AFRICA NETWORKS: VISIBLE, VIBRANT, VIABLE

AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

Creative Metier

CONTENTS

Between April 2019 and July 2022 Creative Metier, worked with diverse, locally led African networks impacting the rural entrepreneurial ecosystem supported by Small Foundation and drawing on a Converge networks approach.

We engaged with each network to understand their current position and provide transition support adopting an action research approach. We then convened the nine East and West Africa networks together as a Network of Networks to accelerate learning and implementation. Our aim was to explore three hypotheses:

- Locally led impact networks are an underutilised and often invisible resource in efforts to build a sustainable local ecosystem

- Existing networks addressing complex issues can achieve greater impact through consciously adopting a networks approach

- Entities transitioning to a networks approach may face particular challenges as they change and grow

Participating networks demonstrated commitment to their vision and mission, and their willingness to explore a networks approach:

AFRACA	**FATE Foundation**	**SE Ghana**
ANDE, East Africa	**IIA Ghana**	**UAA**
Fairtrade West Africa	**IIA Kenya**	**Welcome2Africa**

At the time of writing in 2022, the nine participating networks cumulatively reach:

22,756 SMEs and SGBs

361 producer organisations and agri SMEs

111 intermediaries

200 investors

1,200 volunteers

31 associations and networks

436,003 smallholder farmers

79 financial institutions and insurers

32 countries

African Network Practice

Our wider work has identified a rich tapestry of effective African network practice. Through collaboration with, and learning from, their network of entrepreneurs FATE Foundation in Nigeria have independently evolved an approach which deeply engages their entrepreneurial community in every phase of their work. We explore and show the value of this rich and interconnected entrepreneurial community through a case study.

A Networks Approach

There are many approaches to building effective networks practice. Working with small core teams, at the start of our engagement, network leadership saw their primary roles as service delivery and ensuring the funding for ongoing viability. This had often prompted a shift towards programmatic funding which was not always aligned with the mission of the network or with member needs.

Shifting from an organisational mindset, to a networks mindset inspired a different view. Implementing a Converge networks approach, which we drew on in the design of our engagement, networks shifted to work with aligned actors to clarify their purpose, deepen member engagement through carefully designed convenings and build trust. This led to coordinated action, deeper relationships, collaboration between members and partners and a greater potential for systemic impact.

Fundamental Underpinnings

A shift from an internal, organisational focus to an external focus, with continuous evolution to meet member and stakeholder needs implies comfort with emergence. There is a parallel need for underlying stability. A key finding of our research is that three essential underpinnings are needed for a network to thrive and build:

- Visibility: Creating clarity and building awareness of the work with potential members, stakeholders and funders

- Vibrancy: Embedding an aligned culture through governance, leadership, team engagement, and skills building

- Viability: Evolving and maintaining a sustainable business model

Network leaders and coordinators who successfully balanced the need to evolve in response to the environment and member needs, and these fundamental underpinnings, achieved outstanding results during our work together. These needs were identified in the early stages of our research, and we sought to address them with the networks. The need to maintain this balance will always be present, always be required and always be a fundamental skill in a network leadership role.

Funding the Transition to a Networks Approach

Transitioning to a networks approach requires time to refocus the leadership and team, and patient application of emergent learning to evolve new ways forward. Funders can support a network transition by support through core funding to deliver on a clear transition plan,

funding for specific roles, funding to increase network visibility and consultancy support during a transition process. Networks may also need funding to maintain sustainability as they change, grow and evolve new business models.

The acceleration of learning through the Network of Networks also demonstrates an opportunity for funders to bring investees or grantees together to facilitate peer learning and deepen engagement. Funding a locally led network, offers an opportunity to fund direct action and impact on the ground.

Conclusions

During the course of this work, participating networks have iteratively transitioned from:

- Fitting in to standing out
- Providing services to facilitating and collaborating
- Invisibility to confidently sharing their work
- Project implementation to thought partner with stakeholders and funders
- Project implementation to more sustainable business models
- The role, reach and visibility of the networks substantially evolved

Our research demonstrates that locally led networks, grounded in their context, and with an increasingly wide reach, have significant potential to evolve practical and sustainable solutions to complex issues. The full impact of these changes, and the corresponding response to the initial hypotheses will be demonstrated through three and five year evaluations.

