

The Communication for Development (C4D) Network

By Jackie Davies¹

Introduction

'So how do you do it?', I am sometimes asked. 'How do you create a successful social network?' And I am not sure what to say, because I wonder myself. Although there is no magic, no formula, I can share here a few principles and lessons we have learnt in the process of starting up and developing the Communication for Development Network since 2007. When I say 'we', I mean initially myself, a C4D consultant and graduate of Malmö University's Master's in Communication for Development' who acts as Manager and 'Jack of all Trades', and Nicola, a former Oxfam communication officer who is C4D's Editor. Gradually, as the Network developed, this core team came to be supported by a number of volunteers who lead international and regional groups. The 'we' has also expanded to include occasional part time staff, and as of this year an Advisory Board. That is the core team, but 'we' also refers to the Network as a whole, i.e. all the people who have joined it since it began – and that is upwards of 1400 people worldwide at this point.

I initiated the Network with some fellow C4D consultants in 2007 as an informal lunch group based in London. A number of us were just starting out as freelancers and feeling somewhat isolated; others were still in 'proper jobs' at organisations such as Panos, the BBC World Service Trust (now BBC Media Action), OneWorld.net and Internews, to name a few; and some belonged to academia.

What is the Network?

The C4D Network is a social network, meeting online and offline, for people who are engaged in communication for development. Meeting and talking is the catalyst of the network's impact. When people meet -live and in real time- whether at a face to face meeting or in an online webinar², at a project or book launch or in online discussions, we learn about each other, uncover the connections and commonalities, and can start to identify potential mutual benefits. At present, the Network spans two websites: a [public site](#), and a [members' site](#).

The C4D Network has spawned job offers (at meetings over coffee, in some cases) and provided many consultancy and training leads. It has led to organisational collaborations and freelance partnerships, and enabled propitious brainstorming about events and projects. The starting point for the C4D Network was not delivery, as would be the case for a project or a service. The basis was purely networking - meeting and talking. This influenced everything - the organic nature of our growth, the slightly patchy technical developments of the Network's online platform, and the volunteer-driven basis of its management.

There is also an element of lobbying or awareness-raising in what we do, as we seek to have an influence on colleagues working with international development. Our standpoint is that communication for development is significant and worth understanding more fully. Because the Network is not a development project, we don't have targets, we are not tied to a logframe and mandatory outputs, and we don't report to a donor or a boss. Definitely, as we hit critical mass we want to encourage sponsorship of specific aspects of the network, such as

special events, but this is different from being a donor-funded initiative. We are simply a group of people meeting and talking about the practice of communication for development, because we believe in it and want to understand it better, do it better, and further its progress.

The Network's principles

The Network has three core principles - openness, dedication and sociability. These principles underpin all developments, help to establish the tenor and atmosphere of the community, and may go some way towards explaining our success. We are *open* in terms of being unrestricted and generous in sharing information and knowledge with colleagues and willing to consider new learning and original ideas. We are *dedicated* in terms of our seriousness about advancing the field of 'communication for development', and committed to developing as a community of peers. We are *social* in terms of welcoming and communicative to one another and to guests, and in the sense of being active in our online social network and face to face meet-ups and events.

Lessons learnt

Since the Network's inception in 2007 we have learnt some useful lessons. These include the importance of having a vision as well as flexibility.

We have learnt that there is great strength in combining online with in person networking. Online networking is amazingly useful for breaking through isolation, enabling connections and sustaining a platform for discussions and sharing at a distance; but it the combination of online and in person that I find really works - and that is what the C4D Network is all about: blended networking. In the same way as educators are exploring the potentials of 'blended learning', we are testing and exploring how the C4D Network can 'blend' the different possibilities enabled by face to face and computer-mediated interaction to do what we want to do - and that is simply to come together and talk.

In person, we get together and talk. We meet where we live and work, we see each other and talk and exchange and gossip and learn. We have monthly lunches, special events and international meet ups around the world - from Papua New Guinea to Bangkok, Nairobi to New York and many others cities where C4D enthusiasts want to meet up and talk. Online, we meet through our community portal - posting messages and sharing information about jobs and other opportunities, be them conference papers, research calls, new publications and resources, upcoming events and member requests; we also have online groups that support the regional and national communities, and groups around particular interests - such as for example research communication and uptake.

