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**STRONGER
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Get to Know Your Network

**Types, Functions
& Stages of Development**

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The aim of the Stronger Roots program is to increase the resilience of civil society organizations and their networks, strengthen their social capital, and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate. The program is implemented by the Open Society Fund Prague, the NIOK Foundation, the Open Society Foundation Bratislava, and Glopolis.

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Introduction to
Civil Society
Networks

What You Will Learn?

What **functions** do networks provide to their members and to society at large?

What makes civil society networks valuable for driving **social change**?

What are **the main categories** that help describe **different types of networks**?

How can **categorization** support evaluation, maintaining, repairing, or further development of networks?

How can networks evolve through **stages of development** and what are their **levels of activity**?

The Value of Networks

Try to remember an example of a successful **systemic change** from a context you are familiar with - educational reform, establishment of a protected environmental area, ensuring a social service with your municipality. Whatever achievement it was it probably took units of years, tens of core people, hundreds of meetings, discussions and practical steps. The original good intention needed to be much more deeply analyzed and understood, presented differently or even substantially reshaped in the process. Most likely, various aspects of the issue needed to be dissected and treated separately before coming together into what might be called a solution. Various obstacles needed to be overcome by unplanned ways or involving unfamiliar **people, groups or institutions**. The core actors of change had to move about inside a particular ecosystem and used or created a network of stakeholders around the issue.

Networks - platforms, umbrellas, sectoral associations, coalitions, working groups, communities of practice etc. are forms of collective action. They represent an increasingly important format of civil society organizing. Complex challenges in today's interconnected world require a higher extent as well as quality of **interaction and cooperation**. Siloed efforts fall short of not only tackling larger, critical and multifaceted issues such as social inequality and environmental sustainability, self-contained, flat, one-way endeavors tend to fail to deliver even smaller scale, local changes. Moreover, networks are considered an equally key tool in governance, business or academic endeavors.

Unlike traditional hierarchical structures that rely on top-down control and rigid chains of command, networks excel through **decentralization, adaptability, and the dynamic flow of information**. Many government and corporate environments limit what individual people within the structure know, whom they can consult and what action they can take. Their people are not necessarily aligned with the goals of the structure.

Networks foster collaboration among individuals and organizations with shared objectives, often enabling faster decision-making, innovation, and **collective problem-solving**. Networks can be resilient if they **distribute power and responsibility**, allowing them to adapt quickly to changes or disruptions. This structure is particularly effective in complex, fast-moving environments of today's world.

Clearly, not all CSO networks function that way and fulfill this potential. Many can be rather formal, top-down or semi-active. Internal discontent or passivity of members may paralyze collective action. One or a few members can dominate the rest. The governance may be so complicated and decision-making processes so slow that agility is severely impaired. In some cases (for example, in highly conflictual situations), collaborative network structures may not be the most appropriate option at all.

Categorizations of Networks

Networks can be very different. They vary in a number of factors, such as **purpose** (e.g., advocacy, research, support), **structure** (tight or loose, centralized or decentralized leadership), **scope** (narrower or larger themes), **membership** (individual, organizational or even networks of networks) or **size** (local to global). For example, a small, local mutual support network may prioritize informal interactions among key individuals, while a large, international policy network requires robust governance structures that transparently organizes hundreds of national CSOs.

Before evaluating, fixing or developing a network, one needs to understand at least what type of network it is, what functions it fulfills, and at what stage it is.

For instance, community-based networks often focus on grassroots engagement and local impact, emphasizing inclusivity and responsiveness to community needs. Advocacy networks might prioritize effectiveness in influencing policy and mobilizing stakeholders. For service delivery networks, assessments typically center on operational efficiency, resource allocation, and quality of services provided. Networks focused on knowledge sharing require dissemination and utilization of information, while those aimed at collaboration might zero in on the strength of partnerships and collective problem-solving. Across **developmental stages**, early-phases often emphasize design and feasibility, while mature networks focus on outcomes, long-term impact and sustainability.

Each civil society network is unique, bringing its own value added and facing its own challenges. Yet, for the sake of better understanding and further working with a network it is useful to characterize it by common categories. **Each dimension provides insight into how the network operates, engages stakeholders, and achieves its goals.** Categorization allows you to draw from a more relevant set of experiences and tools of similar networks. A number of various angles can be used to describe a network. Here we present the very basic ones, already slightly clustered.

Scope and Size

These categories describe the **geographic reach and membership count** of the network.

- **Local or Subnational/Regional** – Focused on a specific community or region (e.g., neighborhood advocacy groups).
- **Nation-wide** – Operating within a single country, often engaging national stakeholders.
- **Supranational/Regional** – Spanning multiple countries within a geographic region (e.g., Central and Eastern Europe, Visegrad Four etc.).
- **International/Global** – Engaging members and issues across continents with a worldwide reach.

Based on the number of members, **we can distinguish between small, mid-sized, or large networks**. Although it often does, the network's size may not correspond to the geographical coverage. There can be small, informal international networks as well as large national networks. But, overall, **the size determines capacities and aspirations of the network, and usually also how formalized the network needs to be**.

Membership Composition

This category describes the **type and structure of participants** in the network.

- **Individual-based** – Comprised primarily of people (e.g., activists, experts, community members).
- **Organization-based** – Made up of civil society organizations (CSOs).
- **Multi-stakeholder** – Includes a mix of individuals, CSOs, academics, private sector, public institutions, etc.
- **Networks of Networks** – Meta-networks that connect existing networks under a broader umbrella.

This is especially important for the kind of **governance and structure**. Decision-making mechanisms of individual-based networks are quite different from those of organization-based networks. In addition one kind of actor (**homogenous** network) is usually more easily organized than various kinds of stakeholders (**heterogenous** network). But that in turn very much depends also on the purpose of the network (see below).

Structure, Leadership and Openness

These categories describe the **governance and coordination mechanisms** of the network.

