

Networks Learning Journey



In January 2021, inHive launched the inaugural cohort of our **Networks Learning Journey**, a virtual interactive learning series to bring conversations about networks as a tool for social change to the fore. This series brings together leaders in the field; practitioners, academics, and funders of networks to consider the value of networks: why they are worth investing in, how to create sustainable networks and how they can be structured to deliver social impact and contribute to lasting systems change.

In our final session of the journey, we reflect on our collective learnings and the questions we have unpacked as a cohort, thinking about how we take these learnings forward, both individually and collectively to foster greater understanding of networks for social change and adopt networks approaches in our work.

Our next cohort will launch in Autumn 2021. If you'd be interested in participating in the next cohort, or learning more, please get in touch at prerna@inhiveglobal.org.

Session 1: The Myth of Meritocracy

Our first gathering was truly a meeting of the minds. Daniel Markovits, Professor of Law at Yale Law School, Author of *The Meritocracy Trap* and our keynote speaker told us **a story of rising exclusion in two interlocking sets of networks;**

1. A professional network at work; and
2. An educational network at school.

FIVE THINGS WE LEARNT

1. **Networks of elite super-skilled professionals and elite educational institutions can serve to reinforce each other, concentrating access to opportunity within these exclusive networks.**

In other words – networks are not always good for society, they also carry risk: Markovits explained that the system of meritocracy, first intended to open up access to elite opportunities, has today become the leading cause of growing structural inequality worldwide. Today's richest 1% is predominately made up of super-skilled workers (finance sector professionals, management at top corporate firms, partners at law firms, specialist medical doctors etc). These super-skilled workers largely come from an elite and highly privileged educational background, having attended only the top schools. They then invest hugely in their own children's education, sending them to the most elite schools. This creates and reinforces privilege at the level of education, generating huge educational and attainment gap between the children of the ultra-rich and those of the middle class. In turn, highly skilled professional jobs are only recruited for from the top elite universities (the Ivy league, Oxbridge and their equivalents), which are dominated by the children of the wealthiest. In this way, the elite professional network and elite educational network serve to reciprocally reinforce each other in perpetuity, causing inequality to snowball.

2. **It isn't just an inequality of access to networks, but an inequality of benefit.**

Even when a network's benefits are not exclusive, those within a network are more likely to ask for the benefits that the network can provide, as a result of the social capital they hold from 'belonging' to the inner circle. It is not always about the resources that insiders hold but also the self-confidence to approach the network for private benefit. In contrast, even approaching a network can feel like a barrier for those from low resourced and historically discriminated backgrounds, particularly when there aren't relatable and accessible role models within the

Networks Learning Journey

network to connect with. This is why representation is key and you need to have an affirmative action approach to networks. A 'fair' approach towards those who seek to access the network is not enough, but rather a conscious effort is needed to make the network and its benefit known to those who otherwise may not know to access it.

3. Meaningful equality of opportunity in accessing networks that accrue private benefit is constrained under conditions of high levels of inequality of opportunity.

A meritocratic approach to admissions technically means that anyone can apply, and has an equal opportunity to do so. However, the reality is that those students attending elite private schools have five times more investment in their education (schooling itself, as well as additional tutoring, college admissions coaching, extracurricular activities and more), which entrench attainment gaps and consequently inequality. Networks can go some way to dismantling this through affirmative action programs to attain greater inclusion and representation.

4. Designing networks to be inclusive is really hard work.

There are many different models and approaches to network building, and almost all of them face challenges around power and decision-making. Many networks are dependent on the energy, time and resources of their most enthusiastic members (also known as the 'hand-raisers', ambassadors or super-connectors). These individuals will come with their own agenda, and own networks which in turn may inadvertently continue to skew benefits towards them.

5. Networks whether broadly inclusive or exclusive, should operate under the principle of flourishing for all.

The issue with exclusive networks that accrue private benefit is that individual incentives are highly concentrated to compound inequality. Structural reform is required to align individual incentive structures towards the social good and create networks that are equitable, and serve the 'have nots' as well as the 'haves'. The guiding question for networks, their structure and approach should be: what promotes flourishing for a society overall? We need to anchor our focus towards systems that enable a healthy and equitable society for all.

Key Takeaway: This principle of flourishing, for individuals, for society, for the environment needs to be a key guiding principle when building networks.