We have learnt to be responsive to the natural evolution of the network, and the importance of keeping up technically and strategically but also topically with all the developments in the C4D sector itself. Online social networks have a life of their own – and they are constantly evolving, so it is important to be responsive to these changes. For us, the evolution has been in both the use of technology and in our strategies to deal with content.

Technically, we have grown from an email group to an online social network. Our evolution in terms of content has been grounded in a greater understanding of social networking as we

have moved along – mainly through trial and error. Now that user-generated content is the norm, there are so many options for people to express themselves that it is important to decide what options to go with. We have had discussion forums which seem to work to an extent, and we have had blogs which have not worked -perhaps because we were not sufficiently clear about helping members figure out how they could contribute, and we confused matters by having an editorial blog overlap with a member opinion blog. We have learnt that guidelines need to be clearly delineated. We have had photo and video sharing and that has proved popular, but most of all we hear from members that the content they like best is the information sharing, and the ability to browse and connect with other members.

That happened more as an accident than by design, since it was not part of our earlier manifestation – but as more people joined, it seemed obvious that we would all like to know who each other, and this aspect has led developments for the past few years. It has enabled the international groups to emerge organically, and the online platform is abuzz with colleagues connecting up, often after a number of years of not being in contact but having worked together previously.

Interestingly, the Network both connects and reconnects people. Examples abound. The Zimbabwe meet-up led to consultants acting as referrals for each other, and now exploring joint work. A member notes the impact is often intangible, but definitely there - leading in her case to new jobs using her Francophone skills, and a connection with a C4D humanitarian specialist who acted as a reviewer for a paper she wrote. Members working for a large donor were able to record interviews with presenters and fellow members at a Network event on mobile telephony and development that were then used for an internal learning day on digital technology. A C4D expert with a strong background in Nigeria advised a member from an organization working against child marriage towards developing programming in another country.

We have also learnt to be flexible and not too precious about testing things and letting them go if they are not working out. Strategically we have grown organically - step by step. There was no roadmap -just a bunch of people who wanted to meet and talk. This remains the central aim, and what happens as a result of this networking is serendipitous - it is more up to the course of events than to strategic design. This is not to say that we are without strategy – far from it, we have always been very strong on identifying useful developments for the Network. We have always wanted blended networking and input from C4D champions around the world. We have always had a vision for C4Ders to get together wherever they are to enjoy what we have enjoyed as a Network in the UK – the camaraderie, the useful information-sharing, the sense of being part of a development sector that is growing and thriving. We have also, I hope, been consistently clear about our communication for development focus.

However, the design of activities and new content areas has been responsive to the growth of the network (or it is the other way around, i.e. that growth responds to the new ideas that have been implemented?) We do indeed like to shift things along, and we do so more and more - matchmaking and sharing key information and resources, training and brokering opportunities for members. But ultimately it's up to each individual to run with these opportunities and connections. It has been useful for those involved, and we hope that has been the case for the broader C4D and mainstream development communities as well.

While in the developing body of literature about social networking there are various models about growth, there is also a fair degree of consensus that there are recognizable phases in the process: the initial kick-off phase, a middle phase, and then a maturing phase (for a useful outline of the stages of growth for social networks, see the Online Community Guide, by FeverBee: <http://bit.ly/171kyfi>). Few social networks keep growing exponentially; they are communities of interest, after all, and not campaigns, so they have natural finite point. What the finite point in terms of numbers will be for our C4D community, only time will tell.

Some social networks get a little lost and loose in focus as they grow, and that is understandable, as an internet platform will struggle to reflect too many interests – those interests can fragment, and efforts to stay focused may or may not work. For the Network, it is important to keep remembering our originating focus - *'the main thing is the main thing'*, and for us that main thing is C4D.

