

Networks – SDCs new learning structure

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Two years ago it was the “big bang” during re-organization of SDC’s (Swiss Development Cooperation) headquarters: No more F-Domain! Within the F-Domain there were Divisions according to themes or topics like water, health, employment and income, good governance, etc. These Divisions were supposed to formulate thematic policies and provide support to the operations. Did SDC no longer care for their thematic competences? In contrary! The idea was to capture these competencies in networks to secure competencies closer to the operations in the field and thus remaining up-to-date, relevant and demand-oriented.

There were good reasons for a change

Networks – where committed experts exchange experiences and ideas, views and insights, and where a common organizational understanding on thematic issues and policies is developed by using mail, wikis, skype and cops for communication – are the ideal set-up for an institution like SDC where personal is distributed all over the world. And isn’t it an appropriate tool for the new generation of National Programme Officers (NPOs) and other internet natives to be in direct contact with their peers and being an active part

¹ This article is based on an interview with the SDC collaborators Manuel Flury, head of the Learning and Networking Division, Peter Tschumi, focal point of the Employment and Income (E&I) network, and Kuno Schläfli, focal point of the Decentralization and Local Governance (DLG) network. The Learning and Networking Division provides methodological support to the focal points and network members to build up and manage their networks as well as on how to learn and exchange in networks. The E&I network consists of the three subnetworks Financial Sector Development, Vocational Skills Development, and Private Sector Development that existed already prior to the re-organization. Whereas the DLG network started from the scratch.

of SDC’s future orientation and not only a subordinate or recipient of headquarter decisions?

Since almost two years SDC is rearranging its organizational structure. One of the main objectives is the transformation of the former thematic F-Domain into thematic networks. *The networks are supposed to work as learning networks – that’s the new learning structure of SDC* (Manuel Flury). The members of the networks include focal points and programme people at the head office as well as in the cooperation offices (COOFs) who are in charge of a specific theme. They have similar mandates as the F-Domain had before. The focal points are supposed to act as policy persons and the networks are supposed to learn from experience and to develop good practices. *“But there is one major difference: Now, the networks are anchored in a decentralized way in the regional operational divisions.”* (Manuel Flury) Further, the thematic networks are supposed to include strategic partners that may be Swiss, international, or regional NGOs as well as public, private and civil society organisations and persons in the partner countries. *“The idea is that through people who are networked inside and outside of SDC, SDC and its partners have access to competence”* (Manuel Flury).

What was a major change within the process of re-organization?

Manuel Flury: With the re-organization SDC focused its proactive policy work and contribution to the global policy dialogue on a limited number of themes.

The networks organize themselves. They have as given the focal point as facilitator and a core group of people who – according to their job description – may invest 15% of their time whereas other network members may invest 5%. The network members are

What does the term ‘focal point’ exactly mean?

Peter Tschumi: In terms of thematic networks within SDC a focal point is a competence centre for a specific theme.

Kuno Schläfli: The focal point is an institutional address within the organization where everything which relates to a certain topic is sent to and treated. For instance, Swiss political interventions within the topic “Decentralization and Local Governance” land on my table.

not subordinated to the focal point but remain subordinated to their superiors within their operational division.

The three most important functions of a network are a) to create the possibility that people within the networks can exchange in a peer assist way, b) to advise their non-thematic colleagues in thematic matters, and c) to contribute – with particular experience from a specific country or context – to conceptual work, to good practice, to guidelines or even in some cases to policy work. The focal points as facilitators of the networks and as policy persons for the whole SDC now work within an operational setting. The tasks of a focal point include: thematic dialogue and learning, experience capitalization, to provide instruments and tools, capacity building, network facilitation, to advise headquarter and field, backstopping mandates.

There were three main reasons for this restructuring: First, the policies provided by the F-Domain have not been taken up by the operations because a) there were too many of these policies, b) there was no obligation to follow these policies, and c) the support given from the former F-Domain to the operations tended to be more supply driven than demand oriented. *“At the end there was complete disfunction”* (Manuel Flury). Second, the politicization of this conflict between the F-Domain and the operational domains was so strong and accentuated that an intermediate option of reorganization was not possible. *“So, the re-organization came to change the system completely”* (Manuel Flury).

The re-organization of SDC has strengthened the one line hierarchy. Contrary to the previous situation when the thematic work was the responsibility of the F-Domain, the operational divisions are now in charge as well for this work. *Now, the regional divisions are the ones who decide about thematic priorities and the activities of the networks* (Manuel Flury).

What has been achieved so far?

