

A chi-square test was run to determine level of association. All characteristics that demonstrated an association with 95% confidence were considered “surviving” characteristics. Only 19 characteristics passed this first round of winnowing.

The research team initially grouped the surviving 19 characteristics into six descriptive categories: process, culture, learning, strategy, collaboration and structure. Initial observations were quite counterintuitive. With the exception of “process” at 46% representation and “learning” at 43%, the remaining categories were only represented by one-third or fewer survivors from the original list of surveyed characteristics. Two categories, technology and policy, had no characteristics that met the minimum 95% confidence requirement for survival. This result indicates that, in the opinion of the thought leader respondents, factors related to either policy or technology are not generally linked to network performance.

When we examined the top ten surviving characteristics in a second round of winnowing the results were much more instructive. Items representing measures of network *productivity* and *member effort* accounted for half of the ten surviving characteristics. The other surviving five characteristics were narrowly focused on *member commitment* and *member ownership*. Measures of productivity and effort, as well as member commitment and ownership became central to our findings. We immediately identified a pattern consistent with research findings carried out by Boston Consulting on common denominators of successful change management initiatives. In over 1000 change management initiatives worldwide studied by Boston Consulting, four factors emerged: 1) duration of time until the change program is completed; 2) the project teams performance integrity or skill-set, 3) commitment to change by top management and frontline staff, and; 4) effort over and above the usual work that the change initiative demands of employees.<sup>8</sup>

We also noted similarities between our preliminary findings and work carried out by Richard Holloway on the key variables that determine horizontal philanthropy (local philanthropic giving habits). Holloway highlights the interplay between “normal” everyday needs and “urgent” needs as a key determinant behind horizontal philanthropy, along with shared motivation, and the reputation of the individuals participating in the philanthropic giving circle.

As we came to better understand our findings in light of this work we returned to the first round of “surviving 19” characteristics and regrouped survey items into the following six performance categories:

### **1. Productivity**

- Quality of network products or outcomes
- Extent to which the network demonstrates results
- Depth of knowledge resources and information available
- Extent to which network has impact

### **2. Effort**

- Extent to which the network adjusts or responds to challenges
- Extent to which the network can be described as “active”

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<sup>8</sup> “The Hard Side of Change Management”, Harvard Business Review, Winter 2005.

- Extent to which members make equitable contributions to support the network and its functions
  - Extent to which creative interaction exists among members
- 3. Commitment of members**
- Quality of the internal communication between members
  - Extent to which members participate actively in network activities
- 4. Commitment of senior staff**
- Extent to which the network can be described as “committed“
  - Extent to which the network succeeds in supporting member learning
- 5. Performance Integrity**
- Quality of the network’s decision-making processes
  - Extent to which the network builds capacity of members to learn
- 6. Ownership**
- Extent to which members share in network ownership
  - Extent to which members influence network priorities
  - Extent to which members have a strong sense of belonging to the network
  - Extent to which collaboration exists between members
  - Extent to which members feel responsible for network success

The Pact research team combined these six factors into a framework that can be used to predict the viability of a learning network:

$$\text{Network Viability} = \frac{\text{Productivity}}{\text{Effort}} (\text{Performance Integrity} + \text{Ownership} + \text{Commitment of Senior Staff} + \text{Commitment of Members})$$

The framework proposes that viability is a function of the productivity of the network divided by the effort required from network members. This result of this ratio of productivity to effort is then multiplied by the sum of the remaining four factors. Each of the six factors is described below:

1. *Productivity* - the regularity with which members receive a useful resource or make a useful connection because of their participation in the learning network.
2. *Effort* - the frequency with which members are asked to make a significant contribution of time or resources to the learning network.
3. *Performance integrity of key staff* - the performance of core network staff (frontline managers of the network).
4. *Ownership* - the level of input that members have in setting network priorities and guiding activities and the degree of input that members have in evaluating the network and its key staff.
5. *Commitment of senior management* - the speed at which network senior management demonstrate support for network goals and the intensity of effort made by senior management to remove impediments as they arise.

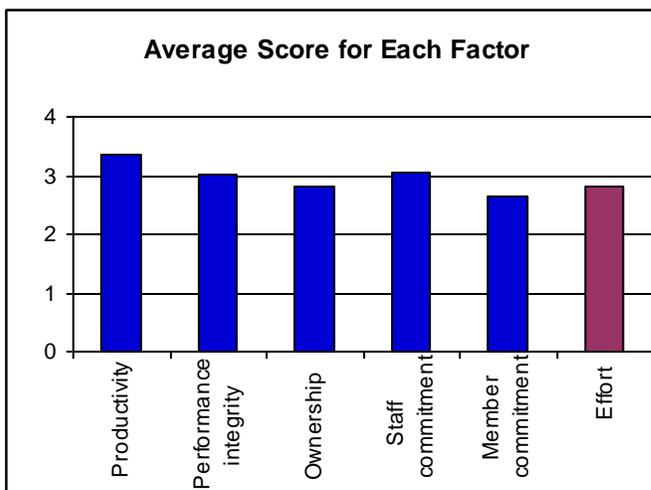
6. *Commitment of members* - the level of network member participation in network related activities and the amount of interaction that occurs between members.

### **Development and dissemination of online network viability evaluation tool**

The Pact research team put the learning network viability framework to the test by developing and posting an online evaluation tool for network practitioners. This tool contains six simple survey questions – one for each of the six framework factors – that measure learning network performance on a four-point Likert scale. (One is lowest performing and four is highest performing – except in the case of effort, for which the scale was inverted due to its position in the framework<sup>9</sup>). The tool can be accessed at <http://www.pactworld.com/network/index.php> or can be viewed in document form in Annex B. At the time of this report publication, Pact had received approximately 115 responses via e-mail, with additional responses coming in every day.

The tool provided valuable quantitative information on the role of each factor in supporting high performing learning networks. Figure 5 shows the average scores for all six factors. The scores for *Effort* have been re-inverted to facilitate easy comparison between all six.

**Figure 5**



Productivity ranked highest among the six factors, with an average score of 3.4. This suggests that the majority of networks responding to the online tool produce resources or facilitate connections at least quarterly. Suggestions for improving network productivity, validated by at least two respondent networks, included:

- Sharing key network related information on a regular basis (One respondent suggested monthly digests sent systematically to all network members).
- Setting clear milestones that are reviewed periodically.

<sup>9</sup> Because the productivity variable is *divided* by the effort variable, a high score for effort (i.e. a score of four) will actually lower the overall viability score rather than increase it. Thus the effort score is inverted to ensure a meaningful result.

- Developing mechanisms for frequent interaction and joint activities for network members.

The second highest ranked factor was staff commitment. The average score of 3.1 indicates that most network managers are highly supportive of goals, and remove impediments as they arise. Suggestions for improving staff commitment included:

- Detailing the commitments and responsibilities of staff, and evaluating success in participatory performance appraisals.
- Ensuring structured interaction between network staff and senior management, possibly in the form of scheduled retreats.

