

Ten Dimensions of Network Strengthening: A Summary of Lessons from Health Rights Advocates in Guatemala, Mexico, and the Philippines

Maintaining and strengthening networks of volunteers is central to the health rights advocacy work of four civil society organizations in Guatemala (Centro de Estudios para la Equidad y Gobernanza en los Sistemas de Salud), Mexico (Asesoría, Capacitación y Asistencia en Salud A.C. and Observatorio de Mortalidad Materna en México), and the Philippines (Government-Watch) who have collaborated to improve reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent healthcare (RMNCAH) services for marginalized communities.



A REDC-Salud volunteer working at an information table shares a pamphlet with a community member.

Credit: CEGSS

Their experience shows that networks of volunteers which represent marginalized populations and have the skills to engage with public authorities at different levels of government can confront the political and policy issues necessary to improve RMNCAH care. Conversations with the leaders of these organizations identified ten dimensions of network strengthening, summarized here and captured in full in an Accountability Note.

1. **Strengthening core organizations that convene and support the network.** Staff who support volunteers and complete technical tasks (e.g. legal and communications) can strengthen volunteer networks, as can internal strategy work, planning, and record keeping.
2. **Recruiting and (re)engaging volunteers.** Enlisting new volunteers or motivating former volunteers to get involved again is essential to maintaining and expanding a volunteer network. Volunteers are involved only if they have been convinced to participate. Increasing volunteer numbers and geographic coverage are both important aspects of recruitment.
3. **Building capacity and activating volunteers.** Training volunteers so that they have the knowledge and skills needed to be effective and enabling them to do work that is interesting and meaningful to them are both essential to volunteer networks.
4. **Developing network cohesion and trust.** Trusting relationships between network members and supporting organizations are built in many ways, helping both to keep people involved and supporting them to overcome challenges.
5. **Strengthening networks' relationships with community members.** Outreach in communities and delivering information or services that are valued by community members (such as accompaniment and translation at medical appointments or information about rights to health) motivates volunteers, increases demand for the network's services, and builds trust. This in turn is a sign that the network has operated ethically in the communities.

6. **Increasing network visibility and public recognition.**

Communications, events, and alliances can help the public learn about what the network does. The ability to attract positive attention is also a sign that the network has reached a certain level of formalization.

7. **Building alliances with counterpart organizations.** Strategic alliances with other organized social constituencies can be central to advocacy work and volunteer recruitment. Alliances with established organizations can also build credibility and opportunities for coalition building. The existence of strategic partnerships is a sign that networks have built legitimacy and a good reputation.

8. **Developing relationships with government.** Building relationships with public officials is a sign that a network is sophisticated and organized in its advocacy. Strong working relationships with collaborative government officials can help a network meet its goals, and can also help manage less sympathetic officials.

9. **Broadening the frame of problems and solutions.** If volunteers can build knowledge and skills in new issue areas, they become stronger individually and collectively. Feeling supported and motivated enough to take on new areas of work is also a sign that their network is strong.



A youth volunteer practices interviewing other young people about their experiences with public health services.

Credit: G-Watch



Youth health promoters holding the puppets they built with ACASAC to create educational videos on sensitive topics for other indigenous youth in their native languages.

Credit: ACASAC

10. **Sustaining networks over time.** There are three aspects of sustainability: where the network resources come from, where the human capacity is built, and how the network expands. Balancing the complex dynamics of each of these aspects—and in particular, balancing the tension between network growth that the capacity to support it adequately—it is key to strengthening networks that are sustainable over time. Supporting organizations considering expansion opportunities must also consider how they will support volunteers over the long term.

Read the full Accountability Note to learn more



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