The networks themselves in their specific fields of work already provide and reflect a lot of learnings. For instance, concepts are developed and brought into SDC’s business processes. There are many learning instances at the operational level, but SDC as a learning organization is not systematically learning yet. SDC as an organization has not yet provided the incentives required to give the networks the appropriate standing in institutional terms. Thus, the networks cannot yet influence SDC and improve its learning capacities in a systematic way. Programmes and policies are developed in the line units. Experiences on specific themes or issues should be exchanged freely and non-hierarchically on the level of networks. *But they don’t yet do so. The network members first have to learn how to interact freely in a situation where the superiors may set other priorities* (Manuel Flury).

Did the thematic work move closer to the operations now that operational staff from headquarters and the COOFs is members of the thematic networks?

Peter Tschumi: Moving closer to the operations from our point of view: yes and no. In the Financial Sector Development network only a few people from SDC headquarter and COOFs participate. We have 60 members from external partners. So, we didn’t actually come closer to the SDC operations. Also for the Vocational Skills Development network, I think we didn’t move closer to SDC staff either. We don’t have enough resources. Only concerning the Private Sector Development network we are closer to the operations now. In recent years, the approaches we provide like ‘making markets work for the poor (M4P)’ has become a mainstreaming approach within SDC.

Kuno Schläfli: I think we should look at this issue from the angle of ‘how useful is the work produced for our operations?’ and not necessarily ‘how close it is to operations?’

What activities exist already within the network?

Peter Tschumi: We have a lot of planned activities and products for 2010, e.g. learning and exchange events, learning cycles, trainings, establishing an international M4P network, result measuring, promotion of good practices and standards, case studies, impact studies, etc.

Kuno Schläfli: There are three types of activities: 1) Short exchange of information: short consultations and exchange of documents, processes, terms of reference, etc.; quick questions and answers via email. This activity is spontaneous. You cannot rely on it, sometimes you get an answer and sometimes you don't. 2) Contributions to steps in the Programme Cycle Management (PCM): this can be planned and the competences or experiences of network members can be integrated. 3) Learning topics: 8 or 9 specific learning topics have been identified and group members contribute according to their interest. These are planned and organized work streams which should produce concrete products over the year, like good practices, guidelines, etc. This is the centre piece of the network activity.

Within the process of re-organization, the focal points with the support of their networks inherited the functions of the F-Domain. But the focal point as well as the network members have not sufficient capacity to work thematically compared to the former thematic divisions. *"Now there is much more coordination involved"* (Kuno Schläfli). In the daily work the questions of resource allocation, investment of time and energy are important. Learning and exchange of experience within networks will always be in competition to the daily operational tasks and if the network members do not provide the required percentage of their working time for network activities they run the risk that working for the network becomes second or third priority. *Changing the structure does not necessarily improve the quality of knowledge management* (Peter Tschumi). The situation today requires a lot of energy of the focal points to find their position in

the new organization which is constantly changing. *It's an up and down concerning tasks and responsibilities, resources and competences, because a lot is unclear* (Kuno Schläfli).

But despite the adverse conditions concerning the lack of resources and institutional support, there were some rewarding activities during the phase of setting up the networks. Some highlights for Kuno Schläfli were the creation of an enabling environment with the network members, moderating the core group, integrating people into the whole dynamic, motivating people to work on concrete projects and to enter into a network exchange, and especially preparing the face-to-face meeting in India (on www.sdc-decentralization.net you find information about the DLG face-to-face meeting).

What are the main challenges for 2010?

Peter Tschumi: Looking at the quality of the processes within the network is decisive. If not, at the end of the day there is a lot of dynamics but no good products. This is one of the main challenges: to come up with useful products. In general, knowledge management is not bound to the structures, it depends much more on how people interact and communicate with the people inside and outside the network.

Kuno Schläfli: It is now, that the hard work has to be done. It is a critical time, because if you don't manage to produce interesting and useful outputs during 2010, the network will be dead.

SDC's thematic networks (present status)