- **Centralized** – A formal body (e.g., secretariat or coordination office) manages operations and strategy.
- **Core Group-led** – A few highly active members or a steering committee drive the network's activities and decisions.
- **Decentralized (Member-led)** – Leadership and initiatives emerge organically from members with minimal centralized control.

Consensus-based networks tend to have more inclusive decision-making, active participation and representation of all members; greater accountability and legitimacy, but may be less coordinated, efficient and effective than centralized networks.

- **Formalized** (usually with legal status) – Operates with clear governance rules, membership criteria, and coordination mechanisms, more focused and coherent.
- **Informal/Loose** – Less structured, often emerging around shared goals or campaigns or just practice or a concept, with fluid participation, but looser membership identity and mutual relationship.

A key variable in working with networks is also their **openness**, which also determines how much effort needs to be put in producing collective action:

- **Open network** – anyone who shares the network's purpose and wants to contribute is welcome
- **Closed network** – tighter control and criteria for membership

Tip: Use [Worksheet 1](#) at the end of this material to get a quick picture of your network type.

Purpose

This category describes the **focus** of the network.

- **Community-Based Networks:** Focused on local issues and grassroots initiatives.
- **Thematic Networks:** Centered around specific topics like human rights, environmental protection, or education.
- **Service Delivery Networks:** Providing essential services such as healthcare, education, or disaster relief.

Networks may also differ depending on whether they focus more on the number of members or on the quality of their engagement:

- **Focus on quantity of membership:** Usually larger, more diverse group of members; greater representativeness; greater chance to gather resources but also entails risks of being superficial or full of internal tensions.
- **Focus on quality of membership:** Easier to build connections between a limited number of members and agree on a joint action but it may not be representative or legitimate enough.

The type is important because **different purposes and scales of operation require different approaches on the side of the network.** A small, local or informal network will have neither capacity nor need to establish sophisticated governance structure or undertake robust evaluations. Advocacy networks are usually more driven by and focused on external impact in their particular theme while service delivery networks will be more preoccupied with members' capacities and functional environment.

Main Functions for Members

This categorization helps you describe what the network is supposed to deliver to its members. There are two useful ways to describe a network's "functions," and they complement each other:

1. **Functions as core activities (what we do / how we work):** the recurring processes the network performs.
2. **Functions as value for members (what members get / why it matters):** the benefits members experience as a result.

These two lenses describe the same reality from different angles. A single activity can create several kinds of value for members, (for example, convening can build trust, increase collaboration, and strengthen policy influence). Likewise, the same kind of value for members can be produced through different activities (for example, capacity building can be supported by filtering knowledge, facilitation, convening, or investment).

What We Do (functions perceived as core activities)

- **Filter (curate & make accessible):** The network identifies what is most relevant (information, opportunities, contacts) and makes it easier for members to use. This reduces overwhelm and saves time by turning scattered inputs into practical, usable resources.
Examples: Monthly policy digests, shared library with tagging, “starter pack” for new members (templates, contacts, evidence).
- **Amplify (make a message louder & clearer):** The network strengthens members’ collective voice by shaping shared messages and communicating them consistently to outsiders. This can include public positioning, narrative framing, or coordinated outreach that is more credible than isolated messages.
Examples: Joint statements, coordinated posting and media pitching, agreed narrative, core messages, FAQs, press kit.
- **Convene (bring people together):** The network brings the right people into the same space—members, allies, institutions, funders, experts—to build alignment and move work forward. Convening is not just “meeting”; it is creating purposeful interaction that leads to decisions, coordination, or new relationships.
Examples: Quarterly multi-stakeholder roundtable, thematic working groups, coordination calls.
- **Build community (create belonging and shared norms):** The network invests in relationships, identity, and shared ways of working—so membership feels meaningful and cooperation becomes easier over time. This is where trust, mutual support, and a “we” culture are intentionally nurtured.
Examples: Onboarding procedures, buddy systems, annual retreats, member spotlight series (“how we did it”).
- **Invest / provide (resources and support):** The network provides tangible support that members can use—money, shared services, tools, staff capacity, or access to expertise. This reduces barriers to action and helps smaller or stretched organizations participate on a more equal footing.
Examples: Micro-grants for member-led initiatives, shared services (legal helpdesk, comms support, pooled translation/design), rapid response fund.
- **Facilitate (learning, coordination, and efficiency):** The network helps members work smarter together—by improving coordination, enabling peer learning, and reducing duplication. Facilitation turns participation into progress by helping groups make decisions, learn from experience, and connect the right people to the right tasks.
Examples: After-action reviews (“what worked / didn’t / next time”), sharing learnings, matchmaking directory (“who can help with X?”), coordination tools (shared calendar, workspace).

Networks usually fulfill more than one function. An advocacy network will need to filter incoming information and amplify outgoing messages, spend time in internal facilitation among members and external convening of stakeholders. It will usually result in some kind of community being created, which also generates resources for the network.

What Members Get (functions perceived as value for members)

- **Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building:** Members strengthen their skills, approaches, and organizational capacity because learning is faster and more practical through the network. The network helps members access useful know-how, adapt good practice, and avoid reinventing the wheel.
Example: A regional health NGO network organizes workshops to train smaller member organizations on effective community outreach strategies.
- **Social Capital and Cohesion:** Members build trust, relationships, and a sense of belonging that makes collaboration easier and safer. People are more willing to ask for help, share sensitive challenges, and coordinate because the network reduces isolation and increases mutual confidence.
Example: An interfaith alliance brings together religious groups to build mutual trust and promote peace in a divided community.
- **Collaboration and Risk Sharing:** Members do things together that would be difficult alone—joint projects, shared services, coordinated action—and they share the costs, workload, and exposure (financial, reputational, political, or legal). The network reduces individual vulnerability by distributing responsibility and visibility across multiple organisations.
Example: A network of legal aid organizations jointly leads strategic litigation, sharing cases, expertise, public communication, and costs so that legal, financial, and political risks are carried collectively rather than borne by a single organization.
- **Advocacy and (Sectoral) Policy Influence:** Members gain a stronger, clearer voice to shape policies and decisions that affect their work or communities. The network increases credibility and reach through aligned positions, coordinated engagement, and consistent messaging to institutions, media, and the public.
Example: A global education network lobbies governments to increase funding for girls' education, influencing national policy agendas.
- **Institutional Accountability and (Systemic) Oversight:** Members collectively monitor institutions and systems, promote transparency, and push for correction when rules or commitments are not followed. This can range from evidence-based scrutiny and public reporting to coordinated complaints or watchdog actions, depending on the network's mandate and capacity.
Example: A democratic transparency network monitors election processes and publicly reports irregularities to uphold democratic standards.