Additional reading:

- 'The Meritocracy Trap' (2019) - Daniel Markovits, Penguin Press
- 'The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged' (2019) – Sam Friedman & Daniel Laurison, Policy Press

Questions for reflection:

- Are inclusive networks always the way forward, or can exclusive networks service social purpose as well?
- How can we effectively democratise access to networks?

Networks Learning Journey



Session 2: People, Passion & Process; The necessary ingredients of a network

Our second session of this Networks learning journey jumped into the deep end of what it takes to build a network. Sharing their expertise in the field, we had two speakers, **Jihad Hajjouji, Program Lead at the African Leadership Academy (ALA)** and **Asha Curran, CEO of Giving Tuesday**, drawing on their experiences of building these two very distinct networks.

* Jihad leads ALforEducation, ALA's sector program that aims to develop a pipeline of leaders for Africa's education sector.

*Giving Tuesday is the global generosity movement that aims to democratise giving. It works at multiple layers of networks; a global movement driven by a series of national networks led by a community of highly motivated leaders.

FIVE THINGS WE LEARNT

1. Fostering deep rooted connections and a real sense of trust and belonging is essential for building a lasting community.

Curating shared experiences where members are able to get to know each other really helps in translating from a network to a community that is bounded by deep trust. Important for building this deep sense of trust is creating a safe space for members to share vulnerability. For ALA, this deep connection comes from its highly interactive two-year core leadership program. But even for networks where this shared experience is not possible, investing in creating space for network members to form bonds, get to know each other and share openly is key, especially in virtual environments where this does not happen organically. Modelling kindness, warmth, reciprocity can have a powerful motivating effect. It is also important to continue to reinforce those norms, and not simply create norms and hope they stick.

2. For all networks, but especially those who cannot create a shared experience, a strong shared purpose is key.

The more radical the vision, the more intrinsically motivated members are and this is what leads to a real sense of community. Solving problems together can be a bonding experience for communities too, so it is important for the Network to focus around ACTION towards its shared purpose.

3. Fostering co-ownership & co-creation

Networks really thrive when its members can co-create its activity, as this gives a strong sense of ownership and drives action by its members. For Giving Tuesday, this approach has enabled a good balance between adaptability for country contexts with a unified vision. Such a system doesn't necessarily require decentralisation, but rather just low hierarchy so that there is a sense of shared success. For Giving Tuesday, an idea is only seen as truly successful when it is replicated and iterated on by others within the network; so there is a strong value of sharing and learning. A movement is truly a success when it starts moving without you (the centralised leaders).

Networks Learning Journey



4. Impact is a long game for networks. Setting up networks is resource intensive, but the long-term return on investment is always high.

It often takes time for the impact of networks to be seen. We may see early indication of impact, but many of the issues we are working on are systems-oriented and require time to show measurable impact. Often the impact of a network comes from what its members do outside of the network; the connections from the network they collaborate with, the initiatives they are inspired to lead as a result of the network and so forth. This is why whatever impact you can and do measure is often a conservative estimate of what value is actually being created, so continued investment is important even when all the impact isn't visible.

5. Find and nurture super-participants.

These highly engaged participants will be the likely leaders of the network on local levels, and those most committed to act. It is important to know how they are and develop their capacity. But also be mindful of the network not perpetuating privilege; engaged and interested individuals from all backgrounds should be nurtured to enable them to become leaders of the network.

Key Takeaway: Networks are messy and complex; as with all people based structures, there is no one size fits all set up, but by bringing positive energy and a clear shared purpose, they can thrive and innovate to deliver real social impact.

Additional reading:

- [The Weaving Lab](#) is a community of practice around building collaboration, trust and alignment within a network towards an equitable world.
- [Collective Mind](#) have some free resources including an overview of what a network needs.
- In addition, inHive has both a Networks Assessment Matrix and will be co-launching a community of practice for network builders in June 2021 if you're interested.

Questions for reflection:

- How do you motivate networks to take action together?
- How do you drive deep relationships when people don't meet?
- How do you cultivate shared ownership?

Networks Learning Journey



Session 3: Marathon not a Sprint

Our third session drew on the experiences of the **Mastercard Foundation** in playing a dual role of both investing in its partners' alumni networks as well as developing their own pan-African network for all young people who have benefitted from their multitude of programs. **Ashley Collier, Lead for North American Partnerships** and **Jahazi David, Lead for youth engagement** delved into the journey they took to bring senior leaders within the Foundation on board to invest into a Foundation wide alumni network. They also shed light into the lessons they've learned about resourcing to match impact goals of their network, focusing on human resources, financial resources and time resources.

A special thanks to the **Porticus Foundation** for collaborating with inHive on this learnings summary note.

FIVE THINGS WE LEARNT

1. **“The network is the main course, not the appetiser”:** Your community is the goal in itself

In order to unlock resources internally and gain internal buy in, we need to show that networks matter and have value. Key stakeholders need to see the value of the connections among members a network facilitates, and this in and of itself being of intrinsic value. For the Mastercard Foundation, the value of a robust, interconnected alumni network is better outcomes for young people and increased impact, because networks have a multiplier effect. Facilitating likeminded youth to connect increases their social capital, access to information, their own agency and ability and ultimately their ability to influence change. And these benefits have a multiplier effect, so it is important to engage early people in the network and convince them of the value add and then leverage the initial active members to attract more.

2. **Members need to be at the centre of the network's design**

Mastercard Foundation seeks to establish networks that are youth led, youth focused and youth driven. Crucial to the networks model is to avoid being too prescriptive and relinquish control to enable members to define their own activities and impact, otherwise alumni/member engagement can become another program with the name of a network. This inclusive member-driven approach is key to ensuring it the network benefits the people the network is actually trying to support, but it is important to recognise that this takes a lot of time, resource and intentionality from the organisation.

3. **The process needs resourcing**

Organisations, and funders in particular, need to be comfortable to invest in the processes and distributed systems to support networks directly themselves, and for their core partners too. The set up phase of networks requires significant staff time, and funders need to be prepared to fund these core costs.

Networks Learning Journey

4. **We need to see the invisible**

A challenge we often encounter when seeking investing in networks is funders wanting to see a clear theory of change, where input and outcomes are clear. Yet with the networks model, it is hard to know the direction its members will take. Impact can feel uncertain in this set up, and funders can feel uncomfortable in investing this. Expectation management early on for internal stakeholders that this process and impact will be visible in the long term. In the interim, milestones need to be set to give some indication of early successes and wins; this can come in the form of measuring the level of connection, value of connections as well as collecting qualitative stories of individual members and the impact the network is having on them.

5. **It is helpful to get funders involved in the network as well creating networks of likeminded funders and philanthropists**

Creating connections and networks among likeminded funders can help create sector wide norms and understanding on the value of investing in networks. Likewise, engaging funders in the network and its events can help them see their interim progress and long term value.

Key Takeaway: Impact in networks is a long game, investing in them requires a level of trust in the process, understanding the value of connections, and building interim metrics that serve as indicators of long term success.

Additional reading:

- Measuring the Impact of Networks, Small Foundation (*Internal presentation by the Small Foundation, available upon request*).

Questions for reflection:

- What tools and metrics can we use to measure interim impact?
- How do you keep yourself motivated and committed to investing in networks when you're not seeing the impact?

Networks Learning Journey



Session 4: 'Nurture For All' Networks

Our fourth session tied together some of our recurring questions that we've been grappling with over this series on how we practically create networks that benefit both individual members and society at large. **Sharath Jeevan, Founder of Intrinsic Labs** brought in his incredible insight on intrinsic motivation and the role of skilled talent nurturers in this endeavour. **Areebah Shahid, Founder of Pakistan Youth Change Advocates (PYCA)** drew from her experience of advocacy to emphasise the importance of building linkages and connections between networks at different levels to enhance their collective impact.

FIVE THINGS WE LEARNT

6. **We need to challenge opportunity hoarding within networks and our "winner takes all" systems. When networks succumb to opportunity hoarding, they are rarely sustained.**
Many of us inadvertently use our networks to take more and more opportunities for ourselves. Whilst most of us may be pro equal justice, our systems are set up in a way that incentivizes 'survival of the fittest' style competition that perpetuates opportunity hoarding within networks. LinkedIn is a noteworthy example: though intended to be a platform that democratizes access to employment opportunities, it actually reveals that an individual is 6x more likely to get a job if they have a connection in the organisation. Networks set-up within this 'opportunity hoarding' framework that provide only private benefit at the cost of excluding others are hard to sustain and often implode in on themselves (take for example the U.S. college admissions scandal).
7. **Talent nurturing is key for networks to thrive and sustain.**
When networks genuinely expand social capital and are truly talent nurturing, they create value for both individual members and for society at large. They are also far more likely to sustain because they develop and nurture a very diverse set of leaders with the variety of talents, background and perspectives needed to run network, who are needed given the ever-evolving nature of networks. This is why it is incredibly important to nurture "talent nurturers" within a network, i.e. network coordinators who hold an **abundance mindset**, recognising and developing the talent of many talent owners equally, and not just the cream of the crop. This enables networks to be more inclusive in their benefits.
8. **Challenging the system of 'opportunity hoarding' and 'winner takes all' systemic inequality requires us to develop ourselves into talent nurturers.**
In practice, this means that as program managers, we need to truly nurture our beneficiaries to be able to create and own their own solutions, and as donors, we need nurture the doers we fund, to create sustainable, local solutions. This enables power to truly shift to beneficiaries and network coordinators, enabling more context appropriate solutions to be created.
9. **Social impact is maximised when networks at different levels interact with each other.**
For PYCA, learning from the experiences and challenges of youth volunteers at the grassroots and community level has been key to informing context relevant interventions

Networks Learning Journey

and policy proposals to advocate for at the national level. Drawing together the influencing power of local, national, and international networks can also be incredibly powerful in catapulting change. For PYCA, this shone through when their national level advocacy to increase funding and resources for girls education was independently complemented by youth networks at the local level lobbying their local MPs. This interaction between the local and the national created sufficient impetus for policy change at the national government level. Collaboration among networks operating at different levels can as a result often lead to better, more impactful solutions for both individuals and society at large.

5. Network coordinators feed off both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

The initial phase of building up a network, when the impact cannot be seen in the short term can feel like a long, hard slog for its coordinators. It's hard work and so it's important to allow network coordinators to focus on their nurturing role and not pull them in too many other functions within the organisation. Sustained interest in the network comes from providing both individual benefit but also fun engagement and interactions that build strong friendships and relationships to keep people motivated. It is important to find and maintain a balance between organic demand and "outside injection" of motivation – and each of these may be more or less needed and appropriate at different times of a network's growth journey. People will also move from the centre to the margins of the network and vice versa; this is normal and okay!

Key Takeaway: Building sustained networks requires a shift away from 'opportunity hoarding' to an abundance mindset. Nurturing talent nurturers that drive the network towards individual and collective benefit together is key.

Additional reading:

- ['Intrinsic: A manifesto to reignite our inner drive'](#), Sharath Jeevan 2021

Questions for reflection:

- Are there any potential tensions between how open a network is and how effective or active it could be?

Networks Learning Journey



Session 5: Networks for 'Locally Rooted, Globally Informed' Development

In this session, **Wendy Kopp, Lucy Ashman, Folawe Omikunle and Esther Sarsa of Teach For All** opened up the conversation on a recurring challenge in the network building space, namely how do we create networks that leverage global insights and learning, but provide the flexibility and independence for their local nodes to thrive, flourish and work in contextually relevant ways. Sharing their insights and learnings from the phenomenal success of the Teach For All model, we explored some of the key components of networks that operate simultaneously at the global and local levels to maximise social impact.

FIVE THINGS WE LEARNT

10. Locally driven networks can be brought together by common, unifying principles that bring them together at a global level

For Teach For All, a set of unifying principles have been crucial to drive unity across the network and clarity on what the common purpose and aims are of the network are whilst leaving a lot of room for local nodes to define **how** they achieve the shared purpose. This has enabled the network to be locally led by independent organisations who ensure that the way they work is best for the context that they exist in.

11. The role of the network's global organisation is to foster connection and learning transfer between local leaders

Maximising social impact requires strong local leaders that are supported by a global structure so that knowledge and learnings can flow across countries. Key to ensuring successful learnings transfer is to ensure that these are documented at the global level and sufficient opportunities are made available for local leaders to be connected through the global structure to enable successful innovations to spread across the network and for their impact to be amplified. To this effect, the global structure is key in providing the communications and data infrastructure and systems to enable global sharing, learning and monitoring.

12. Relationships are foundational

As with any network, fostering strong relationships and connection between local nodes is key to the success and impact of the global network. Teach For All has invested heavily in in-person and virtual gatherings between local members to cultivate strong relationships of trust and openness between members. Creating both formal and informal opportunities for people to network and build ties are crucial at every level- network leaders, network members and all stakeholders in between. Having informal points of connection are particularly important to build the friendships and relationships of trust that enable sharing, learning and collaboration with one another.

Networks Learning Journey

13. Develop and invest in leadership at every level and stakeholder groups, whether this be local network leaders, members, alumni and allies

Teach For All in particular places huge emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, including through investing in the leadership of those who have lived experience of inequity. More broadly for networks, it's important to shift power away from the global organisation such that local network are empowered to drive their own, context-appropriate change. Constantly reflecting on how to decentre the global organisation is key for scale and sustainability.

14. Measuring the impact of the global structure on local nodes is important to inform the approach at the global level

Teach For All evaluates the impact of the global structure on its local organisations through network surveys that capture and track how global level connections have facilitated and enabled progress and innovation at the local level. At a more general level, the impact of the global organisational structure should be evaluated in its ability to 1) foster connections 2) facilitate knowledge transfer and spread successful innovations 3) result in collaboration that enable the network's achievements and impact to be greater than the sum of its parts.

Key Takeaway: Fostering a thriving network is easier said than done, and in the context of a network that operates both and the global and local levels, its crucial to constantly reflect on how to decentre the global organisation.

Additional reading:

- Teach For All Intended Outcomes & Metrics- <https://my.visme.co/view/ojqj0vq9->

Questions for reflection:

- When building a network, how do you balance between ownership and control held at the global vs. local levels?

Networks Learning Journey



Session 6: What's Next? Catalysing Collective Action

Roisin Fogarty from **Reach for Change** opened up the conversation on how one network seeded by Reach for Change, **Social Enterprise Ghana**, has succeeded in its efforts towards making social enterprise recognised in the government's business policies. Drawing from the successes of this network as well as weaving together the recurring questions and learnings from the series as a whole, we approached the question of where this cohort goes next: How do we continue to build on our learnings and capitalise on the community we have created through this series to continue building the sector around network-based solutions to social change.

FIVE THINGS WE LEARNT

- 15. For networks to lead to impact you need a deeply committed core of members and leaders who keep working towards the network's shared purpose even when outcomes are not materialising immediately.**

Vision is important, but you also need a core group within the network who will figure out the strategy of the network. Key for network leadership is to leverage networks and people around them who can provide contextually aware perspectives to shape the strategy towards the shared purpose.

- 16. Identifying and focusing on low hanging fruit, the most pressing and easy to accomplish issues for the network can be a useful execution strategy.**

Early wins help get the ball rolling and engage and incentivise key stakeholders in the ecosystem to come on board. Early successes help the network grow and draw in more members and important stakeholders.

- 17. The community and relationships built through this Networks Learning Journey has modelled in many ways the networks approach that we have been learning about through the series.**

By using co-creative approaches involving the participants in designing and delivering the series, as well as placing emphasis on relationship building and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, the Networks Learning Journey has modelled many of the tools of effective network building. The result has been the creation of a network of members who are connecting and collaborating towards a shared purpose of advancing knowledge around network building and raising the profile of network-based approaches to social change.

- 18. Further research, literature and resource review is required on how networks matter and how impact within them can be measured.**

Often the challenge with investing in networks is that their impact is not very well understood, nor is how to measure them. Their way of operation and impact does not fit with traditional programmatic grant making processes. Joint research is needed on

Networks Learning Journey

understanding how to measure their impact in order to set the terms of how funders assess value and impact of network-based solutions.

19. **Many of our learnings across the series are context specific and apply to some types of networks and not all.**

As we collate our learnings on how to build effective, we also need a typology of networks to understand what approaches are most effective in different types of networks. For instance, how inclusive or exclusive a network should be, and how centralised or decentralised control and decision-making within a network is will depend on a combination of the goals and the structure of each network.

Key Takeaway: The final session of the Networks Learning Journey marks the beginning of continued connection and collaboration among this cohort, rather than an end.

Next steps for the cohort: We see three areas of continued engagement between the community that has been built through participation in this journey:

- (1) Creation of a **shared public resource** that collates all the learnings from this Networks Learning Journey, and categorises these learnings by the type of networks and contexts they are relevant in.
- (2) Undertaking a **joint research proposal** to further understanding on network impact.
- (3) Establishing a channel for ongoing **sharing and learning** among the cohort.