WELCOME

Between April 2019 and July 2022 Creative Metier worked with eleven diverse, locally led impact networks, focussed on impacting the rural entrepreneurial ecosystem in East and West Africa to explore the potential of implementing a networks approach.

We took a deep dive into the unique reality of each network: their challenges, their successes and ultimately, their wider impact on members and stakeholders. Our action research approach enabled us to recognise and build on the networks' existing practices as we worked together.

Working with the generous support and deep engagement of Small Foundation, we evolved a locally nuanced approach, based on a Converge networks approach, to accelerate the impact of networks seeking to effect positive systemic change. We are grateful to Converge for generously sharing their networks approach which, alongside parallel models and existing local practice, we have drawn on substantially.

We are delighted to share our findings, drawing on the invaluable contributions of the participating networks and our experience through this research.

Our findings are relevant to you if you are:

- **Supporting global, regional, or local impact networks to effect sustainable systemic change**

- **Seeking to support locally led networks to increase their social impact**

- **Leading the African networks that are so pivotal to realising progress against the most complex challenges the continent faces today**

You are welcome to walk alongside us through our research journey, feel the passion and potential of our research partners, see the value of their work, explore the potential of a networks approach and, by extension, the potential of this work for existing networks with a strong social mission.

About Creative Metier

Creative Metier works with networks, leaders, and organisations at critical moments of change to drive locally led, inclusive, systemic change. Together, we power positive social and economic impact that is sustainable and sustaining. Complex challenges, navigated with certainty, so that people thrive, and economies prosper.

About Small Foundation

Small Foundation is a philanthropic foundation based in Ireland that is working to catalyse and scale income generating opportunities for people living in extreme poverty in rural sub-Saharan Africa.

Small Foundation's goal is to collaborate with those creating the environment for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) to succeed and deliver opportunity at scale. In particular, Small Foundation works with intermediaries that increase availability of the finance, social and human capital, knowledge, technology and markets required by a thriving, commercially viable MSME ecosystem.

About Converge

Converge is a network of practitioners who cultivate impact networks. They are systems strategists, designers, facilitators, educators, and evaluators committed to cocreating positive impact by advancing a network approach to collaboration.

As a network themselves, they weave a variety of perspectives, skills, and experience into a suite of services that they could not offer alone. Their practice evolves as they learn together, with each other and with the networks they support.

Author

Glynis Rankin, CEO Creative Metier, with contributions from the Creative Metier team

Disclaimer

The systemic challenges humanity faces today are too complex for any one part of an ecosystem to address on its own. Bringing people and organisations together to collaborate around a shared vision or purpose, through impact networks, creates scale and enhances impact, increasing the likelihood of successfully generating large scale solutions to these challenges.

> **Impact network: A network that brings individuals and organisations together for learning and collaborative action for shared purpose.** [1]

Network approaches, practised for many years, are gaining increasing visibility and traction as a way of bringing actors together across a system to evolve dynamic, innovative, and sustainable solutions.

The impact networks with whom we worked during this research process, play a critical role in strengthening rural entrepreneurial ecosystems across sub-Saharan Africa. They deliver significant impact by aligning key actors committed to increasing the income generating opportunities needed to improve the lives of people living in poverty.

Our work demonstrates that the participating networks have a critical role to play in achieving positive systemic change. However, we have seen that funds do not flow easily to locally led networks with these ambitions. Their impact is limited due to the biases and barriers in their journey to sustainability, and there is a need to develop nuanced funding mechanisms to support them to remain truly on mission and in service of their members.