Network	Responsible Unit	Focal Point	Shareweb	Status Shareweb	Wiki	D-Group
Climate, Energy & Environment	Climate Change	Ueli Mauderli	N	offline, work in progres	N	SDCNetworkClimateChangeEnvironment@d2.dgroups.org
Conflicts & Human Rights	South Asia	Christina Hoyos	N	none	N	N
Decentralization and Local Governance	Western Balkans	Kuno Schläfli	www.sdc-decentralization.net	online	Y	SDCDecentralisation1@dgroups.org
Political economics & development	East Asia	Walter Hofer	www.sdcpoliticaconomy.ch	offline	N	N
Education	West Africa	Fabienne Lagier	www.sdc-education.net	online	N	N
Employment & Income	Latin America	Peter Tschumi	www.sdc-employment-income.ch	online	Y	sdcmemploymentandincome@d2.dgroups.org
Health	East & Southern Africa	Andreas Loebell & Arthur Marx	N	none	N	sdchealthnetwork@dgroups.org
Migration & Development	Migration	Barbara Affolter	N	none	N	N (planning)
Rural Development	Food security	Sabine Schenk	www.sdc-ruraldevelopment.ch	online (existing before)	N	sdcruraldev@d2.dgroups.org
Water	Water	Thomas Zeller	www.sdc-water.ch	offline	N	N
Multilateral	Global Institutions	Susanne Zumstein				sdcmultilateral@dgroups.org
MfDR	Global Institutions	Hanspeter Wyss	N	work in progres	N	SDCMultilateralMFDR@dgroups.org
IFI	Global Institutions	Susanne Zumstein	N	none	N	SDCMultilateralIFI@dgroups.org
UN	Global Institutions	Marie Marchand	N	none	N	SDCMultilateralUN@dgroups.org
Quality Assurance	Quality Assurance	Adrian Maître	N	none	N	N
Disaster Risk Reduction	Risks & Security	Franz Stössel	www.riskandsafetynet.ch	online (existing before)	N	sdcdrr@dgroups.org
Sicherheit Feld	Sicherheit EDA	Peter Lehmann	N	none	N	N
Financial Management	Financial Services	Lilian Bürgi	N	none	N	sdcmfinance@dgroups.org
Gender	RC, Chief of Staff	Annemarie Sancar	www.sdc-gender-development.ch	online	N	sdcmgender@dgroups.org
Aid Effectiveness	RC, Chief of Staff	Philippe Besson	www.sdc-aid-effectiveness.ch	work in progres	N	aideffectiveness@d2.dgroups.org

Outlook and how to address the challenges ahead

The networks have not yet realized the stage where they can be characterized as real exchange and learning networks. *“It will need more time and more institutional incentives to give the networks the institutional standing”* (Manuel Flury). The networks will contribute to develop SDC’s organizational culture so that the institution itself and the collaborators understand that learning and improving can be done through participating and working in networks. *“The vision is that basically all SDC collaborators are part of a network”* (Manuel Flury). They may do their operational job in their organization unit and at the same time exchange experiences within the networks building up their competence with peers. Based on that principle SDC could develop into a learning organization that is based on knowledge sharing between peers. *I hope that SDC will keep this principle, despite difficult experiences at the early stages of networking and formalizing these networks* (Manuel Flury).

Within the next years, more thematic responsibilities, thematic support, and management competence will be on the level of the COOFs. Competent people

What would you have done in a different matter using your experience today?

Kuno Schläfli: As a focal point I have very little resources, no clear competences, but a mandate which is very ambitious and with a lot of expectations. Not having formal authority, I have to mobilize and motivate people in a lateral way across hierarchies. If I could start again, I would expand my boundaries as far as I can. I would not wait until my space is limited by hierarchy, but occupy it immediately as far as possible.

Peter Tschumi: I would have interpreted instructions from the management with more flexibility.

Where does your network stand in about 3 years?

Kuno Schläfli: Concerning the network: If we can continue the way we started, the network will grow up to 100 persons and there will be more interaction with thematic networks outside SDC. I think we will connect our network to other networks and we will interact between the whole network and regional network dynamics in West Africa or Eastern and Southern Africa. I believe we will have interesting products if we manage to get the necessary resources from inside SDC. This is a challenge but I believe in it.

Concerning the focal point: I’m quite confident that the focal points will be regrouped in a new department or division, in a new organizational unit. This will happen because the integration into the divisions bears constraints for SDC-wide impact. It limits our energy and our sphere of action; it superimposes us additional hierarchies that are not needed. To develop all the potential of a focal point we should be somewhere combined together again.

Peter Tschumi: If I look at the facts and figures I would be inclined to think that it will go in the same direction as Kuno says.

from different COOFs and from headquarters have to be better linked. *“There is an institutional need to continue working within thematic networks, networks of country directors and people who are in charge of a support function in the COOFs”* (Manuel Flury).

Within organizational restructuring there is always potential for improvement. One problem is, that the heads of the COOFs who decide on the resource allocation of their NPOs have to believe in something that has not yet proven its usefulness for their work. *The top management who chose this organizational learning option should signal the line management and the heads of the COOFs that learning is important and everyone has to invest time in it. There isn’t a clear organizational commitment at SDC* (Kuno Schläfli). Another important point is the internal communication from the management. If collaborators in the field don’t know whether a document is official or not, they get confused. *Many of them say, as long as you are reorganizing at the head office, we do not mind and we do not move* (Peter Tschumi).