

Product Description 4: Networking with SME Development Partner Organizations

Summary - Basic features - Benefits, Impact, Scope, Problems -
Implementation process - Costs - References - Contact

1. Summary

Creating a Business Development Services (BDS) Network. The SME/BDS network will be a forum of experience exchange, coordination and policy dialogue between public and private institutions and entrepreneurs.

2. Basic features

Target groups

- Entrepreneurs, business associations and chambers of commerce.
- Public and private business support institutions.

Principles:

- Avoid heavily formalised structure of Network: Do not create an over-formalised network. Structures with President, Secretary, Board of directors, Membership fees etc. are not absolutely necessary for efficient networking. Main purpose of networking is experience exchange and coordination. For this, periodical meetings e.g. 3-monthly meetings are sufficient and should not be formalised by rules and regulations.
- Establishing a Network by self-initiative of its members: Network should evolve and should not be imposed. Efficient networks usually start with a handful of organizations that are able to develop common purpose and vision and carrying out concrete BDS activities on the ground in order to avoid a *talk show*. As the network develops, others who share the vision will join.
- Networking should be based on a clear definition of common interest or purpose. This is fundamental to a sustainable networking. It is important to clarify the interests and expectations of each member and identify common grounds on which the networking could be based.
- Offering concrete benefits to members: A network will not be sustainable if it is not offering concrete benefits to its members. Therefore the network activity should focus on what it can do for its members in facilitating their work on the ground, building their capacities, lobbying on their behalf or publicizing their work, organizing trainings, discussion workshops etc.
- The network should be able to coordinate activities of its members instead of developing parallel capacities that compete with its members, e.g. avoid boosted network budget for common activities – always the slowest one will decide on the speed; coordinate existing activities of members.

Network Management:

- One of the local partner organizations with the necessary capacity should take over the network management: organizing the periodical meetings, sending program purpose and invitation, moderating the network meeting and writing the minutes.
- The project which took the initiative should assist the local network management structure, supervising the punctual invitation, assisting for the proposal of the issues to be discussed and assisting for moderation and documentation.
- Transport and participation should not be financed by the project and should be taken over by each of the participants. Conference room, coffee and lunch break may be financed.
- For specific issues workgroups may be organized, meet in the interim of the plenum meetings and finally present their results to the next meeting.
- An Email list of all members should be available. In the interim of the network meetings a virtual network activity can be undertaken by regular Email based news to the members and interested public.
- Non-members should also be regularly informed about the network activities. Non-members today may be members tomorrow.

Example of the Ethiopian BDS Network:

- Half-yearly meetings with about 30 private and public partner organisations:
 - One day meetings with deciders and discussion of organizational, strategy and work problems, discussion of strategies and policies. Invitation of resource persons, e.g. from the tax authority or microfinance network.

- One day meetings with teamleaders of BDS facilitators discussing concrete implementation problems of the 6-month BDS cycle approach, problems in situation analysis, linkage with training centers, transport problems etc.

Between the meetings contact is held by email newsletters and visits on the ground.

The Ethiopian BDS Website www.bds-ethiopia.net is the information and learning platform of the Net.

3. Benefits, impact, scope - problems

A smooth network has a lot of advantages: experience exchange, coordination, collaboration, trainings through network work groups. Also it makes publicity for its network members. If network is really *smooth*, that means avoiding heavy organizational structures, then you will collect a lot of advantages without collecting a lot of problems.

4. Implementation process

- Before networking start BDS activities on the ground on enterprises level (business trainings and business counselling activities). At least you should have a core group of competent partner organizations in order to develop the capacity of newcomers.
 - Look for *working* partner institutions and not for "*conference professionals*".
 - Then - after BDS activities on the ground have been initiated - start networking with some partner organizations already implementing BDS.
 - Look for a partner organization taking over network management.
 - For specific issues create work groups that bring their results to the next plenum.
 - For each of the meetings you should identify one or two specific issues of common interest to discuss. Invite resource persons for competent discussion.
 - Do not over formalize networks by asking for budgets, membership fees and regulations. You will get less money and more problems!
 - Say no, if others start to propose heavy network structures with budget, general secretary, business plan and official rules and regulations.
-

5. Costs

Avoid costs like big network budget. Start with smooth network structures. Quarterly or half yearly network meetings for experience exchange. All participants pay their transport and accommodation costs by themselves. Small budget for meeting room, coffee and lunch breaks. Do not agree with proposal creating heavy network structures. Those who make heavy network structure proposals - should pay.

6. References

Implementation experiences with the Ethiopian BDS Network can be transferred to any country where working BDS organizations wish to organize experience exchange.

- More on networking see www.bds-forum.net/networking.htm
 - Example of BDS network see Ethiopian BDS Network webpage www.bds-ethiopia.net
-

7. Contact

Dieter Gagel, freelance consultant, mail@gagel.net.