HOW EFFICIENT IS NETWORKING?

Speech held on occasion of EFA/ISPA Conference “Cultural Networks at Work” - Workshop “How efficient is networking?”
Brussels, June 8th 2007

by Ugo Bacchella
How efficient is networking?

Brussels, June 8th Cultural Networks at work Workshop How efficient is networking?
Aims: Propose a set of criteria to measure the results from cultural networking as well discuss solutions for improving work / efficiency / productivity
Opening remarks by Ugo Bacchella, President, Fondazione Fitzcarraldo, Torino (Italy)

1. The challenge of evaluating networking
Evaluating the performances of cultural networking and networks and getting to convincing results is a tough challenge, whatever approach is adopted able. Analysis networks is a great trouble for researchers, despite different interpretational approaches, analysis instruments and theories have been developed for understanding social network.
The network of relationships explodes into thousands of real or potential interactions, links and interconnections, making complex a pertinent and comprehensive representation of the system. Accordingly it is difficult the identification of appropriate tools for guiding those who work within the network and for evaluation for those who have the problem of understanding the partial or global performance of the system.
As far as the cultural networks are concerned, the complex nature of networks, particularly when active internationally, adds up to the difficulty of rendering the whole range of values of arts and culture without sticking to the mere economic arguments.
The nature and activities carried out by cultural networks today do not substantially differ from all other social networks:
- Learning and capacity building environment
- Provision of services
- Advocacy.
- Management / facilitating unit

Cultural networks, as have been developed first and mainly in Europe in the last 30 years, do much more than that and represent a very diverse and lively environment. Their role and function in nurturing the cultural cooperation have been underated by governments as well as by private donors. The most significant support to their expansion - eventhough financially modest - came from the Council of Europe and only later on from the European Commission mostly trough the cultural programmes. But their growth and unvaluable relevance is not appreciated to the extent it deserves. There are recent signs that some already modest structural support to networks is weakening. There is in my opinion is a matter of legitimacy. The practice of transnational networking and the cultural networks themselves are not valued as the best form of semistructured environment for facilitating exchange and cooperation. The responsibility for this lies mainly on the selfreferential attitude largely prevailing in the field of arts and culture and in the resulting inadequacy and inability in unveiling the good of cultural networking.

2. Where is the good of networking?
Networking – and related multilateral project set up and management- is one of the most effective learning exercise for capacity building and professional development. It nurtures attitudes:
* to placing the people and not structures at the center of the stage
* to dealing with complexity and diversity
* to “mettre en valeur” your own know how and experiences
to implement developmental strategies through project building rather than selling ready-made products
* to working by projects and objectives

Networking and particularly crosscultural projects and exchanges lead to more relevant intangible legacies than concrete outcomes.

“The core business is not the manufacture of products or the provision of services, but social learning, communication and the making of meaning.” (Engel, 1993 about networking in general)

Arts networking rather than an infallible supplier of cultural products, is - at its best - a medium - long term process largely dependent on the direction, the journey and the way of moving through the network of each member.

This is what makes measuring the results of networking a tough business, unless you downscale and impoverish the phenomenon.

3. Building legitimacy
A full recognition of the above mentioned nature of networking has obvious implications not only on how to design and study networking.

Far more important the complex nature of this social phenomenon needs to be accepted by public policy makers and private funders as a precondition for setting up a new system of relationships between the networks and their stakeholders.

This is a matter of legitimacy.

The practice of transnational networking and the cultural networks themselves, are not in fact valued as the most effective form of semistructured environment for facilitating transnational exchange and cooperation.

A responsibility for this lies mainly on the selfreferential attitude largely prevailing in the field of arts and culture and in the resulting inadequacy and inability in unveiling the good of cultural networking, providing sound evidence of their role and function to governments at all levels, to the foundations and to civil society and to the general public.

4. How to increase efficiency and credibility
Besides a lack of awareness, there are also undoubtedly behaviours and practices within many cultural networks that raise questions among public and private funders.

The activity of a number of established networks consist mainly in nice annual meeting places, ruled by almost the same nomenklatura since too many years, and do not reflect the dynamics of neither represent any longer the emerging driving forces within their sector. Some infact loose impetus and legitimacy, membership decline and narrow.

Some other duplicate and overlap activities and subsequently waste resources in absurd competition.

Within Europe, ther is not a common umbrella organization really representing the whole arts and culture, the performing arts, the heritage and other cultural activities as well as the arts organizations, the professionals and the practitioners all together.

Networks may dislike it and probably do not even consider this a priority. This is wrong.

In times of declining public budgets and increasing competition for supporting other than the arts, proving in a convincing way your raison d’etre is vital.

This is particularly true for most of networks whose membership include mostly dinosaurs, eg those large and long established monodiscipline institutions.

Public funders, id est supranational and intergovernmental organizations, national governments and their national cultural institutes, as well regional local authorities have become cautious in allocating increasingly scarce financial resources.

They do want to understand and evaluate.
The challenging task for cultural networking is accepting this ground, increasing efficiency without altering and then spoiling the delicate, distinctive nature of these environments.

5. What can we do?
Some final hints to increase the knowledge and the awareness of what networking is as well as to improve their efficiency as well as to enhance their governance and decision making process:
1) some comparative analyses capable of identifying and conceptualizing best practices and methodologies for cooperation as well as shedding light on a number of networks simultaneously in order to reveal their structural differences and similarities;
2) more focus on the key specific issues and activities, instead of pretending to cover a broad range of fields and services;
3) a radical transparency approach in, with every decision making process public and accessible on line to the membership and to general public;
4) a determined opening to next generations through the rotation of the board members as well as the executives
5) increasing interaction, interconnection and cooperation among networks to avoid duplications and overlapping, to share instead of to compete whenever possible:
   a) establishing common resource centres responsible for information, documentation and dissemination
   b) setting up projects and activities for professional development (courses, staff exchange etc)
   c) adopting joint advocacy initiatives
   d) enhancing technological infrastructures and tools

Ugo Bacchella