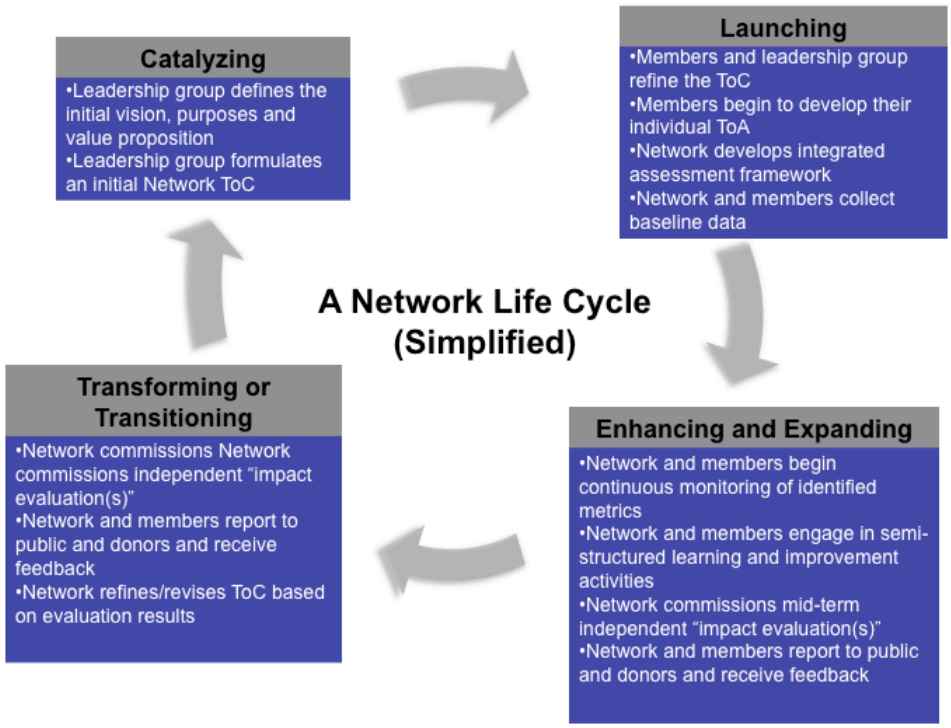
Network Life Cycle and Impact Planning, Assessment, Reporting and Learning Systems

Innovations for Scaling Impact

WWW.SCALINGIMPACT.NET

Networks are dynamic and often pass through a series of phases as they evolve (see diagram below). Based on our work with networks, we have identified a four-phase network life cycle described below. The life cycle of a network can be used as a guide to help organize the implementation of a network Impact Planning, Assessment, Reporting and Learning (IPARL) system. Specific IPARL components and activities can be matched to various stages within the life cycle. Once a network has determined the stage they currently fall into it becomes clear which IPARL components and activities they should be focusing on.



Network Life Cycle Phases and IPARL components

1. **Catalyzing:** Initial network theory of change developed
2. **Launching:** Network theory of change revised. Initial member theories of action developed.
3. **Enhancing and Expanding:** Integrated assessment framework developed and implemented including conducting a mid-term evaluation. Stakeholder, public and donor reporting processes developed and first round of reporting and learning activities.
4. **Transforming or Transitioning:** Second round of evaluation and reporting. Continuous improvement and learning activities used to help revise original network theory of change

Network IPARL Systems

Networks and networked initiatives must increase their vibrancy and efficiency in a world of constrained resources and demands for accountability.

This requires the development of a system for impact(s) planning, assessment, reporting and learning (IPARL). An IPARL system can help to measure and improve network effectiveness by:

- Assessing network achievements in real time for course correction and adaptation
- Identifying key conditions, causal and influence mechanisms for network effectiveness
- Drawing lessons learned from evaluation results
- Improving strategic planning of ongoing efforts

Other iScale Network Resources Include (for Example):

- Theory of Change and Strategy Development Tools
- Network Mapping
- Models for Network Governance and Administration
- Option for Network Membership
- Network Communication Platforms

Innovations for Scaling Impact

iScale

Catalyzing

This phase involves developing the foundations for launching the network. It includes an initial mapping of the issues/problem and key stakeholders to gain an understanding of the current landscape, gaps and potential opportunities. Key stakeholders identified through the initial mapping and a leadership group capable of addressing the identified issue/problem are then convened to help define the vision, purpose and value of the network. These initial conversations also include an explicit discussion of network communication needs, general philosophy, incentives, goals and first attempts at simple knowledge management practices. The leadership group should develop an initial and basic theory of change.

Launching

The network's broad purpose, as defined during the catalyzing phase, is then sharpened and operationalized in the subsequent launching phase. Here members and leadership should work together to review and revise the initial network theory of change developed in the previous phase. Members can then begin to explicate their individual, but linked, theories of action. The network theory of change starts with the overall goal(s) or vision of the network described in the catalyzing phase and then work backwards to describe how the network as a whole plans to achieve the goal(s). Working backwards requires participants to identify the intermediate outcomes that are necessary for achieving the vision and general set of strategies for reaching these outcomes. This general frame becomes the network theory of change. Individual members indicate which strategies they will focus on and describe how their actions will help bring about the intermediate outcomes in detail.

Enhancing and Expanding

This phase focuses on expanding and enhancing network structures developed during the initial launch phase. Networks in this phase should focus on developing their integrated assessment framework. Indicators should be identified at each level of a member's theory of action (activities, outputs, outcomes and intermediate outcomes). Network leadership should be in charge of compiling and aggregating individual member data and tracking overall network progress towards the intermediate outcomes identified by the network. Once indicators have been decided upon, the first step for each member will be to collect a baseline. A baseline creates a starting point and describes the landscape before the launch of the network. Data on the current status of each of the outputs and outcomes members select to monitor needs to be collected at the start of the network so that subsequent data can be compared to the initial starting point and progress charted. A table can be used to collect initial base line data and chart progress for each indicator.

Periodic reflection on network progress and lessons learned is important if the network is to course correct in real time. These reflective sessions may result in publically distributable reports, changes to monitoring procedures or strategy refinement.

Transforming

At this point the network will have a robust set of monitoring data to examine, and a formal assessment of the network to assess network vibrancy, effectiveness, communication tools/practices etc…is useful. The evaluation should feed into any strategic rethinking of the network vision, purposes and values. This creates an opportunity for the network to refine/redefine its vision, purpose and value. These changes may then be reflected/recorded in a revised network theory of change and corresponding member theories of action.

Network evaluations focused around a theory of change are more useful than simplistic counterfactual-focused evaluations. If there was a single step in the causal chain, that is, the network does something (x) and that is intended to result in something (y), then asking the counterfactual question would likely yield powerful information. However, as mentioned above, networks are extremely complex and complicated initiatives that have multiple steps in the causal chain. These characteristics make the value of counterfactuals minimal at best. For the counterfactual question to generate useful information/learnings in a network, we have to ask the counterfactual at every step in the chain across the theory of change. Richness and detail about a network's contribution is gained by asking the counterfactual question at each step in the theory of change.