Minnesota FOOD CHARTER Network

Introduction to Social Network Analysis

The Value of Mapping

A key ingredient of network effectiveness is connectivity—how and the degree to which members are connected to each other. As Plastrick, Taylor, and Cleveland point out in their book, *Connecting to Change the World*, if members are not connected to each other, then no value can be created by the network (2012, p. 152). They go on to say:

> *Network maps, which are created with special software, [can] present complex information in a way that makes it easier for members to "see" connections and their patterns. Mapping reveals the structure of a network's connectivity, and a method called "social network analysis" can analyze the efficiency [1] of the connectivity.*

Maps help participants see, analyze and act to improve connections by:

- Visualizing how information and communication flows
- Identifying resources—who is "out there" and could be tapped for involvement
- Identifying where people have common interests and priorities to learn from each other or work on strategies together, and
- Identifying who is missing from the network

Some of the data collected as part of a network mapping process can also be used to track the health status of the network from year-to-year.

Two Approaches to Social Network Analysis

There are two ways to do network mapping with a group:

- **Hand drawing** a network is the simplest and easiest way to start. It takes a large piece of paper and different colored magic markers or post-it notes. Participants can either work together to create one map or each create their own and then compare them. The advantage of hand drawing maps is that the process takes very little time and they can be analyzed and discussed by network members immediately.

[1] Efficiency refers to the average number of steps it takes for any one network member (node) to reach another member (node) in the network. Ideally, it should take about three steps.

- **Generating maps with software.** This option involves the creation of a web-based survey, sending it to network members in an email, and using software to electronically generate the maps, and then analyzing and discussing the maps. The survey questions must be designed in a certain way to use the responses to generate maps and metrics. Some of the data collected with this option can also be used to track how the network's structure is evolving from year-to-year. **But remember:** It takes human and financial resources to develop and administer the survey, generate the maps, and analyze them. And, it generally takes about 3 months.

Regardless of approach, the basic steps for mapping a network include:

1. Identifying the network [2] you want to map. Which members (people, organizations, networks) do you want to include?
2. Determining the way the maps will be drawn and who will guide the process. Will you do hand mapping or use software? What types of connections do you want to map (who is connected to whom, quality of relationships, who is working on what issues, etc.)?
3. Creating the maps.
4. Analyzing the maps together. What patterns do participants see? Why are the patterns the way they are? Which patterns need to be strengthened and why? Where are there easy opportunities to pursue which would bring more energy and resilience to the network?
5. Developing a set of action steps that specific people will take to enhance the network.

Resources

Johnstad and Associates have developed mapping resources for creating and using hand-drawn maps and generating maps using software.

References

Holly, J. (2012). *Network weaver handbook: A guide to transformational networks*. Athens, OH: Network Weaver Publishing.

Plastrik, P., Taylor, M., & Cleveland, J. (2014). *Connecting to change the world.* Washington: Island Press.

[2] Minnesota networks may also go by names that include the words alliance, coalition, policy council, or collaborative.