Participating networks are working in a world which is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, a VUCA[2] world. The Covid-19 pandemic presented additional challenges during the period of our research, and further demonstrated the critical role that the networks play, as they supported their members during this time.
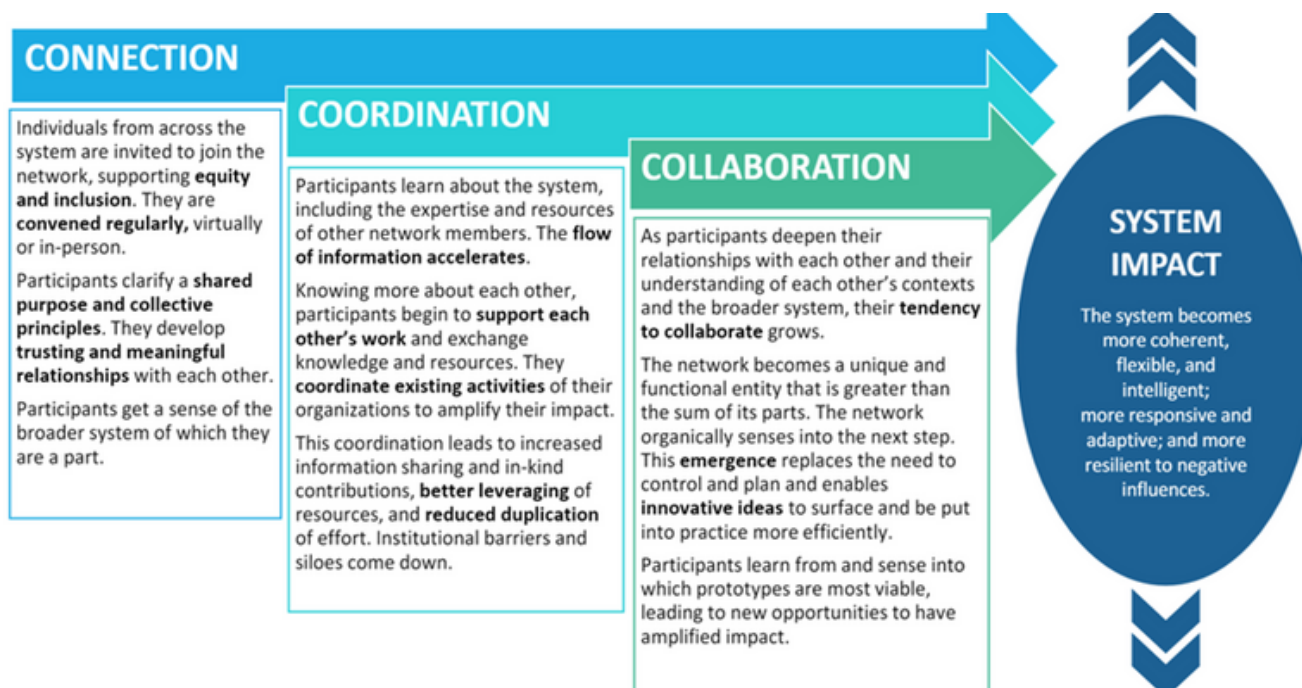
We set out to explore the role that existing locally led networks with a strong social mission play in the rural entrepreneurial ecosystem in East and West Africa and the potential value to them of adopting a Converge networks approach. We also set out to generate examples and contextual learning around the application of a networks approach, specifically within locally led African networks.

Our initial research hypotheses:

- Locally led impact networks are an underutilised and often invisible resource in efforts to build a sustainable local ecosystem

- Existing networks addressing complex issues can achieve greater impact through consciously adopting a networks approach

- Entities transitioning to a networks approach may face particular challenges as they change and grow

Small Foundation worked with Converge to develop a network theory of change which maps the way in which application of a networks approach contributes to system impact.

Small Foundation Theory of Change [3]

CONNECTION

Individuals from across the system are invited to join the network, supporting **equity and inclusion**. They are **convened regularly,** virtually or in-person.

Participants clarify a **shared purpose and collective principles.** They develop **trusting and meaningful relationships** with each other.

Participants get a sense of the broader system of which they are a part.

COORDINATION

Participants learn about the system, including the expertise and resources of other network members. The **flow of information accelerates**.

Knowing more about each other, participants begin to **support each other's work** and exchange knowledge and resources. They **coordinate existing activities** of their organizations to amplify their impact.