Most importantly, we have learnt the importance of taking care – of everyone in the network, of the content, of the atmosphere. ‘Community managers’ is the term used for people who nurture social networks, but I prefer to use ‘caretakers’, because that is what we are – temporary guardians of something that is organic and self-generating. Our role is to take care of it. We take care of the people who join, of tone and atmosphere, and of content. And we also think a lot about policies, managing growth, and ensuring a good stable network. We don’t want to ‘manage’ it like a project and mould it to our agenda, and we don’t want to ‘be the boss’. In fact, we have an exit plan for transferring coordination and governance of the Network to its members through the development of member committees and a board within the next eighteen months. We do not want founder’s syndrome to slip in.

A key aspect of taking care of the Network is the hosting. Whether it is done by me at our monthly UK meetings, or by champion members who volunteer to host international groups and meet-ups, careful hosting is one of the C4D Network’s major strengths. I like to think of it as similar to a cocktail party where the host sets the tone. Whether it is stiff and uncomfortable, or warm and open, one can feel it immediately. Are people having a good time? Are the different types of people being looked after - the shy, the life and soul, the loud, the quiet? Is everyone feeling at ease, are we being introduced to each other, is there sufficient movement so that no one is left in the corner (figuratively or actually)? It helps when there are refreshments and food and music and busyness -and this is why in the UK we always have met up in jolly places, and international groups are following suit. Being in interesting, creative spaces helps a social network to be attractive by extension. We once had our monthly meet-up in an office - it was horrible. No one wants awkward silences and not knowing what to do with oneself, so teacups and nibbles, trips to the cafe and general sociability are key.

To date, we have been pretty fleet of foot and pared down in terms of necessary finance, and have run the Network as a voluntary endeavour. This works when about the scale implies networking a few hundred friends and colleagues, but as the network grew - jumping to over a thousand members in 2012 and now nearing fifteen hundred - the pressures did start to mount. It's natural to not want to let people down, and it's important to make new members feel noticed and welcome - but it is one crazy cocktail party when you are rushing around trying to make sure such an amount of people is having a good and productive time.

At this point, it becomes necessary to introduce new hosts - and this had been the case with the growth of regional and national groups and the many meet-ups that have been happening in the past year. Each of these is led by a member who has volunteered to host, and hats off to them - they have identified venues, contacted other members and then waited to see who turns up. Sometimes it has been a crowd and sometimes just one or two people, but the Network is not a numbers game - the point is viral social networking. Once you know that there are others in your city that have similar interests in C4D as you do, and once you know it is easy to just meet up and talk, then this is bound to happen more and more. Where the conditions are right, where people want to interact, the Network will grow.

We have learnt the importance of having a fairly strong editorial hand and protections. Another aspect of taking care has been our focus on a strong editorial presence and strong protections. Because a focused network is a strong network, we go to considerable lengths to make sure that the people who are part of it are actually engaged in communication for development.

We are not vetting for seniority. In fact, we consciously want to encourage seasoned C4D professionals to interact with C4D students and people moving into the sector -often from media or from other development areas, and also a lot of communication managers in NGOs wanting to engage with communications more as a tool for development rather than purely as an external relations function. We are vetting for engagement in C4D. In the case of those who are a bit interested but not greatly engaged, we encourage them to be on our email list as 'friends of the network'. In this way we do not lose people who are curious, but at the same time we ensure that the actual social network is clearly made of C4D practitioners. We don't always get this right, and there is a need to 'clean' the database, as there are some early members who may not be as invested as others, but we are getting there.

Evaluations of online communities - in development practice and elsewhere - are starting to document what is surely common sense - and that is that a human hand is vital: strong coordination, strong moderation and strong hosting are essential. Since the beginning the C4D Network has had an Editor. This role is taken on by Nicola or myself, but no matter who is on call, the role itself is consistent - there is a C4D Network Editor, and the Editorial voice is clear. We spend quite a bit of time on shaping this voice - we take care that we are inclusive, warm, professional and also friendly. We don't always get it right, but we are mindful of the importance of tone.