Performance integrity was the third ranked factor (3.0). Most networks reported that the amount of time and resources dedicated to staffing and resourcing the network, and the experience and ability level of core staff was good. Common suggestions for improving this factor included:

- Building the capacity of network members through training (One respondent highlighted the power of ‘learning by doing’).
- Mobilizing and managing resources effectively.
- Ensuring that management and core-team members frequently engage in network activities.
- Maintaining a manageable amount of objectives and tasks.

Ownership and effort were ranked equally in fourth with a score of 2.8. In the case of ownership, this means that most networks reported that their members felt an above average level of ownership for network goals and activities. Suggestions for improving ownership included:

- Acknowledging and incorporating member ideas into network activities.
- Creating a friendly atmosphere where people are able to speak openly about key issues.
- Coordinating broad participation and involving members at all levels in the network’s activities – from planning through implementation.

The average score for effort indicates that most networks require members to make a significant contribution of time or resources slightly less often than once per quarter. Suggestions for streamlining member effort included:

- Review and prioritize activities regularly, reducing time spent on non-core activities.
- Remove bottlenecks by involving additional members in network activities.
- Restructure staff and member time so that each participant is working on what really matters to them.

In the opinion of many respondents, effort was the most controversial factor of the six. In particular, there was confusion about the ideal level of expectation for member effort, and whether or not a raw score for ‘effort’ was the most suitable mechanism for measuring this important concept.

The lowest scoring factor for networks responding to the online framework was member commitment. A mean of 2.7 suggests that the level of member participation in network related

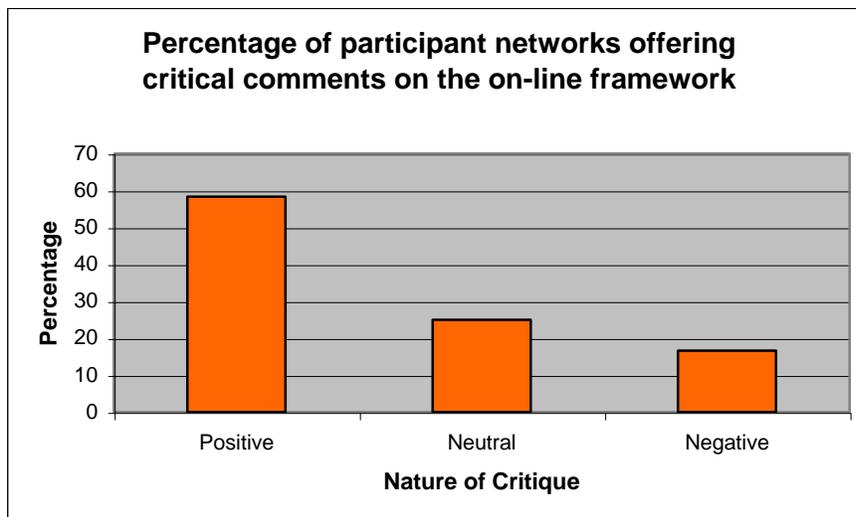
activities is considered better than average but not necessarily high. Suggestions to improve performance in this factor, advanced by at least two respondents, included:

- Developing and implementing a sound communication plan.
- Bringing members face-to-face and involving them in network activities.
- Planning the network in a participatory way that responds to and accommodates members' ideas.

According to the framework employed by the online tool, the lowest possible overall viability score for a network is 1 and the highest is 64. The average respondent score was 24, which suggests that there are some strong foundations within the networks, but also a need to prioritize certain factors to increase the vibrancy and viability of interaction.

Upon completion of the online tool, participants were asked to provide feedback about validity of the framework. Figure 6, below, splits responses into three categories – positive, neutral, and negative. As the graph shows, the majority of comments (58%) were positive, and only 17% of comments were negative in nature.

**Figure 6**



Examples of positive comments included the following:

- “Your evaluation is well balanced”
- “It correctly reflected our strengths and weaknesses and gave some thought how to overcome it”
- “The set of six [factors] is good and addresses most of the concerns I have had”

25% of responses were neutral and many of these included numerous useful suggestions. One respondent suggested that a good framework “should not be fixed or cast in stone”, indicating that Pact, and the broader learning network community, should occasionally review the framework to reflect changing needs and trends. Another group suggested that the productivity of a network “may be affected also by hardware”, access to facilities, computers etc. This might be an aspect of learning networks that future iterations of the framework are designed to reflect.

Only a small number of respondents suggested that the framework piloted in the online tool required significant rethinking. Comments in this category included:

- “Skewed in favour of traditional hierarchical understandings of organizational structure”
- “Some of the factors in the framework appear to overlap, e.g. commitment and ownership”

A full listing of the feedback and suggestions is available in Annex C.

### **Dissemination of small grants for testing of tools to support learning networks**

To further advance understanding of learning network viability, Pact made available three small grants of \$1750 each to support the rapid testing of innovations related to one or more of the six viability factors described above.

Through the small grants, Pact hoped to identify promising tools, techniques, and approaches being explored by worknets from all parts of the globe.

The dissemination of small grants was a competitive process that resulted in the submission of a total of 27 applications from organizations and institutions in 16 countries. (See Annex E for a complete applicant list). The quality and creativity of submissions was highly impressive, focusing on a variety of sectors - such as HIV/AIDS, microenterprise, youth, gender, agriculture, water sanitation, and forestry - and proposing a range of innovative approaches that leverage technology and human capital to better understand the viability of networks.

#### **Lessons from the Small Grant Dissemination Process**

An unexpected but significant lesson from this phase of Pact’s action research was how the provision of this very limited seed money quickly revealed the depth and breadth of interest in the network viability concept. Funding limitations, tight timeframes, and a less-than-“glamorous” topic of study had the research team expecting much more modest numbers of applications. But passion clearly abounds for this subject and suggests to the Pact research team that there is tremendous potential to harness this enthusiasm and connect practitioners so that the most promising approaches to enhancing network viability are refined through peer engagement, then implemented and replicated/scaled-up.

The dynamic that we witnessed in this phase of the research is similar to the “crowdsourcing” approach employed in the for-profit field by Proctor and Gamble, Hewlett-Packard and Eli Lilly. Crowdsourcing connects well-resourced organizations with pioneering practitioners on the cutting edge of innovation. Tapping into the field-derived knowledge of these innovators on the frontlines is key for the rapid scale-up of successful ideas. This approach shifts attitudes from resistance to innovations “not invented here” to enthusiasm for those “proudly found elsewhere.” In the spirit of learning networks, the crowdsourcing approach has the potential to foster the development of a global “brain trust” with the purpose of connecting the wisdom of small grant applicants and others interested in the network viability topic, co-developing and investing in tools for change, and replicating successful practices around the world.

The Pact research team ultimately decided to support the following three activities, based on their relatedness to the overall research initiative, implementation feasibility, and creativity.

### **1. Development and Testing of Member Commitment Assessment Toolkit (Impact Centre, Kenya)**

Impact Centre was funded to develop a “member commitment” assessment toolkit for use with the Western Women Empowerment Network (WWEN), an umbrella network of eight NGOs operating in Western Kenya that exists “to facilitate the creation of a healthy, progressive,

wealthy and prosperous community through shared resources and strategy”. Because each of WWEN’s members is responsible for the implementation of one of the thematic objectives that make up the network’s strategic plan, measurement of member commitment was deemed as high value by both the network and the Impact Centre. The assessment tools they developed help to explore the specific links between implementation success (or lack thereof) and commitment to the network.

Results from the application of the assessment toolkit (which was comprised of a semi-structured interview guide, focus group discussion protocol, and a questionnaire) with the eight WWEN NGO members validated the member commitment viability factor. In particular, the research highlighted that:

1. There is a strong correlation between WWEN member commitment and network performance.
2. WWEN members consistently demonstrate their commitment to the network through active participation in a wide variety of activities such as joint project implementation, strategic planning, performance evaluations, conflict management, and fulfilment of governance roles and responsibilities.
3. There are some commitment gaps in areas like effective communication and trust and mutual respect among members.
4. WWEN’s member commitment is driven primarily by intangible benefits rather than by tangible activities and infrastructure.

The Impact Centre hopes to use the data generated through this small grant as a basis for further investigation of WWEN viability and to determine network strengthening interventions for the future.

## **2. Social Network Evaluation of Global Youth Online Discussion Forums (St. Louis University, School of Public Health, USA)**

Researchers from St. Louis University conducted a network text analysis of topical discussion forums hosted by TakingITGlobal (TIG), an online initiative that was pioneered to foster youth dialogue and involvement in global issues. The broad aim of this research project was to enhance the understanding of performance of learning networks and contribute to the formation of best practices for online knowledge sharing initiatives in the development sector. The project specifically addressed three network viability factors: productivity, effort, and commitment of members.

This project demonstrated the application of a network text analysis of three topics within a TIG discussion forum with disparate levels of participation. Conversations that occurred during a 3-month period in 2006 comprised the data for this study, and were divided by the following topical areas:

- a. Culture and Identity – discussion threads in this area focused on the subjects of homosexuality, racism, and spirituality.
- b. Peace, Conflict & Governance – this topical area included discussions on “The Truth of Israel”, “North Korea and Nuclear Power”, and “How Holy is this War?”

- c. Health and Wellness - discussions focused on smoking in public places, sex education, and general tips for healthy living.

Through their project, the SLU research team confirmed that network text analysis (NTA) can effectively be used to trace patterns of attitudes and beliefs about current issues that are implicitly present in the online conversations of youth around the world. Such an analysis can be used to tailor the content of e-learning interventions.

The SLU research team also highlighted an important methodological recommendation for future applications of the NTA: following a consistent definition of concepts is integral to the robustness of a network text analysis. While the exact utility of following a theory-based approach is yet unknown in defining concepts, a broader theoretical framework undoubtedly guides in designing the analytical strategy and defining levels of analysis.

### **3. Performance Monitoring Tool Development for Post-Harvest Innovation Learning Alliances (Natural Resources Institute at the University of Greenwich, UK)**

The Post-Harvest Innovation Learning Alliances (PHILA) were established in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, with DFID funding, to sustain the uptake and adoption of post-harvest knowledge for the benefit of poor farmers. PHILA's short-term objective has been to explore and establish better ways by which organizations and individuals with post-harvest interests might work and learn together, and manage post-harvest knowledge to better meet farmers' demands. It is hypothesized that improvements in the way that member organizations relate and learn together will translate into sustainable improvements at the system level, with widespread uptake and adoption of post-harvest knowledge by end-users, especially poor farmers.

The main functions of PHILA are:

- Collaborative research activities (i.e. action research case studies);
- Information sharing (stakeholder workshops, communication exchanges, document exchanges, website);
- Engagement with other key stakeholders who may be relevant to operationalizing findings and having wider impact;
- Management activities to maintain the research, information sharing, and engagement functions.

With Pact funding the PHILA management team developed, in partnership with the members, a basic monitoring tool that builds on efforts already undertaken to measure overall network performance. The monitoring tool focused primarily on the member commitment viability factor. The tool also assesses the relevance of PHILA's activities to its memberships in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, the level of member participation in network related activities, and the amount of interaction that occurs between members.

#### **Establishment of web space for learning networks community of practice**

Not only did Pact's research project aim to generate useful data on the characteristics of successful learning networks; it also sought to create an actual learning network with a

committed and diverse community of research participants modeling promising practices and experimenting with new innovations identified through the action research itself. To this end, Pact established the “Learning Network Research Initiative Group” on the Impact Alliance portal ([http://www.impactalliance.org/ev\\_en.php?ID=11362\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=11362_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC)). This web space is dedicated to providing the latest information on research activities and a platform for thought leaders and practitioners alike to contribute content.

There has been a positive response to this aspect of the research initiative, particularly from those who were unsuccessful in securing small grants but interested in staying connected to a global community dedicated to working with and through networks. It is beginning to create a foundation for global information exchange around learning networks – one that we hope will support the ongoing transmission of ideas among like-minded individuals beyond the formal close of this initiative.

## Achievements, Recommendations and Future Directions

### Achievements

Pact's learning networks research project proved to be a success in a number of key ways. Firstly, the research produced a number of findings that have helped to generate a deeper understanding of how to implement and sustain high performing learning networks and worknets:

- Many networks defy the label “learning network” and are frequently described in terms of their strategic intent (“sectoral”, “advocacy”, “service delivery” etc.) *Worknets* such as these, dedicated to specific objectives, frequently overlook “learning” as a distinct performance component.
- Thought leaders narrowed down the universe of characteristics that drive learning network success, reporting that network characteristics related to Processes and Learning are most important in catalyzing high performance learning networks. Conversely, characteristics related to Policy and Technology are believed to be insignificant in catalyzing high performance.
- Findings from the thought leader survey converged powerfully with Harvard University Business School's DICE framework for assessing project performance. This assisted with the development of a pilot network viability framework, concentrated around six core factors: Productivity, Effort, Performance Integrity, Ownership, Commitment of Senior Staff, and Commitment of Members.
- The value of the pilot viability framework was endorsed, in the form of positive or neutral critiques, by over 80% of network practitioners using the online tool.
- Network practitioners responding to the tool highlighted slightly different characteristics than those put forward by thought leaders. In particular, they reported the importance of access to and maximization of resources.
- Practitioners also commented on the tool in general. For example, some found the Effort score to be a little confusing and others indicated a degree of overlap between Ownership and Commitment of Members. These findings have been used to develop a second generation of the framework.
- 27 organizations produced innovative and high quality proposals for small grants to pilot tools for strengthening networks. The three most promising of these were funded.