This coordination leads to increased information sharing and in-kind contributions, **better leveraging** of resources, and **reduced duplication** of effort. Institutional barriers and siloes come down.

COLLABORATION

As participants deepen their relationships with each other and their understanding of each other's contexts and the broader system, their **tendency to collaborate** grows.

The network becomes a unique and functional entity that is greater than the sum of its parts. The network organically senses into the next step. This **emergence** replaces the need to control and plan and enables **innovative ideas** to surface and be put into practice more efficiently.

Participants learn from and sense into which prototypes are most viable, leading to new opportunities to have amplified impact.

SYSTEM IMPACT

The system becomes more coherent, flexible, and intelligent; more responsive and adaptive; and more resilient to negative influences.

Research Influences

The research design was informed by:

- The work of Converge, most recently articulated in David Ehrlichman's book: Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration and Catalyze Systemic Change (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2021)
- Creative Metier's action research experience, tools, consulting, facilitation and coaching approaches and deep experience working in sub-Saharan Africa

Building networks is not easy. People coming together, often from different organisations or backgrounds and with different interests, requires more than a shared purpose to hold them together. A Converge networks approach calls for a 'network coordinator' to facilitate the network, coordinate activities and convene events for systems impact.

The coordinator, rather than defining the direction of the network, instead carefully facilitates the network's members, to build collaboration and trust, and to hold each other accountable for their shared mission. This involves an approach to facilitation that enables the network to benefit from both the structure and focus as a single entity, as well as the dynamism of a unified group of people in service of their shared purpose.

Coordination: A network leadership role that provides operational support to sustain network activities and develop the network's ability to share information, capture learnings, and coordinate actions. [4]

Converge Networks Approach

The Converge networks approach identifies five core activities for building and sustaining impact networks:

The 'Five Cs': [5]

- **Clarify purpose and principles**
- **Convene the people**
- **Cultivate trust**
- **Coordinate actions**
- **Collaborate for systems change**

Creative Metier was engaged by Small Foundation to explore the potential for the application of a Converge networks approach in the sub-Saharan African context. This has evolved significantly during the period of this research.

Participating networks were given the opportunity to attend the Network Leadership Series which was piloted during our research engagement. The publication of David Ehrlichman's book in late 2021 provides a valuable resource for those who wish to explore the depth of their work.

There are many different 'networks approaches'. In recognition of this, and by agreement with Converge, we have used the term 'a network approach' throughout this document to refer to their work and to networks approaches more generally.

Network Selection

Participants were selected to introduce diversity to the study: differing audiences, sectoral focus, geographic footprint, the level of markets served, engagement with technology, length of time they have been operating and the extent to which they already adopted any type of networks approach. This diversity was important in understanding the efficacy of the Converge networks approach in different contexts.

The selected networks were already making a strong social contribution, with their leadership committed to that contribution. This was a critical selection criterion for participation in the research.

At the start of our engagement:

- Some participants were membership organisations, alliances of organisations working towards a common purpose, or 'networks of networks' seeking to address issues impacting a rural ecosystem

- Others were entrepreneurial networks providing services direct to entrepreneurs

- Some participants thought of themselves as a network from the outset, some as organisations with members

We referred to these networks as 'transition networks', with the expectation that their journey would be a 'transition', from their current ways of working to conscious adoption of a networks approach. We recognised that the actual journey depended on the unique starting point for each network. For most, their journey began with a mindset shift which we consider below. New ways of working evolved from there.

For other participants who were already aligned to a networks approach, the journey brought fresh thinking and a further evolution of their current direction and practice.