Tip: Use [Worksheet 2](#) at the end of this material to reflect on which of these five main functions your network currently fulfills most and least and what would be the right balance.

To quite an extent, the functions that the network fulfills for its members are related to its **stage of development** and can be viewed as possible **phases of growing network aspirations**. Typically, a network has catalyzed around a topical social problem, for instance foster care. It is launched to exchange experiences and good practices among several NGOs that help find families for children in an orphanage and offer them extracurricular activities for personal development in different locations. As the network expands membership and geographical coverage, members increasingly focus on the underlying, systemic challenges. They not only build capacities and ensure resources for their local work but also began to advocate and possibly further watchdog an implementation of a policy change on the national level (e.g. deinstitutionalization of care).

Network Duration, Development (Life Cycle) and Activity Level

Last but not least, there is the time perspective. In terms of **duration**, the main distinction can be made between those networks created as:

- **Temporary alignment** to achieve a specific, limited goal. That may take months or years to complete, but the network is usually disbanded upon completion.
Example: A coalition protesting a real estate development project adverse to their community.
- **Long-term structures** to generate multiple and/or ongoing types of social impact. Such networks tend to focus on more complex, evolving challenges that require creative solutions spanning various actors or fields of practice.
Example: An umbrella of NGOs defending LGBTQ+ rights promoting tolerant narratives in the public space, producing educational materials and advocating for a range of policy requirements.

Of course, some of the temporary coalitions may turn into more permanent structures if they are successful and up to larger challenges. As already suggested above, networks of all kinds typically evolve through certain general phases or **life cycle stages**:

- **Catalyzing**: Defining purpose and forming vision and goals
- **Designing and Launching**: Building processes and infrastructure, setting up governance
- **Implementing**: Deploying the design, operationalizing and testing the set-up
- **Enhancing/Expanding**: Improving performance, strengthening operations and scaling activities
- **Transforming/Transitioning**: Adapting to new contexts, reviewing the network for continued relevance, effectiveness, sustainability or concluding efforts.

Tip: Use [Worksheet 3](#) at the end of this material to assess in which phase your network is.

However, not all networks undergo the full spectrum of stages. Its development may cease or freeze or unwind. Therefore, we can also describe a network in terms of **activity level**:

- **Active** – regular events, communication, joint projects, high member participation.
- **Seasonal** – operates in cycles (e.g., around campaigns, annual meetings), with limited activity otherwise.
- **Low** – sporadic communication, few joint activities, only a formal existence.
- **Dormant** – the network formally exists but carries out practically no activities.
- **Declining** – the network is effectively disbanding, with activities coming to an end.

Recognizing these stages helps align strategies with developmental needs. The stages typically correspond to dominant activities and processes. At each stage, adjustments are made to meet evolving needs and ensure alignment with overarching objectives.

Conclusion:

Why Categorization Matters?

This is not aspiring to be a complete classification system. Other perspectives are possible while not all categories might be relevant for your network. The different dimensions are neither mutually exclusive, nor consistent. Rather, they can **complement or build on each other**.

The point of this introduction is to provide some **basic categories and structure for how to describe and assess your network** before you proceed to look for solutions to specific tasks such as evaluation of network's functioning or the engagement of its members (see our other materials).

Although, we try to recommend approaches, concepts and tools to the broadest possible range of networks, this material is slanted towards the core group of **StrongerRoots grantees**. These are usually larger, organization-based, nationwide networks in advanced stages of their life cycle, often with strong advocacy focus, which tend to be formalized and long-term.

Questions for Your Reflection

- How would you currently describe your network? What do you think are the most relevant categories and why? Are there any dimensions of your network that you have not considered yet?
- What are the key functions of your network? How is the everyday activity distributed among the key functions? Which of them does your network fulfill most strongly and which are weaker?
- At what stage of life cycle is your network and how would you assess its level of activity? What was the historical path along which your network developed?
- Are there any characteristics that you would like to change or evolve? Why?

Worksheets

Use these worksheets for group reflections within your network. Suitable occasions might include interactive sessions at the general assembly, a retreat, strategic planning sessions, or other member, leadership, or working group meetings. The questions for reflection and worksheets can help you not only describe your network but also see some patterns.

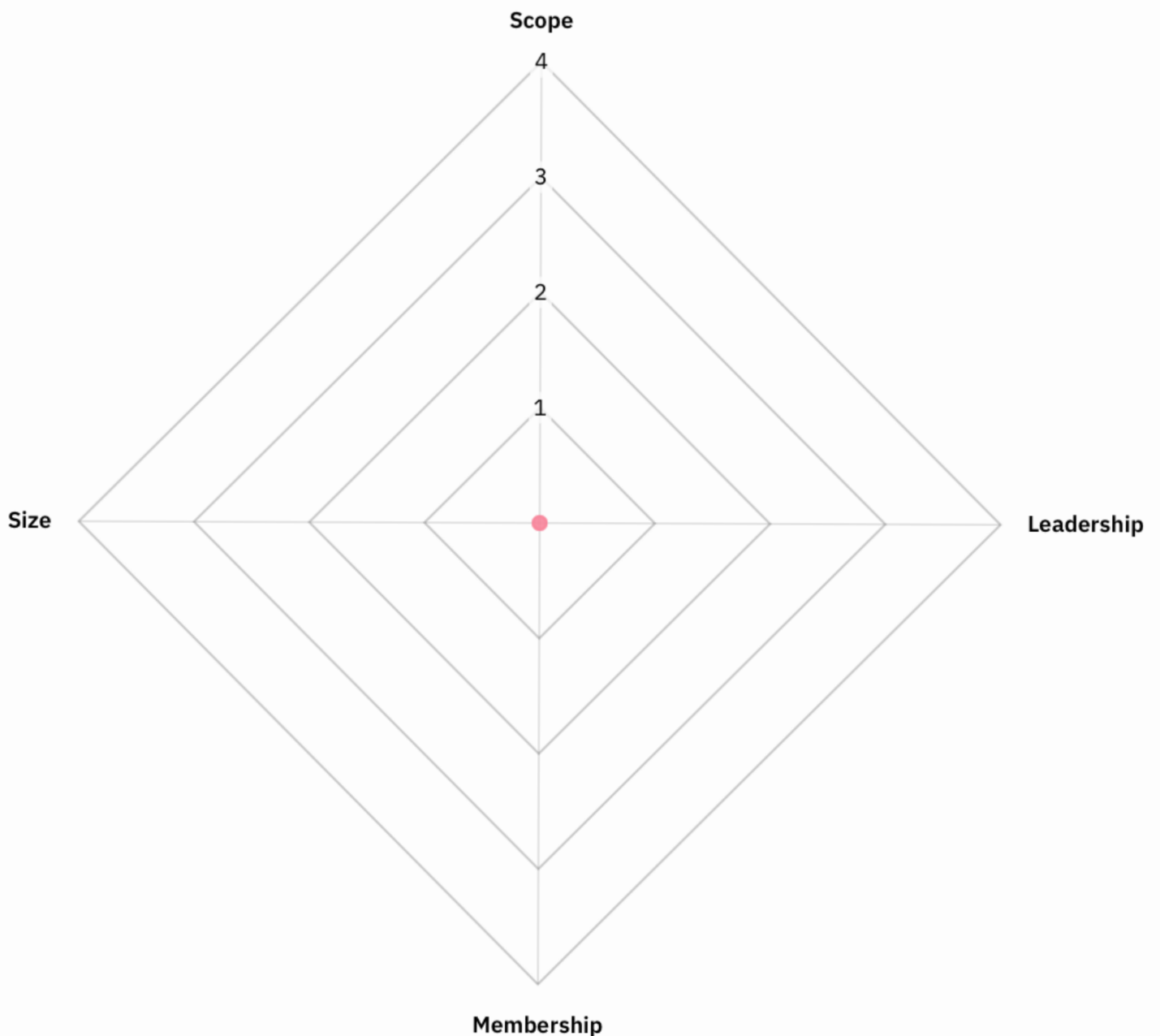
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1. What type of network are you?

This exercise helps you get a quick picture of what your network looks like and creates a basis for reflection.

Instructions:

Use this chart with four axes: **Size, Scope, Membership, and Leadership.**



For each axis, read the short descriptions and decide which level (1–4) best reflects the current reality of your network:

- **Size (number of members):** 1. small (<10), 2. mid-size (10–30), 3. larger (30–70), 4. big (>70)
- **Scope (geographical):** 1. local, 2. national, 3. supranational (but within a certain region), 4. international/global
- **Membership (composition):** 1. individuals, 2. CSOs, 3. multi-stakeholder (CSOs/academia + government and/or business), 4. networks of networks
- **Leadership (centralization):** 1. completely decentralized, only loose coordination among members, 2. local/regional hubs/thematic/working groups, 3. core group/executive board/team, 4. secretariat-led

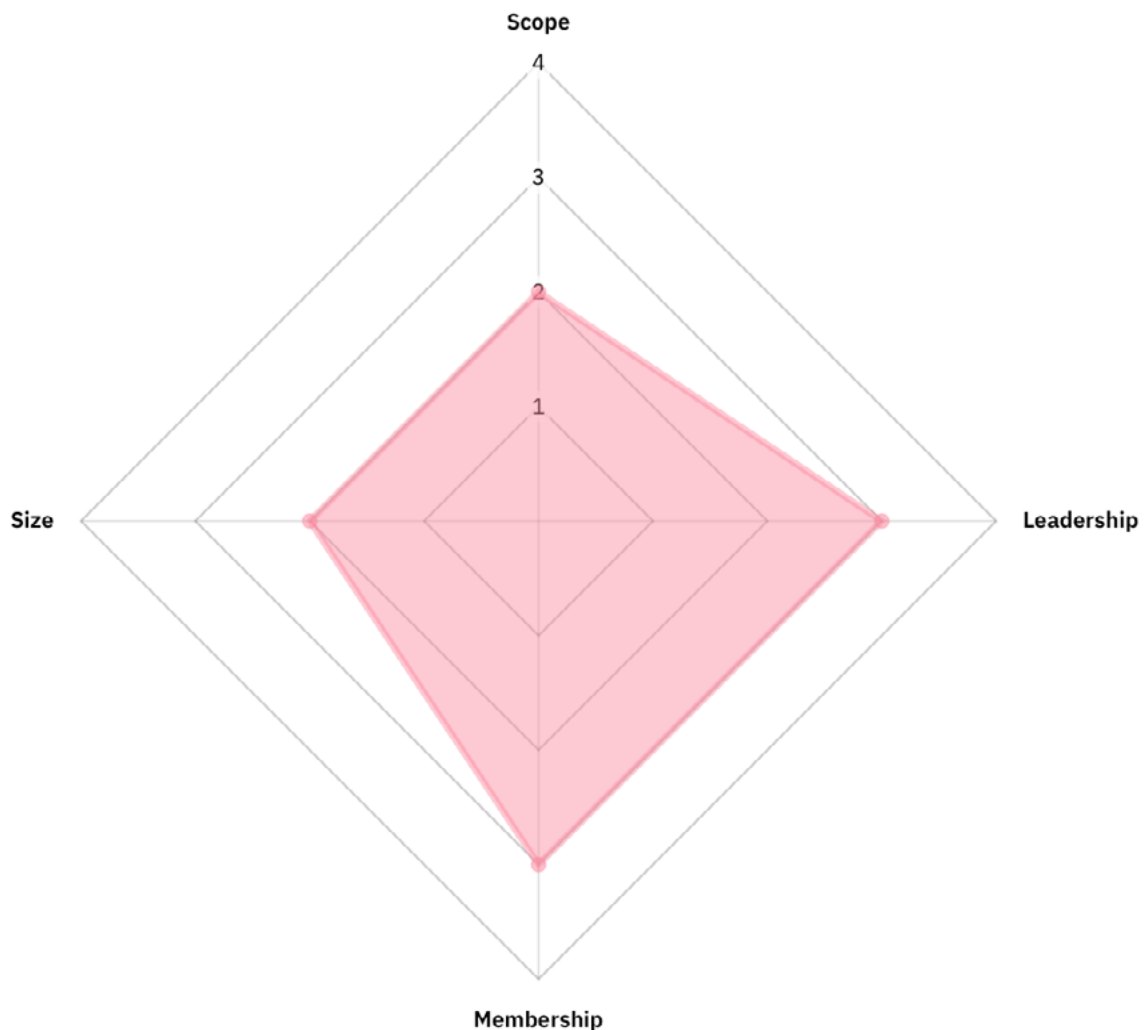
Mark that point on the chart. Once you have marked all four categories, connect the points to form the shape. Take a moment to **look at the overall picture and think about what stands out.**

Questions for discussion:

- What would be the right balance between those categories?
E. g. What would be the right balance between leadership centralization and the size of the network or membership composition?
- Given the size or scope of your network can you engage other potential members and how?
- How open vs. closed or how informal vs. formalized is your network?

Example:

A coalition focused on improving access to inclusive education brings together organizations working with children with disabilities, parent groups, and a few expert centers. It was initially formed in one region, but over two years it attracted members from across the country and began engaging the Ministry of Education.



How they score the four axes:

- **Size** (number of members): **2 – mid-size (10–30)**: The network has 22 member organizations. This size feels manageable for meaningful participation, but it already requires clearer coordination when it comes to decision-making and keeping everyone informed.
- **Scope** (geographical): **2 – national**: Members are spread across the country and the network engages national-level decision makers. Even though some activities happen regionally, the network's agenda (policy change, national standards, funding rules) is at the national level.

- **Membership** (composition): **3 – multi-stakeholder**: The core of the network is CSOs and expert organizations, but there are also a few local government allies (e.g., municipal education departments) and occasional involvement of teachers' associations. A cross-sectoral composition increases coordination demands, as it requires taking into account the different roles, mandates, and expectations of individual members.
- **Leadership** (centralization): **3 – core group**: A core group of 6 organizations meets monthly and prepares proposals, agendas, and draft statements. Decisions are still validated by the wider membership, but the core group does the heavy lifting, so the network doesn't stall. There is no full-time secretariat—coordination is shared and partly voluntary.

What the shape suggests (possible discussion points):

- With **national scope** and **multi-stakeholder membership**, a **mid-size network** often benefits from slightly more structure than it had at the start. They discuss whether their current **"3" leadership** is enough, or whether a small part-time coordinator (moving towards "4") would reduce overload and improve reliability.
- Given their **national scope**, they ask: Which tasks should stay voluntary, and which require dedicated capacity?
- They also reflect on balance: if they aim to grow from 22 to 40+ **members** (size moving from 2 to 3), they will likely need either **hubs/working groups** (2) or a **light secretariat** (4) to keep participation meaningful.

Resulting possible next step:

They agree to keep size stable for six months, strengthen working groups, and explore funding or a part-time coordinator to prevent the core group from becoming the bottleneck.

2. Which functions does your network fulfill?

This exercise will help you reflect on which of the five main functions your network currently fulfills most and least, what would be the right balance, and where its strengths and gaps lie.

Instructions:

Start by reviewing the five functions shown in the spider diagram:

- **Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building:** Members strengthen their skills, approaches, and organizational capacity because learning is faster and more practical through the network. The network helps members access useful know-how, adapt good practice, and avoid reinventing the wheel.
- **Social Capital and Cohesion:** Members build trust, relationships, and a sense of belonging that makes collaboration easier and safer. People are more willing to ask for help, share sensitive challenges, and coordinate because the network reduces isolation and increases mutual confidence.
- **Collaboration and Risk Sharing:** Members do things together that would be difficult alone—joint projects, shared services, coordinated action — and they share the costs, workload, and exposure (financial, reputational, political, or legal). The network reduces individual vulnerability by distributing responsibility and visibility across multiple organizations.
- **Advocacy and (Sectoral) Policy Influence:** Members gain a stronger, clearer voice to shape policies and decisions that affect their work or communities. The network increases credibility and reach through aligned positions, coordinated engagement, and consistent messaging to institutions, media, and the public.
- **Institutional Accountability and (Systemic) Oversight:** Members collectively monitor institutions and systems, promote transparency, and push for correction when rules or commitments are not followed. This can range from evidence-based scrutiny and public reporting to coordinated complaints or watchdog actions, depending on the network's mandate and capacity.