Secondly, the research project was an excellent mechanism for identifying innovative approaches to analyzing, assessing, and supporting learning networks. While Pact was only able to award three small grants, the application process itself proved to be an ideal means for bringing to the surface fascinating and creative networking initiatives, many at the grassroots level, being implemented throughout the world. Even though resources were limited, the process generated a substantial response and suggests that this could be a useful mechanism to employ in the future.

The action research was also successful in establishing a foundation for ongoing practitioner and thought leader exchange on the topic of learning networks. The Impact Alliance web portal has

already generated a great deal of traffic and Pact expects that this will continue as more and more individuals seek to get engaged in this emerging community of practice.

Another achievement of this project was the successful engagement of research “targets”. The online tool was useful not only for Pact’s data collection purposes, but it also provided instant results and meaningful recommendations to respondents. This is highly important in an industry that often conducts research and/or evaluation unilaterally and can be negligent about sharing research results with data providers.

Finally, the draft framework developed through this study represents an important first step in creating a powerful model for learning network development and assessment. The methodology dovetails well with numerous other innovations that are gaining traction in the development field, including the use of organizational network analysis software and value chain analysis. Combined with these powerful mathematical and analytical methodologies, the viability framework augments an increasingly adaptable toolkit for understanding and enriching the complex interactions of learning networks.

### **Recommendations**

While the learning networks research project was a success on many levels, there are some ways in which the various aspects of the research approach could be further strengthened. Pact recommends the following:

1. *Increase the response rate of thought leaders to the initial survey.* Pact had anticipated a higher response rate to the survey and, consequently, a more nuanced analysis of the survey data. Because responses were somewhat limited, the analysis is more general in nature and did not inform, as significantly, the development of the viability framework. Pact should also ensure that all major geographic regions are represented in the respondent pool. (No responses were received from thought leaders in Asia, for example).
2. *Involve network practitioners earlier in the research process.* Because a great deal of the desire and urgency to connect with like-minded colleagues stemmed from the practitioners, Pact should consider ways to harness their participation earlier in the process.
3. *Broaden data collection methods so that they are not so reliant on Internet technology.* The research model is fairly limited to those who have access to Internet technology. It would be helpful to expand the approach so that learning network experiences in more grassroots, low-tech environments can be better understood as well.
4. *Increase opportunities for face-to-face interaction among research participants.* The Pact research team decided to make participation in round two of the research self-selective because of the relatively low response rate to the first survey. While this was intentional – we wanted to build ownership before investing in face-to-face engagements – it certainly changed the scope of the original design. We hope that post-grant research activities will

build on the momentum that has been gained in the last couple of months and create opportunities for direct interaction among participants.

5. *Further explore the effort factor of network viability.* As described previously, for a number of users of the online viability survey, the idea of minimizing member effort was not necessarily seen as desirable. In light of this, Pact is in the process of revising the online tool to combine Productivity and Effort into a single measure for Productivity that is a ratio of member input to network output. Thus, the second iteration of the network viability framework will be as follows:

**Network Viability = Productivity (Performance Integrity + Ownership + Commitment of Senior Staff + Commitment of Members)**

6. *Further investigation should also be made into the role of access to resources in network validity.* This issue has been raised by a number of online tool respondents, but will require greater verification before being added to the framework. The same is true of the assertion that ownership and commitment of members are codependent factors and only one of these should be included in the framework.

### **Future Directions**

The greatest value provided by this action research has been its role in catalyzing the formation of an initial framework and emerging community of practice around learning network viability. Pact has a responsibility to ensure both the sustainability and dissemination of this work. There are a number of potentially high-value future directions for this work.

One critical step for the short-term is the **continuation of online survey data collection**. We are still receiving responses from network practitioners and, with minimal effort, can continue to process the data and evolve our understanding of network viability. Based on feedback from users and our own reflections on the tool, we will refine the tool content and functionality as appropriate. One way to do this is to make the user results section more robust by providing more comprehensive and practical suggestions to respondents about how to improve performance in each of the six viability factors. This content could also be produced in hard copy for anyone interested in practical tips for network strengthening.

**Support for the emerging community of practice** around high performance learning networks and worknets is also of high-value for Pact. The online space provided by the Impact Alliance will continue to be accessible to research participants as well as other interested parties. We will seek to actively link this community of practice to the broader Impact Alliance initiative, as well as any other network-focused initiatives that emerge.

Because the small grants component of this project generated such a positive response, Pact will seek out additional funds to support the **further testing of learning network innovations**. As mentioned previously, Pact received 27 small grant applications from organizations all around the world. Many of these applications were of exceptional quality and proposed interesting ideas, but financial constraints limited us to funding only three. In the future it would be wonderful to

fund some of these proposals, as well as new ideas generated through the emerging community of practice.

The strategic **application of research tools and lessons learned to Pact's own networks** will be of high value in the coming months. Internally, Pact has recently formed working groups of professionals operating internationally in core platform areas such as HIV/AIDS, Democracy and Governance, and Improving Livelihoods. These nascent groups may benefit particularly from feeding research results into their network development activities.

There is also tremendous potential for **the application of the research methodology within Pact's field programs**. Specifically, we see an opportunity for using various aspects of our approach with participants in the Zambian HIV/AIDS Learning Initiative. Two new associations – one comprised of NGOs and another of local service providers - have been formed and could use the learning networks tools for direction-setting and strategic decision-making about future directions.

Involving Impact Alliance members in the **development and further verification of research** outputs will be critical. The successful Impact Alliance network includes many members in both the thought leader and practitioner coalitions. It may be profitable to use a session at an Impact Alliance conference to generate a broad debate and bring in a range of opinions about the validity of research tools and potential network interventions.

A very tangible short-term action that Pact could easily implement is the **development of a 1 day workshop protocol**, along the lines of Pact's widely used Organizational Capacity Assessment, for assessing and analyzing/improving networks. Networks would score themselves in the morning using the network viability framework and then analyze results and create an action plan for improving the network in the afternoon. This would be an extremely practical use for the network viability framework, and also facilitate rigorous field-testing of the results of the research.

Finally, this action research initiative has opened the door to **additional research in the field**, which could be completed either by Pact or a member of our growing community of practice. Such research might focus on factors that explain long-term improvement in networking effectiveness and corresponding improvements in the capacity of participating organizations to access, produce, transfer and disseminate information that leads to extraordinary program performance. One such key study would be an analysis of which characteristics – demographics, strategy, external environment, internal structure, leadership styles, management systems, resources and incentive structures – are related to more successful learning networks.

## Annex A: Thought Leader Survey

### Introduction

With this survey, Pact embarks on the data-collection phase of its research initiative to explore what drives high performing learning networks. Over the next eight months, Pact, in collaboration with SNV and USAID, will involve hundreds of experts and practitioners in this research which will significantly advance the development sector's understanding of the factors that foster high-performing learning networks and highlight key lessons learned and recommendations for organizational change leaders launching or managing learning networks.

Completing the survey is the first step in your participation in this exciting process. Your responses will provide the initial insights into the working of learning networks that we will then share with a wider community for further analysis and elaboration. Your knowledge and experience is invaluable to this endeavor, and we encourage you to join us in the global movement around generating effective learning networks.

On the following pages, you will be asked to select one learning network that you know well and respond to a series of questions about that network. For the purposes of this research, we are defining learning networks as any network that has, in part or entirely, a strategic intention to share or create knowledge. Since most networks involve exchanges of information, it is likely that most networks with which you are familiar will fit within this definition.

### Respondent Contact Information

1. Your name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Your email address: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Your organization: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Your title: \_\_\_\_\_

**Survey Instructions:** Please take a moment and think of the ONE network with which you are most familiar. It can be a network you have studied, founded, managed, or been a member. It can be a strong or weak network, and it does not have to be focused on any particular region or topic. The only criterion is that you need to know it well.

Once you have selected your network, please answer to the best of your ability all remaining questions in this survey based on your knowledge of that network and its members.

5. Network name: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Program area / technical focus (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_
7. Network coordinator / key contact for requesting additional information: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Year network formed: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Is this network still active?    \_\_\_yes            \_\_\_no

10. Geographic location of:  
Secretariat / coordination: \_\_\_\_\_

Network members: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Composition of participants (select all that apply):

- Organizations
- Individuals
- Networks
- Single sector
- Multiple sector

12. Main activities / strategies: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

13. Approximate number of staff (part-time, full-time, and volunteers): \_\_\_\_\_

14. Number of members (indicate whether you are referencing individuals or organizations):  
\_\_\_\_\_

15. Approximate annual operating budget:

- Less than \$50,000
- \$50,000 to \$199,999
- \$200,000 to 399,999
- \$400,000 to \$1,000,000
- More than \$1,000,000

16. How familiar are you with current scholarship / research regarding networks?

- Not at all familiar
- Somewhat familiar
- Familiar
- Very familiar

17. What is your relationship to this network (select all that apply)?

- Member
- Manager
- Technical assistance
- Other (Please specify)

18. What percentage of your time do you spend managing or researching networks?

- none
- less than 25%
- less than 50% but more than 25%
- about 50%
- more than 50% but less than 75%
- more than 75%
- about 100%

**Network Goals**

Questions 19-24:

What are the goals of the network? Please list at least one and up to three in the spaces provided. If the network has more than three goals, select those that are most important for fulfilling the network's mission.

For each goal listed, please indicate on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the most successful, the extent to which the network has been successful in achieving or making progress towards the goal.

**Goal 1:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Unsuccessful Highly successful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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**Goal 2:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Unsuccessful Highly successful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

**Goal 3:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Unsuccessful Highly successful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

25. To what extent does this network \_\_\_\_\_?  
 (Place a check in the box corresponding to your answer)

	1 Not at all	2	3	4 Completely
Coordinate with other networks				
Have sufficient social capital to achieve intended outcomes				
Demonstrate results				
Build relationships of trust				
Lend legitimacy to its members				
Have clearly stated values				
Represent a wide range of opinions and perspectives				
Operate from a systems perspective				
Lead in new and creative ways				
Succeed in supporting member learning				
Communicate the urgency of its agenda				
Have a clearly stated set of groundrules for participation				
Moderate or guide interaction between members				
Manage the tension between cooperation and competition among its members				
Build the capacity of its members to learn				

26. To what extent does \_\_\_\_\_ describe this network?

	1 Not at all	2	3	4 Completely
Active				
Ethical				
Respectful				
Friendly				
Committed				
Outcome-oriented				
Focused				
Future-oriented				

27. To what extent does this network \_\_\_?

	1 Not at all	2	3	4 Completely
Have qualified personnel to carry out administrative functions				
Have financial resources to support activities and strategy				
Identify opportunities and threats in the environment				
Have an organizational structure that supports its purpose				
Adjust or respond to challenges				
Influence the priorities of its members				
Work across traditional boundaries				
Offer alternative levels of member participation				
Balance autonomy with interdependence				
Gain credibility from the reputation of its members				
Use technology to connect its members				
Use technology to store and access information				
Use technology to share new ideas				

28. How would you characterize this network's \_\_\_?

	1 Weak	2	3	4 Strong
Collaboration between members				
Collaboration with other networks, associations, and institutions				
Marketing efforts to donors and other third parties (not to potential members)				
Depth of knowledge resources and information available				
Ability to learn from experience and apply lessons learned				
Impact				

Mission				
Institutional memory				
Quality of products or outcomes				

29. How would you characterize this network's \_\_\_ ?

	1 Ineffective	2	3	4 Highly Effective
Decision-making processes				
Governance systems				
Internal communications between members				
Conflict resolution mechanisms				
Financial systems				
Internal management skills				
Recruiting or membership outreach				
Strategy for financial sustainability				
Strategic planning				

30. To what extent do this network's members \_\_\_?

	1 Not at all	2	3	4 Completely
Have a sense of belonging to the network				
Make equitable contributions to support the network and its functions				
Have equitable access to network functions and offerings				
Share in network ownership				
Influence the network's priorities				
Feel responsible for its success				
Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities within the network				
Participate actively in network activities				
Take initiative				
Experience creative interaction between each other				
Participate actively in network leadership or governance				
Have ample opportunities for face-to-face interaction				

**Once you have finished this section, the survey is complete. Please return your survey to the Pact representative. Thank you for taking the time to respond. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with you.**

## Annex B: Online Network Viability Evaluation Tool

### Building Vibrant Learning Networks

Have you ever wondered what capacities or characteristics make learning networks “tick?” Have you ever tried to strengthen a learning network but not known where to start? Have you ever wished you knew how to make the highest value investment in a learning network? Over the past several months, learning network experts and practitioners have been coming together to explore the answers to these very questions in a USAID and SNV-funded research initiative conducted by Pact’s Capacity Building Services Group (CBSG).

Pact is now asking for *your* support in testing out a framework for measuring network viability by responding to six simple survey questions below. The performance framework is based on findings from early phases of research that brought to the surface expert views on the critical factors that lead to the success of learning networks.

Please use the form below to input scores for each of the six factors as they apply to your own network. When you click on *Receive your Score*, the website will calculate your total, and provide basic feedback on the viability of your network. When you submit your scores, an email will be sent to the CBSG so that consolidated results can be generated.

#### Biographical Data

Please provide us with the following information:

*Name of Network*   *Contact Email*

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
----------------------	----------------------

#### Productivity

Productivity is the regularity with which members receive a useful resource or make a useful connection because of their participation in the learning network. The resource or connection may come directly from the network secretariat or from another network member. Choose the score that is most appropriate for your network.

- 4 = Once a month or more
- 3 = Once every three months
- 2 = Once every six months
- 1 = Once a year or less

#### Effort

Effort is the frequency with which members are asked to make a significant contribution of time or resources to the learning network.

- 4 = Once a year or less
- 3 = Once every six months
- 2 = Once every three months
- 1 = Once a month or more

### **Performance Integrity of key staff**

This term refers to the performance of core network staff (frontline managers of the network). When scoring this factor, consider the amount of time and resources dedicated to staffing and resourcing the network, and the experience and ability level of core staff.

- 4 = Excellent
- 3 = Good
- 2 = Average
- 1 = Below Average

### **Ownership**

This term refers to the level of ownership of network goals and activities felt by network members. When scoring this factor, consider the level of input that members have in setting network priorities and guiding activities. Also consider the input that members have in evaluating the network and its key staff.

- 4 = Very High
- 3 = High
- 2 = Average
- 1 = Below Average

### **Commitment of senior management**

This refers to the speed at which network senior management demonstrate support for network goals and the intensity of effort made by senior management to remove impediments as they arise.

- 4 = Very High
- 3 = High
- 2 = Average
- 1 = Below Average

### **Commitment of members**

This refers to the level of network member participation in network related activities and the amount of interaction that occurs between members.

- 4 = Very High
- 3 = High
- 2 = Average
- 1 = Below Average

Receive your score

Reset the form

[PAGE 2 \(viewable only upon completion of all survey fields\)](#)

Thank you for very much for taking the time to share your scores with us. Your overall survey score (below) is derived from a performance framework identified by approximately 50 thought leaders representing over 35 learning networks worldwide. The components of the framework are based on the six factors identified by experts as highly significant to the success of a learning network: 1) network **productivity**; 2) the level of **effort** required from members, 3) the **performance integrity** of key network staff, 4) the **ownership** of network goals and activities felt by members, 5) the **commitment of senior**

**management**, and 6) the **commitment of network members**. We have combined these six factors into a working framework that can be used to predict the viability of a learning network:

$$\text{Network Viability} = \frac{\text{Productivity}}{\text{Effort}} (\text{Performance Integrity} + \text{Ownership} + \text{Commitment of Senior Staff} + \text{Commitment of Members})$$

The framework proposes that viability is a function of the productivity of the network divided by the effort required from network members. This score is then multiplied by the sum of the remaining four factors.

### Your score is:

What this means:

32 – 64

Your network has scored highly and the framework predicts that it will remain viable and successful. It is important that you maintain this high performance in each of the six factors to ensure continued success. If your score is towards the lower end of this bracket, then you may wish to look for opportunities to increase the vibrancy of your learning network in the future.

16 – 31

Your network has some significant areas of strength. However, there are also certain areas that if prioritized in the future could greatly increase the vibrancy and viability of interaction. The framework indicates that it is particularly important to focus on the relationship between productivity and effort. This may be a good starting point for any initial intervention.

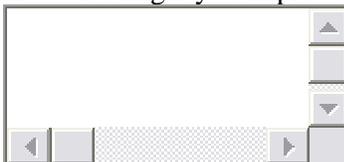
1 – 15

Although your network may have some areas of strength, it is essential that lower scoring areas be addressed as soon as possible. You will quickly see the results of these efforts in the vibrancy of interaction and resulting sharing and learning. One area where an intervention will have an immediate and strongly positive effect on your total is in the relationship between network productivity and required effort.

### Productivity

To improve the **productivity score**, reduce the time between promised milestones without compromising the overall delivery of products, services, or information. If milestones occur infrequently, consider restructuring them so that the time between milestones is reduced, thus enabling greater awareness of staged progress. If possible, divert additional resources to accelerate the progress between milestones. Ensure that milestones clearly describe major actions or achievements rather than lower-level activities.

How else might you improve productivity in your network? Share your ideas in the box below.



### Effort

To improve the **effort score**, reduce the amount of effort that members must dedicate to supporting existing priorities while also participating in new initiatives. If the total combined workload - including new network priorities - cannot be easily sustained, search out opportunities to either stop or to suspend some non-core activities. Consider which discretionary activities or part-time projects might be temporarily suspended. Ensure that all the other projects and/or discretionary activities associated with the network have been appropriately prioritized.

How else might you make improvements in this area? Share your ideas in the box below.



### Team Performance Integrity

To improve the **performance integrity score**, establish a team that has sufficient technical skills, is led by a capable team leader, and demonstrates strong commitment to achieving a clear set of objectives. Alliance competence requires both business skills, such as managing change, strategic thinking, visioning and negotiating as well as relationship skills including trust building, communications, and collaborating in teams. Ensure that the objectives of the network are realistic and clear to all team members.

How else might you improve team performance integrity in your network? Share your ideas in the box below.



### Ownership

To improve the **ownership score** ensure that key stakeholders are actively involved in the planning and visioning phases - either as "team members" or as discussion partners. Make sure your key stakeholders understand the value proposition of the network and have consensus on the "whys, whats, and hows".

Make sure that your governance model is aligned around your purpose. Develop a systems view to understand the complex whole of interrelating, interdependent parts. Overly structured networks may not be appropriate to your network's learning agenda and can disempower members. Understand your network as a living system and empower members to organize at all levels by embracing initiative, even if it involves some risk-taking.

How else might you instill ownership in your network? Share your ideas in the box below.



### **Commitment of senior staff**

To improve the **commitment of senior staff** score, increase senior management's commitment to both the overall vision of the network and to specific network initiatives. Clearly communicate the challenges that stand in the way of success. Describe in detail the actions that senior management should take to support the network and be transparent about time required so that unrealistic expectations don't undermine your hard work.

Experience shows that senior managers often overestimate the organization's *perception* of their own true commitment to a network initiative. Network manager must establish the contextual importance of demonstrated support from senior management.

How else might you improve commitment of senior staff in your network? Share your ideas in the box below.

### **Commitment of members**

To improve the **commitment of members** score, enhance your communication with network members. This goal is best achieved by taking coordinated action and may require a formal communications plan. Look for ways to implement some “quick wins”. Leverage existing communications channels and search out individuals that serve as “mavens” and “connectors” within the network.

How else might you improve commitment of members in your network? Share your ideas in the box below.

Please share with us any general feedback you have about our predictive framework. Does it place too much emphasis on any particular factor? Are there additional key factors that need to be included? We greatly appreciate any thoughts you would like to share with us.

*Additional text for base of both pages:* **Learning Networks Action Research Project**

Pact's Capacity Building Services Group (CBSG) is harnessing the experience of network practitioners and thought leaders worldwide through action research to identify key factors for the success of organizational learning networks. This research project, which seeks to advance the development sector's understanding of what matters most for learning network effectiveness, is funded by a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

A recent USAID study, *NGO Networks: Building Capacity in a Changing World*, recommends that more effort be put into encouraging the development of learning networks, noting that "networking for learning avoids many of the pitfalls associated with technical cooperation, and marks a significant development in the field." Dynamic learning networks enable people and organizations to exchange experience, strengthen capacities, and scale-up impact. Connecting people for knowledge sharing and learning has a tremendous positive impact on their ability to improve organizational performance and achieve their goals.