Of the eleven networks originally invited to participate in the research, nine proceeded for the full duration of the engagement. There were three factors that informed the decision to move forward with the selected networks:

- The level of commitment and interest from the leadership to explore and apply a networks approach further
- Time and resources available to commit to the process at the network level
- A minimum level of network financial viability required to enable engagement with the transition

Multi Year Research Structure

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
In 2019-20, we worked with two entrepreneurial membership networks to explore their potential and to test a Converge networks approach in the Kenyan context.	In 2020-21 an additional four East Africa networks joined the research, enhancing the diversity of the networks in terms of scale, sustainability, and the extent to which they were already aligned with a networks approach.	In 2021-22 five West Africa networks joined the research, to further increase the diversity in terms of geography and culture, and network maturity.
The engagement was designed to value the existing contribution and impact that each network was already making, to hear and respect the realities and challenges faced, and to support them in implementing a networks approach.	The approach was adjusted to support networks at different stages of the transition towards a networks approach.	The approach was adapted for different cultural contexts, to add value with early stage and considerably more mature and established networks, including one network which had already evolved their own networks approach, and for virtual delivery due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
The design of the research ensured that value was gained by the network for their participation and investment of their time, in addition to supporting the research outcomes.	Of the six networks that participated in the initial research, three received funding from Small Foundation to implement a networks approach, and to address challenges identified through the initial research.	The East Africa and West Africa networks came together as a Network of Networks. This peer engagement across the nine networks radically accelerated the adoption process in comparison to the original participants.
	Four of the networks formed the East Africa Network of Networks for peer learning and identification of common challenges and continued to strengthen their interaction, widening access to the work across their teams.	

Action Research Design

Recognise existing expertise

We recognise there are many existing examples of effective African network practice. As a fundamental principle of the research design we sought to acknowledge and build on the work already being done in the participating networks.

Hear the unique context

We identified the existing experience, context, successes, and realities for each network and sought to unlock further system level impact by supporting their transition to a networks approach. We encouraged them to imagine a changed world, five or ten years ahead in which their mission or purpose had been fully achieved, bringing a new perspective to their current context.

Create a confidential space

Critical to the success of the engagement was the confidential environment created. This gave each network the time and space to reflect on the ways they were currently working, hear from each member of their teams and generate inspirational insights and new ways forward.

Introduce a Converge networks approach

We introduced a Converge networks approach, initially through introducing the 'Five Cs', giving the networks time to reflect on how they could apply this approach in their own context. We also facilitated a stakeholder mapping exercise to give a visual representation of the current reality of the network. Each engagement was unique, with the approach being flexed in the directions that the network found most relevant.

Create visibility of the possibilities for collaboration

We leveraged the stakeholder mapping exercise throughout the engagement. This proved to play a critical role in enabling the network to place their mission at the heart of all they do. Seeing all the stakeholders on one map gave a new lens on their wider systemic context. The network could see where synergies already existed, where collaborations could be cultivated and who else needed to be invited into the conversation to generate meaningful, sustainable change.

Detailed Research Approach

Action Research Engagement

Two day in person or virtual facilitation with the network leadership team to explore the unique context and challenges of each network with follow up and debrief

Action research modules facilitated:

- Setting the context and ambition for the future, building from the network's existing mission
- Stakeholder mapping and adopting a networks approach, to convene stakeholders and members, cultivate trust and coordinate existing activities to build the potential for deeper collaborations
- Business models and addressing fundamental challenges
- Impact Measurement and Management (IMM)

Ongoing Implementation Support

- Tailored technical assistance to implement a networks approach (deepening member engagement, designing convenings and IMM implementation)
- Support to address specific transition challenges and further accelerate impact e.g. developing value proposition, business models and financial viability, strategy development

Peer Learning at Regional and Pan-Regional levels

Initially the East Africa networks convened to share learning. From 2022 the East and West Africa networks convened together with quarterly meetings to address their priorities with monthly workgroups around the following themes:

- Deepening member engagement
- Implementing IMM
- Access to funding/sustainability

Funder Dialogue

The Creative Metier team initiated a Funder Dialogue to bring the networks together with funders to create a platform for open dialogue in which participants could deepen their understanding of funder perspectives and needs.

African Rural and Agricultural Credit Association (AFRACA)
1977 | Pan-Africa | 11 central banks, 24 commercial banks and other financial institutions, 44 micro finance institutions
Working across Africa promoting rural and agricultural finance through policy and advocacy, training and capacity building, knowledge and information sharing, and facilitating partnerships amongst members and key industry players.

Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE) East Africa
2011 | East Africa | 20 members, 11 of these headquartered in East Africa
ANDE is a global network of organisations that propel entrepreneurship in developing economies. ANDE members provide critical financial, educational, and business support services to small and growing businesses (SGBs) based on the conviction that SGBs create jobs, stimulate long term economic growth, and produce environmental and social benefits.

Fairtrade Africa, West Africa Network
2005 | West Africa | 342 producer organisations, 434,403 smallholder farmers/ beneficiaries
Addresses the injustices of conventional trade by supporting smallholder farmers and workers across the region to secure better trade terms, access markets and build their capacity in social infrastructure.

FATE Foundation
2000 | Nigeria | 7,111 entrepreneur programme participants, +1,200 volunteers
Nigeria's foremost business incubator and accelerator, enabling aspiring and emerging Nigerian entrepreneurs to start, grow and scale their businesses to spur job creation, economic development and social impact.

Invest in Africa Ghana (IIA Ghana)
2014 | Pan-Africa | 4,000 SMEs engaged, 2,000 SMEs registered on platform
Works to connect multinationals and large indigenous businesses to credible local suppliers, improve access to skills, contracts and finance to build long term capacity and help improve the investment climate and quality of policy discussions in Ghana.

Invest in Africa Kenya (IIA Kenya)
2015 | Pan-Africa | 5,745 SGB members registered on platform, 200 Business Consultants, 7 corporate buyers and partners
Accelerates trade and investment with small and growing businesses (SGBs) in Africa, by creating viable linkages between the SGBs and large corporates, creating sustainable jobs by providing better access to skills, markets and finance.

Social Enterprise Ghana (SE Ghana)
2016 | Ghana | 900 social enterprises engaged
National network for high impact social entrepreneurs, catalysing funding for social enterprises and advocating for business friendly policies for the over 100,000 social entrepreneurs and providing access to training, skills, technology and finance.

Uganda Agribusiness Alliance (UAA)
2014 | Uganda | 9 agribusiness associations, 21 farmer associations,19 agribusiness SMEs, 1,600 small holder farmers impacted through value chains
Working to grow a stronger, more organised, well coordinated and inclusive agribusiness industry, with higher productivity, profitability, sustainability and resilience, creating wealth and jobs and alleviating poverty in Uganda.

Welcome2Africa International
2015 | Nigeria | 5,000+ members registered on platform, 200 investors
Supports investors, multinationals, and key stakeholders in Nigeria's agricultural sector to advance their trade and investment goals by catalysing investments, trade and finance into and across Africa.

Over three years of working with African networks we came across many examples of effective networks practise in action. FATE Foundation in Nigeria had established their own approach, through collaboration with, and learning from their community which, while closely aligned with a Converge networks approach, evolved completely independently. The case study below demonstrates their approach that has evolved over many years and the value of this rich and interconnected entrepreneurial community.

FATE Foundation is Nigeria's foremost business incubator and accelerator, enabling aspiring and emerging Nigerian entrepreneurs to start, grow and scale their businesses to spur job creation, economic development, and social impact. The FATE Foundation team is engaged in delivery of accelerator programmes, state of the sector research and policy advocacy.

The FATE Foundation entrepreneurial alumni community has evolved over many years of listening to, and working to meet, the needs of their entrepreneurial community. The transition from 'the organisation at the centre' to 'mission at the centre' was one which FATE Foundation already embodied in their work prior to our engagement.

> "We wanted the alumni members to be at the centre of the programme design, and give us feedback, and give us insight, give us guidance on the kind of programmes we should be doing, what was working and what was not working." Adenike Adeyemi, CEO, FATE Foundation

The team were curious as to whether consciously engaging in the research process would enable them to further impact their already excellent work. The FATE Foundation team participated in an initial research engagement and in the Network of Networks.