Agree what each function looks like in practice for your network. To build a shared understanding, briefly discuss:

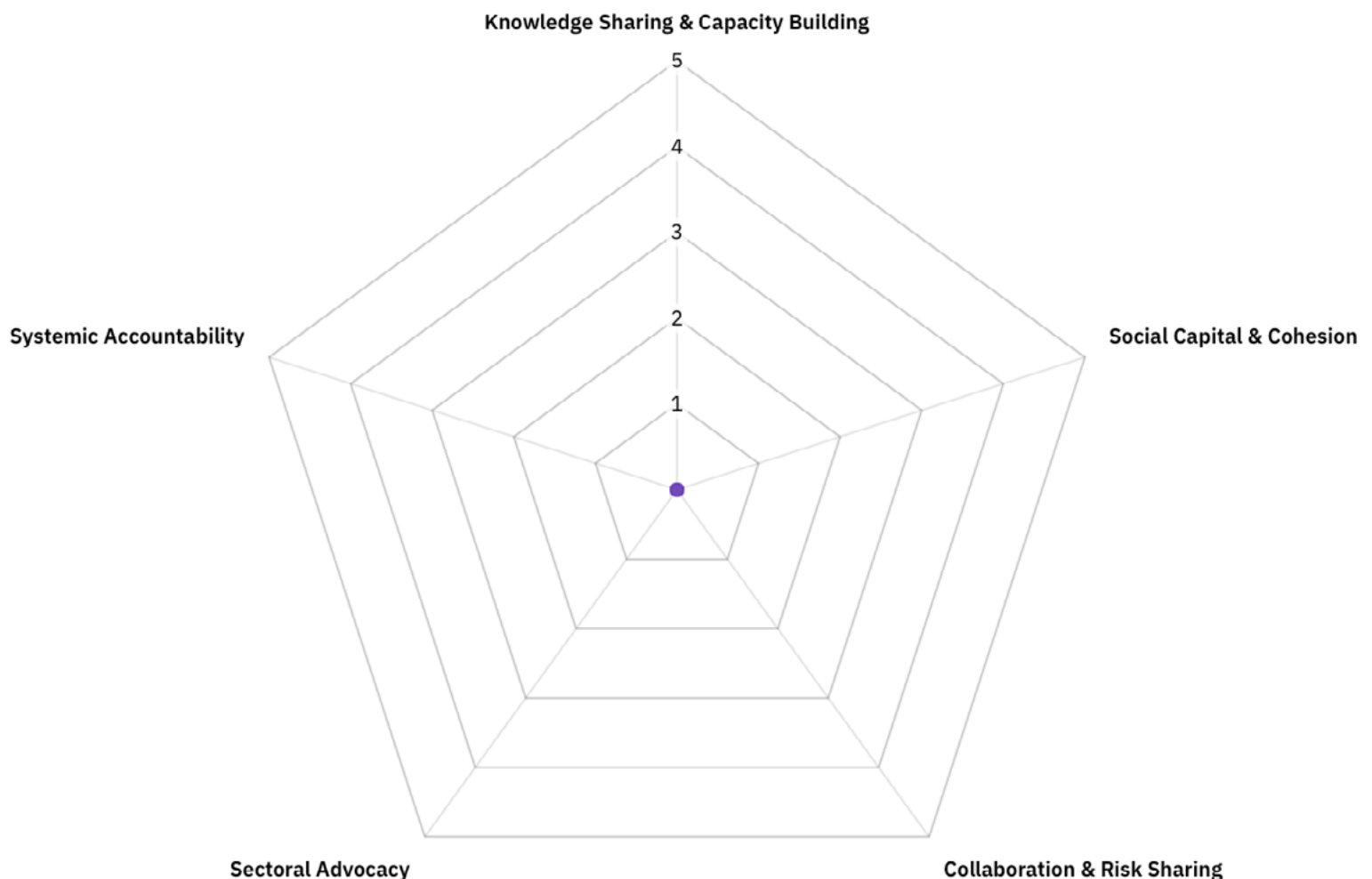
- What activities typically contribute to this function in your network?

- What outcomes would you expect to see if this function is strong?
- What would members say they “get” from it?

(You can also use a different set of functions if that makes more sense for your network. If you do, keep the number of functions limited so the diagram remains readable.)

Score your network’s current strength (1–5)

For each function, assess how strong your network is right now using a scale from **1 (very weak)** to **5 (very strong)**. Mark the score on the spider diagram for each category. Base your judgment on actual activities, outcomes, and member experience—not on intentions or ambitions. After marking all five categories, connect the points to form the shape.



Optional notetaking: If useful, write 1–2 examples under each function that justify your score (a concrete activity, outcome, or member feedback).

Questions for discussion:

- Which functions are most developed? Which are least developed?
- Are imbalances intentional or do they signal gaps that need attention?
- Is this profile aligned with your mission, strategy, and members' needs?
- Are you trying to do too much in some areas – or neglecting something essential?
- What should you strengthen, maintain, or deliberately deprioritize in the next period?

Purpose of the exercise:

The goal is not to maximize scores in all functions. There is no single ideal model. Rather, this is a structured way to take a critical look at the network's overall functioning and whether it is where it needs to be given its mission, strategy, and capacity.

Example:

A regional umbrella network of social service providers (working in areas such as social care, disability services, homelessness, and family support) brings together around 25 organizations operating across several regions.

The network's strongest function is **Social Capital & Cohesion**. Members know each other well, meet regularly in person, and rely on the network as a safe space for mutual support. Trust is high, informal exchanges are common, and smaller organizations feel comfortable asking for help or sharing problems. The network reduces isolation and keeps members connected.

It also performs solidly in **Knowledge Sharing & Capacity Building**, mainly through peer learning. Members exchange practical know-how, templates, and experience from dealing with public authorities. Occasional trainings or invited experts complement this, but learning is mostly practice-driven rather than systematic.

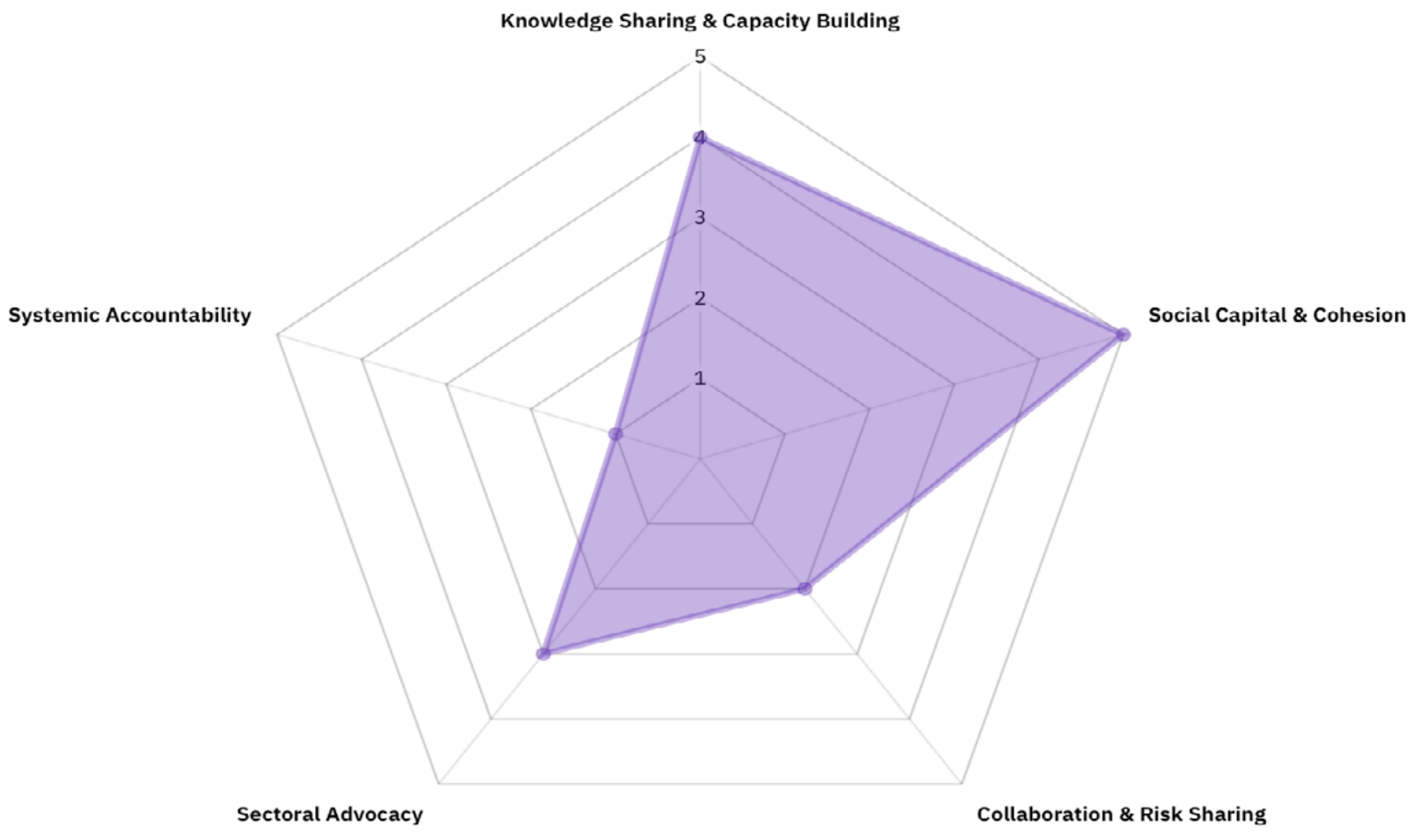
The network shows moderate **Advocacy and (Sectoral) Policy Influence**. It coordinates joint positions on selected policy issues affecting social services (funding rules, procurement, quality standards) and participates in consultations when these directly impact members. However, advocacy is reactive and focused on immediate concerns rather than long-term agenda setting.

By contrast, **Collaboration & Risk Sharing** is more limited. While organizations occasionally cooperate on joint projects and statements, the network does not systematically pool resources, share infrastructure, or distribute political/financial risk across members.

The weakest function is **Institutional Accountability and (Systemic) Oversight**. The network does not act as a watchdog of public institutions or service delivery systems. Monitoring, strategic complaints, or broader civic-space accountability are largely left to specialized organizations outside the network.

Resulting possible next step:

They must either accept a support/learning role or invest in real joint action capacity. The next step could be to pilot one concrete shared collaboration in the next 6 months (e.g., a small joint project/shared service) and review what it took to make it work.



3. At what stage of development is your network?

This simple exercise will help you assess whether your network is in a catalyzing, implementing, expanding, or transforming stage (or at risk of decline).

Instructions:

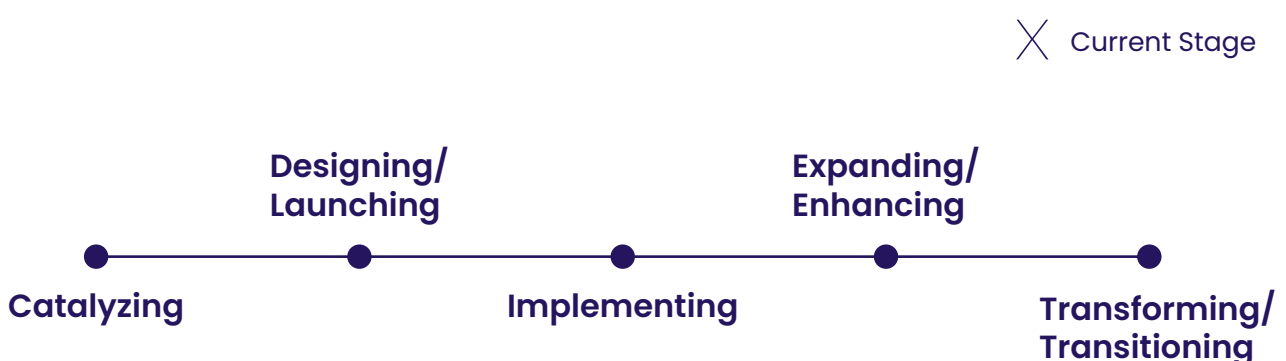
Start by reading the short descriptions of each stage in the diagram:

- **Catalyzing:** Defining purpose and forming vision and goals
- **Designing and Launching:** Building processes and infrastructure, setting up governance
- **Implementing:** Deploying the design, operationalizing and testing the set-up
- **Enhancing/Expanding:** Improving performance, strengthening operations and scaling activities
- **Transforming/Transitioning:** Adapting to new contexts, reviewing the network for continued relevance, effectiveness, sustainability or concluding efforts.

Consider which stage best reflects your network's reality today, based on how it functions, what it prioritizes, and how stable or dynamic it feels.

Place a dot or marker on the timeline at the point that seems most accurate. If your network feels "in between" stages, you can position the marker accordingly or discuss multiple perspectives before agreeing on a shared view.

Development Stages



Questions for discussion:

- **Does this stage match your lived experience?**
What evidence supports it (recent decisions, level of stability, types of activities, how predictable the work feels)?
- **Are you intentionally moving toward the next stage, or are you stuck?**
If stuck, is it because of capacity, unclear mandate, governance, lack of resources, member engagement, or external conditions?
- **What is “next-stage readiness” for your network?**
What capacities, structures, or agreements would you need to move forward (e.g., clearer roles, working groups, funding, coordination, decision rules, communication routines)?
- **What should you stop, start, or strengthen to fit this stage well?**
(Sometimes the issue is not “moving forward” but doing the current stage properly.)

There is no right or wrong place to be. Many networks are in early stages, and this exercise creates space **to agree how far and how fast the network wants to move, and what conditions would make that possible**. For more advanced networks, the discussion often focuses on how to avoid stagnation or decline, how to renew energy and legitimacy, and which pathway makes sense: deepen quality, expand reach, diversify activities, or consolidate and professionalize.

This is also a legitimate moment to discuss less popular but strategic questions:

- **Has the context changed so much that your model needs redesign?**
- **Has your mission been largely achieved, requiring a planned transition?**
- **Do you need a major shift in membership, leadership, funding, or focus to remain relevant?** In some cases, “transforming” is not failure—it is responsible adaptation (or a deliberate conclusion).

Example:

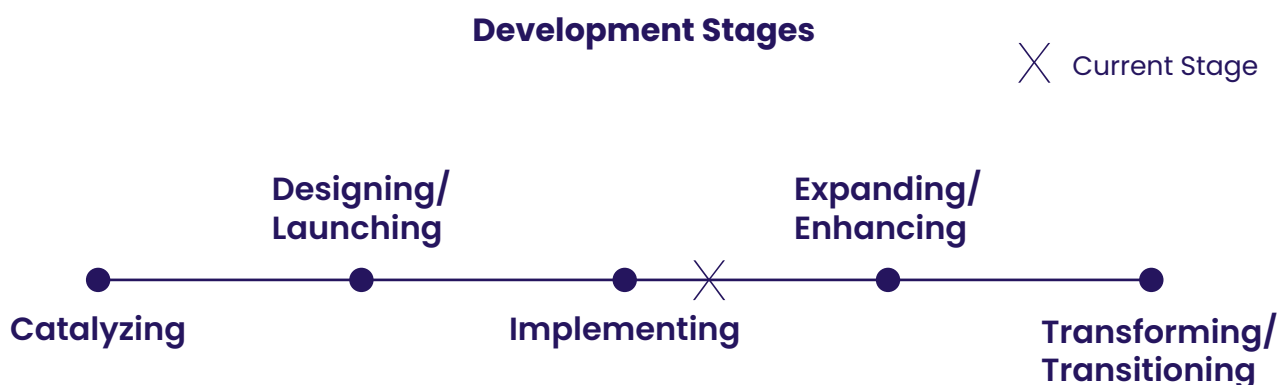
A network of community foundations has been operating for 5 years. It has a clear mission, covers around 60% of the country's districts/regions, and has just finished its second strategy cycle. It has a small coordination team and runs regular peer learning, joint campaigns, and occasional joint fundraising.

When placing the marker, members compare signs of different stages:

- **Why it is beyond Implementing:** The basic model works reliably—meetings happen as planned, roles are mostly clear, onboarding exists, working groups deliver outputs, and members generally understand “how things get done.” The network is not constantly redesigning its basics; it is operating them.
- **Why it might be in Enhancing/Expanding:** The network sees room to improve quality and reach. It is refining internal processes (e.g., decision-making and communication), strengthening working groups, investing in member support, and considering growth—either by recruiting foundations in remaining regions or by offering more structured services (training, shared tools, joint visibility).

So the group places the marker between **Implementing and Enhancing/Expanding**, and the discussion focuses on: **What do we need to scale without losing cohesion?** (e.g., regional hubs, clearer membership expectations, more facilitation capacity, a stronger backbone/secretariat).

However, a different conversation emerges if external conditions have shifted. Suppose a major donor that funded the backbone is exiting, or the legal environment for philanthropy has changed. In that case, the network may decide it is closer to **Transforming/Transitioning**: not because it failed, but because it must adapt—by changing its funding model, narrowing or redefining its services, shifting membership contributions, partnering differently, or even planning a merger or a managed wind-down of some activities.



Key Resources

Collective Mind – Resources on Network Practice

A social enterprise providing consulting, advisory services, and learning resources focused on improving the practice, governance, and impact of networks across sectors.

Available at: collectivemindglobal.org/readings

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) – Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder’s Guide

A widely used practical guide for funders and practitioners on how to build, support, and sustain networks to achieve systems change.

Available at: geofunders.org/resource/catalyzing-networks-for-social-change-a-funders-guide/

iScale – Innovations for Scaling Impact

A global learning initiative and community committed to developing, testing, and promoting innovations that help scale the impact of social change efforts.

Available at: global.cominit.com/content/innovations-scaling-impact-iscale

ODI Global – Understanding Networks: The Functions of Research Policy Networks (Working Paper 271, by Enrique Mendizabal)

A foundational paper outlining key network functions—such as filtering, amplifying, convening, community building, investing, and facilitating—that has informed much subsequent work on network analysis and design.

Available at: odi.org/en/publications/understanding-networks-the-functions-of-research-policy-networks/

EPDN – Understanding Civil Society Networks (Handout 5)

A concise primer on civil society networking, covering key functions such as resource pooling, knowledge sharing, risk sharing, advocacy, and accountability.

Available at: epdn.org/Uploads/Training%201%20Handout%205_%20Understanding%20CSO%20networks_4c2f.pdf