By building skills systematically across local organizations, and among organizations in different countries, learning networks help facilitate an environment of inquiry, entrepreneurship and experimentation. That environment, in turn, makes organizations and the civil society sector as a whole more effective – and leads to lasting development impact. Building on this assumption, Pact is drawing on the combined knowledge of experts and practitioners worldwide to learn what makes some learning networks more effective and scalable than others, focusing on two fundamental research questions:

1. Which characteristics (such as leadership, strategy and resources) are most highly associated with high performing learning networks?
2. Which of these high performance characteristics are most easily influenced through training, new technologies and/or other intervention strategies over time?

Pact hypothesizes that a core set of characteristics will emerge that clearly drive high performance in learning networks and that those characteristics will require particular intervention strategies to ensure that they support high performance over time. By shedding light on these characteristics, the research findings will advance the development sector's understanding of what matters most to learning network effectiveness and will guide practitioners in building and supporting high-performing learning networks across the sector.

If you would like more information or wish to join our community of practice around learning networks please contact Betsy Kummer, Deputy Director CBSG ([ekummer@pacthq.org](mailto:ekummer@pacthq.org)).

## Annex C: Online Evaluation Tool Comments

Respondents to the online network viability evaluation had the opportunity to share suggestions from their own experiences about how best successfully address the six factors. Those suggestions are listed below, by factor, and are followed by general comments on the tool itself.

### Suggestions for improving productivity

- “We found very useful monthly digests, which we send for all members of network. It also is very important to do it on a systematic basis and at the exactly the same time (first Friday/Monday of the month/etc).”
- “This network was started only three months ago and has been active for only 4 weeks. Milestones are clear and need to be strengthened.”
- “The productivity can be improve through good time management and support to each other.”
- “Have more information and joint activities. In this way, the members of ANJA will have more time of meeting and understanding.”
- “Develop mechanisms for more frequent interaction of network members.”
- “Periodic review of the milestones that were previously set and make it attuned to changes in the present situation.”
- “Consider first the milestones in relation to your productivity.”
- “Have more projects and have more development partners to improve the community's livelihood. This is our core mandate as a Community Media Network.”
- “Institutionalize membership, i.e., through formal or written commitments authorized by heads of organizations/supervisors.”
- “Productivity can also be improved by adequate representation of different shade of opinions. Every contribution is very important. Always seek for other people's view. YOU CANT BE MR. KNOW IT ALL.”

### Suggestions for improving effort

- “Reduce non core organization projects and gear most of the efforts towards immediate and short term activities that are likely to have an immediate impact on the target group.”
- “Better division of responsibility among members; diversify the priorities so each member is working on what really matters to them; fund-raising to better cover costs; better functioning of sub-groups and committees through self-directed action.”
- “By restructuring staff time”
- “This can be improved by involving members of the network more in setting the priorities of the network activities. The targets must be achievable and not an impossible tasks. People should not fail even before they start. Efforts need to be made to tackle problems together rather leaving to individual members.”
- “We should meet and frequently exchange our ideas and then should take positive steps.”
- “Suspending some activities is not always the good case. Our network is very diversified and suspending some activities will lead to the "lost members". I think better way is to find the bottle necks and to strengthen them with new people in the network.”
- “One more person will be added to the organization team to enhance the network building efforts.”
- “To reduce amount of time that the it need good planning.”
- “Convener and other members are volunteers. If, we have full time person for ANJA, it will increases its efforts.”

- “More activities which draw on member time, ideas and knowledge.”
- “Review activities and priorities regularly.”
- “First identify activities and prioritize and discard non-core activities. Concentrate on core activities and find ways to fully participant in innovative initiatives.”
- “More commitment from members geared towards achieving our objectives in educating the community on the various development issues.”
- “Spread out network involvement to more members of an organization, i.e., make network participation on a team/organization basis rather than through only one or few representatives from a member organization.”
- “When efforts are rewarded, it increases efforts.”

### **Suggestions for improving integrity**

- “Encourage and embrace multi skilling by the members so that the potentials owned by members can be utilized well.”
- “Better fund-raising and resource management; diversify leadership, so that each member has a leadership function; constantly refer to the vision: how does this action contribute to attaining our vision?; establish more functional collaboration with other networks.”
- “Capacity building is also essential in enhancing team performance. Learning by involvement is the best way. The leader must be ready to support the growing team members. The leader must also be on the lookout for talent and as much as practicable involve people in areas that interests and excites the team members. This way it will not be just work, but also enjoyment, fun and contentment.”
- “Our network meetings are so good and take good steps. Positively working in good manner.”
- “Agree. To have a manageable amount of objectives and tasks is important.”
- “This is a journalistic network advocating improvement in the lives of the poor. The person to be recruited to the team will be an advocacy specialist.”
- “To improve the performance, all team should work together as one family to meet the objective set.”
- “If we have resources, we can hire some technical people for the training to work as the network.”
- “Review concepts of network effectiveness and role of support team.”
- “Team Ownership and participatory leadership, forwarding ideas that can be shared in the team.”
- “Ensure that management in the member organizations have a direct role/involvement in the network.”
- “NO ONE PERSON CAN DO IT ALL. IF A PERSON BURY'S HIMSELF, ONE OF HIS HAND MUST BE OUTSIDE.”
- “The Core Team should commit to engaging our network on a much more frequent basis. We need to have more reliable automated systems for scheduled communications with our network.”

### **Suggestions for improving ownership**

- “Team and consensus building shall be encouraged and all members encouraged to participate frankly on major policy issues of the Organization”
- “Build in more learning opportunities; organise thematic 2-3 day retreats; use the web to broaden and diversify participation, as well as for learning (difficult to do in resource-poor settings)”
- “The ideas and inputs of members of a network need to be valued and if necessary incorporated and implemented. This way, the members feel that "their" network is growing strong because of their ideas and contributions and not because of one or a few people. Participation and involvement increases ownership.”
- “We are working in a network in national level and also in regional level”
- “Feedback from members will be published to show that they are owners in the project. Others will be encouraged to bring feedback and their own ideas will be included in the network's plans.”

- “Through good coordination”
- “More joint developmental activities will enhance ANJA's activities”
- “Discuss joint priority framework; use priorities for planning future activities”
- “Encourage stakeholders to own and make the network simple not to discourage members”
- “Involve members at all levels in the network's activities as well as acknowledge any new ideas coming from them.”
- “Set an open, creative atmosphere through open and friendly communication”
- “SO THAT YOU CAN GUIDE IT VERY WELL. PUBLIC CHILD DIES OF STARVATION”
- “This is good advice.”

### **Suggestions for improving commitment of staff**

- “Spend a little more ‘quality time’ towards the Organization's activities”
- “Hold a retreat for senior management for them to detail their commitments and responsibilities; define an accountability scorecard.”
- “Regular participatory performance appraisals help the senior staff to see their strengths and areas for improvement. All appraisals must be seen as opportunities for look-backs and reflections and not an opportunity to get rid of senior managers. Previous appraisals can also give indicators if the senior manager is improving or not. In others words, appraisals must be measurable and linked with the previous ones.”
- “Senior staff of our net work is highly qualified. Staff members are working in UNDP and election commission of Pakistan and working with emotion they also attend all the meetings of network.”
- “Actually, there is no senior management. There is only the coordinating team, and this is a method to encourage ownership by all network members.”
- “Through building their skill and meet their need through capacity building.”
- “We don't have full time person for network, if we have resources, the commitment of the senior staff will be improved.”
- “More structured interaction with senior management”
- “Avoid as far as possible unattainable and not value adding activities and focus on core activities. Appreciate what they are doing.”
- “Relegation of duties by the senior management to other staff if they find themselves too pre-occupied with other activities so that the network's activities do not stall”
- “Keep senior management in the loop/constantly updated (cc:) as activities unfold.”
- “LEADERSHIP IS VERY IMPORTANT. SOMEBODY MUST GIVE ORDERS AND ALSO LIVE BY EXAMPLES.”

### **Suggestions for improving commitment of members**

- “Encourage members to spare a bit of their time and attend to the Organization's projects.”
- “Depends to a great extent on the commitment of senior management, to allow the necessary time and resources to be used for the network.”
- “Members become committed when they know that their efforts also determine the overall result of their network. Therefore, all the activities of the network must be complementary and clearly linked to a plan done in a participatory way. These plans include: strategic plan, annual plan, monthly plan etc. The role of members in the implementation of the plan must be clearly stated. Effective and continuous monitoring of the implementation of the plan helps keep partners on their toes. Members will not want to fail the network they really own. Never!”

- “We are also touch with another by mail we do our contracts sufficiently.”
- “Good idea. We use formal communication plan for external purposes. Will try it on members as well.”
- “Same as would be done to encourage ownership.”
- “When all members know their set objective goal they can improve.”
- “Full time person will increase the work of members and their commitment to the network”
- “Begin discussion of financial sustainability”
- “Communication plans must be improved to enhance its effectiveness.”
- “Be responsive and facilitate communications. Avoid barriers.”
- “Accommodate other members' ideas and also keep them involved in the activities of the network.”
- “There should be opportunities for meeting face-to-face and working together.”

### **General comments on tool**

- “Your evaluation is well-balanced”
- “It is a bit skewed in favour of traditional hierarchical understandings of organisational structure. How to introduce chaos theory in a practical way?”
- “Predictive framework is an important tool in development. Those who do not have a plan are without knowing, planning to fail. It is like a ship without a destination. As they say - any wind is good enough and such a ship may remain in the sea for a long time - it going nowhere.”
- “A good framework must have indicative milestones. However, it should not be fixed or cast in stone. Regular look-backs and reviews must be done and if necessary, goals and directions need to be re-defined. Collaborating with and working with others (members or networks) greatly help overcome costly mistakes or errors. There is a need to borrow best practices used by members or other networks. This actually, is the real essence of networking.”
- “We want to say that education is the main factor in the life of networks working in the various areas in the world. We have to help to educate and get experience benefits to each other. Thanks.”
- “I think it is good for a quick overview. In our case it correctly reflected our strengths and weaknesses and gave some thought how to overcome it.”
- “Some of the factors in the framework appear to overlap, e.g. commitment and ownership. However, they might be interpreted differently by various people.”
- “If you can come to support of community base organisation they have good objective but they are lacking fund to implement them”
- “Our organization finances the network meetings. We have projects which involve 2-4 members of the networks. If these are considered network activities, our activity level is higher than I have stated. Perhaps using electronic means to allow network participants to follow the field project. I think the set of six is good and addresses most of the concerns I have had.”
- “It is balanced not too much emphasis in particular factor. You have included the software part only in your frame work productivity may be affected also by hardware, facilities, and the like.”
- “All the key factors have been addressed.”
- “Kindly provide/make available to us a copy of your findings and documents.”

## Annex D: Thought Leader Survey Respondents

Ada Jo Mann (Appreciative Inquiry Consulting)  
Alan Fowler  
Brenda Buchelli  
Bruce Britton (Framework)  
Claudia Liebler  
Darcy Ashman  
Fernando Dick (GNTP)  
Heather Baser (European Centre for Development Policy Management)  
Heather Creech (Institute for International Sustainable Development)  
Idrani Sigamany (INTRAC)  
Jeff Kwaterski (Pact)  
Jerry VanSant (Manage for Results)  
Joitske Hulsebosch (IICD)  
Kees de Graaf (SNV Tanzania)  
Ken Phillips (NGO Futures)  
L. David Brown (Harvard KSG)  
Laurie Zivetz  
Liza Culick (La Piana Associates, Inc.)  
Maaïke Smit (PSO)  
Marleen Huysman (Vrije Universiteit)  
Marlous Agterberg (Vrije Universiteit)  
Meg Kinghorn  
Niels Keijzer (European Centre for Development Policy Management)  
Rebecca Wrigley (INTRAC)  
Ricardo Wilson-Grau (NOVIB (Oxfam Netherlands))  
Robin Van Kippersluis (SNV)  
Rosalie Huisinga Norem  
Russell Kerkhoven (PSO)  
Sarah Cummings (Royal Tropical Institute (KIT))  
Sarah Earl (IDRC)  
Silvio Caccia Bava (ABONG)  
Susan Allen Nan (George Mason University)  
Teresa Behrens (W.K. Kellogg Foundation)  
Tessie Catsambas (EnCompass)  
Titong Gavino (AIM)  
Tosca Bruno (Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs)  
Verna Allee (Verna Allee Value Networks)

## **Annex E: Small Grant Applicants**

Bellanet Regional Secretariat  
Creditwatch  
Centre for Enlightenment and Development Interventions  
Centre for Sustainable Community Development  
Elizka Relief International  
Ewald Consulting  
Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing  
Hanoi Business Association  
Impact Centre  
INAFI Nepal  
Integrated Care and Support Referral Network  
International Gender and Trade Network  
Institute for Integrated Rural Development  
Kenya Community Media Network  
Kingdom Communications  
Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich  
PASOAF Foundation  
PELUM-Kenya  
Rights and Resources Group  
SACRENA Network  
Saint Louis University, School of Public Health  
SAP International  
Streams of Knowledge  
St. Stephens Cathedral Widows Group  
Vrije Universiteit  
Zango Alliance  
Zanzibar NGO Cluster