We have learnt to focus on 'the good guys' and not get too wound-up about negative occurrences. When you coordinate a network of over a thousand people, there are going to be the occasional problems and tempers. Some people can be surprisingly uninhibited in using email to berate others for broken links or slow responses to messages, and an array of other failings may occur. We sometimes defend ourselves and remind people that we are not full-time or even part-time C4D Network employees but just volunteer networkers, but more often we just let it be. Some very good advice from [Ning](#) in the early days was not to focus on the challenging members and to focus instead on the wonderful ones – and I can attest that that is a productive (or at the very least pleasant) policy.

We have learnt that a social network works when it is based on individuals rather than organisations, as people move around.

One of the key differences between a social network and other sorts of networks is that a social network is mainly individually based. We have found this to be important, in that it is individual people who network with each other – not organisations. Many come from the 20 or so core C4D organisations, but others come from organisations that one might not predict, and many are freelancers or academics. We move around - some people in the network are now on to their third or fourth job in the sector since we started, and many of us have worked with each other in different contexts – sometimes as Chiefs, sometimes as Indians. This fluidity is characteristic of our professional sector, and also of consulting.

We have learnt that people will do what they want to do, you can't force it, and that a social network will only succeed if the people involved are motivated and the network is responding to needs.

The most important lesson we've learnt is that a social network by definition is 'us', and even if it sounds glib, the collective aspect of the endeavour is everything. Sure an initiator can kick things off and sustain a network with ideas -that clearly is important. But if others aren't interested or benefiting themselves, then it is not going to work. The C4D Network meets a need. It's a motivated community, a community of interest if you will. We have a mantra - 'we are all grown-ups' - and that is in my view the bottom line for all social networks: they work when people engage. You can't drag a person to a social network and force them to post. Social networking has to be self-generating and independent. Understanding this has freed us from quite a bit of angst - we don't worry too much about the future. We are all in this together and it will succeed and grow or it won't, depending on whether people want to be part of it and whether they find it useful.

The future

As we reflect on where we are now, we are beginning to see the potential of the network to lead some C4D research and development (R&D), because what a great asset it is to have more than a thousand C4D champions focusing on a specific matter –be it identifying our innovations for example 'crowd sourcing' our case studies more effectively, or testing approaches and methods.

At present we have 1.402 participants signed up to the Network, from all continents and over 50 countries. We have meet-ups happening in the US, UK, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangkok, Papua New Guinea, Australia... and there will be many more. (Check out the interactive map to get a sense of the C4D Network's global reach: <http://bit.ly/1eYYJOq>.)

We have evolved technologically from an email group, to an e-newsletter, to a customised website, to an online social network (using the *Ning* low-cost platform), to being fully mobile optimised, and now we are about to launch a new version of our online presence. I learnt while working at OneWorld.net, which is a civil society portal, that in the tech world things change frequently – and that frequent change is not something to be scared of, but rather an opportunity to play with more and better toys. However, evolution does take time, and it does take money.

This is why in 2013 we have brought in paid membership and the Advisory Board. Because the Network is no longer a small bunch of chums: it is an authoritative international network of professionals, and it needs adequate support. Managing such a change is hard, but because we consider it to be part of the lifecycle and growth of social networks, we are going with it. In principle, we can see that in the next few years there will be C4D network chapters in many regions, operating much as we have in the UK, but with their own member committees and perspectives; and we will all be coming together online as a social network that is 'greater than the sum of our parts', and standing tall as an increasingly useful gathering point, information-sharing venue and advocacy community - showing that communication for development is most definitely a field of development that needs to be taken seriously.

¹ Jackie Davies is the founder of the Communication for Development Network. A graduate of Malmö's ComDev Master's programme, she specialized in public service programming and community radio after studying at the University of Cape Town. She has worked at the BBC World Service and the Institute for Democracy in South Africa. Starting in 2000, she focused on ICTs, developing online radio platforms and partnerships at OneWorld.net across Africa and the Balkans. Since 2005 she has been an independent consultant specialising in communication for development, training and evaluation. E-mail: Jackie.davies@c4d.org

² The training webinars have had a positive impact in a number of ways: by bringing members from around the world together in a 'cyber room' to learn, by sparking connections, and by providing a hands-on experience of how the tech can be used and carried over into other areas of work.