Here we explore how FATE Foundation's careful facilitation to build connection, coordination and the resulting collaborations between members generates system impact.
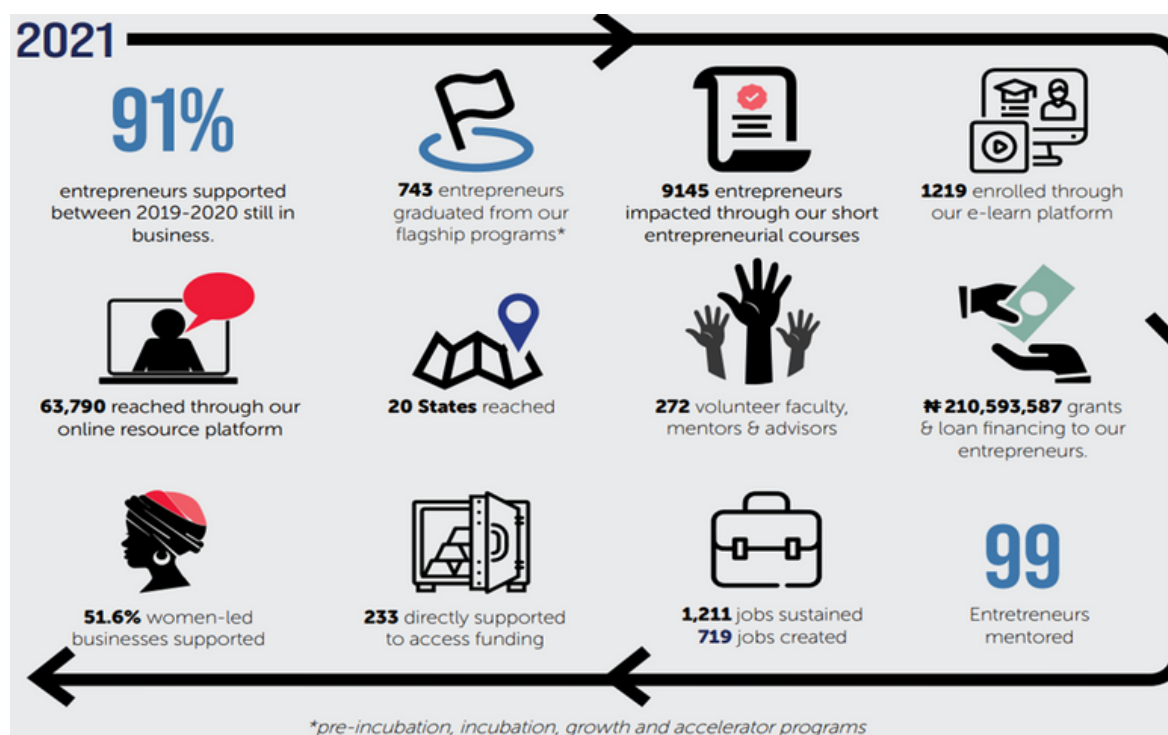
When an entrepreneur graduates from a FATE Foundation accelerator programme they become part of a network, an alumni community which offers support as their business evolves and grows. They can work with a mentor, access advisory services, growth support services and funding linkages, come together at alumni events and join alumni WhatsApp sector groups. The alumni network is led by an Alumni Executive Committee that is elected by the network membership.

Each of these elements contributes to deepening member engagement with collaboration at the heart of the community. Key features of their approach:

- Alumni are at the centre of programme design, giving feedback, insight, and guidance on the programmes needed
- 60% of programmes and events (facilitators, mentors, and volunteers) are delivered pro bono by alumni
- FATE Foundation procure as much as possible from their alumni entrepreneurs

> "We as FATE procure services from our alumni members. It is a policy at FATE that everything we want to source, we find a member of the alumni community that can provide that good or service. Everything you will see me wearing, 95% of the time, is made by a member of the alumni community. A lot of our board members, friends, volunteers also get and source products and services from alumni members." Adenike Adeyemi, CEO, FATE Foundation

Figures from 2021 alone demonstrate the impact of FATE Foundation in the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem.[6]

2021

91% entrepreneurs supported between 2019-2020 still in business.

743 entrepreneurs graduated from our flagship programs*

9145 entrepreneurs impacted through our short entrepreneurial courses

1219 enrolled through our e-learn platform

63,790 reached through our online resource platform

20 States reached

272 volunteer faculty, mentors & advisors

₦210,593,587 grants & loan financing to our entrepreneurs.

51.6% women-led businesses supported

233 directly supported to access funding

1,211 jobs sustained **719** jobs created

99 Entretreneurs mentored

*pre-incubation, incubation, growth and accelerator programs

Having participated in the research and explored the application of a Converge networks approach, the FATE Foundation team:

- **Established a strengthened governance structure for the FATE Alumni Community, deepening member engagement and introducing a networks approach as part of their induction**
- **Further clarified their member value proposition and introduced FATE Alumni Community Benefits**
- **Increased the financial viability of the Community to extend activities and enable increased benefits for members by:**
  - **Recognising the value of the community and its activities (their invisible work) and articulated this more clearly in funding proposals**
  - **Implementing and commencing collection of FATE Alumni Community membership fees**

Find out more about FATE Foundation's approach and impact by listening to two podcast interviews between Fate Foundation CEO Adenike Adeyemi and Creative Metier CEO Glynis Rankin:

Podcast 1: Network Impact Insights, Fate Foundation

Podcast 2: Network Impact Insights, Fate Foundation Results

We recognised that for transition networks the application of a networks approach started with a mindset shift and a pivot in their ways of working. This starting point was different for each network.

The initial, and most fundamental, shift in adopting a networks approach was the move from seeing the organisation at the centre, to placing the mission or overall purpose at the centre of a broader network of actors.

Prior to our engagement most participating transition networks were focussed on the delivery of services to their members. There was an underlying organisational mindset, reaching outwards to individual members. The network leadership saw their primary role as service delivery and therefore securing funding for that delivery and their ongoing viability. The search for funds had, in many cases, prompted a shift towards programmatic funding which was not necessarily fully aligned with the mission of the network or the needs of its members.

Placing the mission at the centre of the network's activities and operations inspired a different view. Rather than focus on the individual, service driven approach, leadership and teams identified ways to navigate relationships in service of outcome and impact. Whilst the mission had always been the driver for action, convening and collaborating in service of the mission was a powerful shift.

David Ehrlichman articulates this shift as: [7, 8]

- Scaling impact, not growing their organisation or function
- Being part of an interconnected system, not the centre of it
- Sharing leadership and credit with peers, not hoarding power or trying to be a hero
- Building trust based relationships, not systems of control

These shifts were continuous; exploring, seeing something differently, implementing and learning from the experience resulted in iterative shifts and comfort with emergence throughout this work.

From the Network's Perspective

IIA Kenya spent more than two years seeking funding to train their small and growing business (SGB) members. During the stakeholder mapping exercise they identified one of their partners, a local bank foundation, with the same focus. IIA Kenya connected their SGB members to the foundation which resulted in training for more than 500 SGBs at no cost to IIA Kenya and without their direct involvement. IIA Kenya simply provided the connection.

"Previously we focussed on connecting SGBs to larger corporates, but adopting the networks approach enabled us to see the benefit SGBs could gain from engaging with one another. Through this approach, we realised that by convening the right organisations and enabling them to collaborate while we step back, there is far greater impact, and that impact is cumulative."
Wangechi Muriuki, Former Country Manager, Invest in Africa, (IIA Kenya)

The IIA Kenya team continues to grow and evolve their ways of thinking about their work:

"Metaphorically speaking, let's take an orchestra. We have moved from trying to play all the instruments to bring some kind of melodies or music, to actually being the orchestra conductor. Our role now is to ensure all members are given a position to bring out their strengths; it's to ensure that all key areas have the right players in place; it's being a central point of communication; it's coordinating the connectivity and synergy between members. For sure together, we have had greater network value and impact over the last two years that we've been working with Creative Metier." Terry Kinyua, Country Manager, Invest in Africa, (IIA Kenya)

In this section we follow the networks as they apply a networks approach through the 'Five Cs' and provide practical examples of the ways in which they shifted ways of working to add value to their already impactful work.

1. Clarify Purpose and Principles

> "The network's purpose is an articulation of its reason for being, the point of alignment that brings disparate parts of a system together. