

The Power of Networks

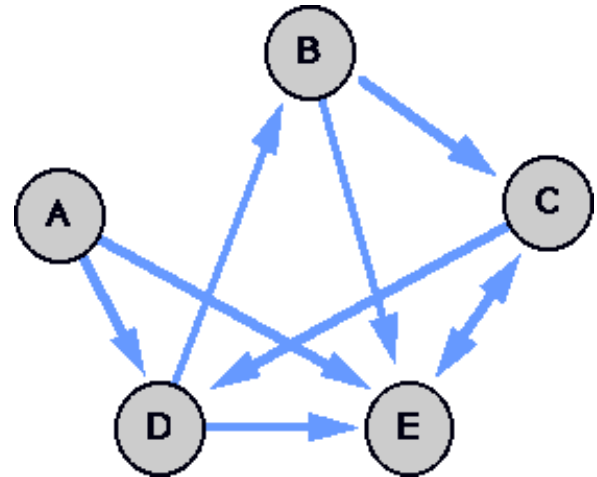
A New Opportunity for Improving Global Health

A network perspective offers a new opportunity for improving global health. As we use monitoring and evaluation to guide the allocation of global health resources, social network analysis (SNA) is the tool that will unlock these new opportunities. SNA provides information that can't be obtained by traditional evaluation methods in which people or organizations (such as government agencies and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs) are considered in isolation of each other. SNA, on the other hand, examines the relationships between organizations. And because people with chronic conditions such as HIV infection or diabetes require many services over time, the quality of their care and health can be affected by coordination among the organizations providing their services.

In MEASURE Evaluation, we apply a network perspective to evaluating the complex task of providing health services to populations. We see that in some populations, there is an overabundance of programs providing services, with many of them working in isolation of the others; or even worse, in competition with them. In other communities the services are scarce, but still the organizations are not working together. Whether in places of program abundance or scarcity, there are opportunities to reap benefits for the population served by enabling organizations to communicate and coordinate with each other. This is especially important as international investments in health decline or shift to other priorities.

A network perspective can be a means to achieve at least four highly valued outcomes:

1. Increased efficiency and impact: When organizations or their donors don't coordinate their efforts, the population they serve can lack some services and have too much of others. But when



they coordinate even partially, gaps can be filled and redundancies avoided. More and better care can be provided without more funding. The result can be more cost-effective health care and better health for the population served.

2. Capacity-building: There is no better teacher than someone who has traveled the path you are on. Local organizations face challenges that are particular to their context. Expert advice is often generic, not adapted to the local context and not proven in the local conditions. But stories of success and failure shared between organizations in the same context are relevant, practical and proven. As they listen to each other, organizations can learn new approaches and enhance their capacities.

3. Innovation: Sharing experiences can also result in new ideas. Often, a neighboring discipline has figured out an approach to a challenge faced by yours. Adapting that approach to a new discipline is one form of innovation. When organizations talk to each other, they can see new possibilities.

4. Advocacy: A single organization seldom has a voice powerful enough to influence policies set by the government. But when organizations join their voices, they increase their volume and their power. By doing so, they stand the chance of influencing policies that affect them all, or getting the government to respond to an unaddressed problem. When organizations talk with each other, they can identify challenges presented by their shared context and join their efforts to bring about change.

MEASURE EVALUATION'S ROLE

MEASURE Evaluation seeks improved health outcomes by enabling policies and programs to be informed with high quality data. To harness the power of networks to improve health outcomes, MEASURE Evaluation can develop tools and approaches for assessing interactions between healthcare agencies and organizations.

Examples of organizational network questions are:

- Who is in the network?
- What are the respective organizations doing? What population(s) do they serve?
- What are the service gaps and redundancies?
- In what ways and with whom are the organizations coordinating?
- What opportunities are there for the organizations to learn from each other and to identify potential innovations?
- What opportunities are there to collaborate and advocate for change in their shared context?

Answers to these questions will help organizations and their donors to allocate resources well, strengthen their capacity to deliver services, identify missed opportunities and new possibilities, and influence the context in which they operate.

APPLICATIONS

We have identified networks of organizations addressing HIV care and family planning in two sections of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We are now using the network information to improve the integration of services between these two areas that often work in isolation of each other.

In Ethiopia, the HIV epidemic is in the general population. We are applying a network perspective in a focal epidemic in Bangkok, Thailand. We will be identifying the organizations providing services to men who have sex with men (MSM) in two Bangkok neighborhoods where MSM gather socially. We will include organizations providing health services as well as those enabling men to meet each other. The network perspective will help the organizations see ways they can work together to protect the health of MSM.

Potential future applications of a network perspective include (1) the provision and use of services in dense urban slums, (2), capacity-building through peer-to-peer teaching between organizations, and (3) coordination among donors in what they fund in particular populations.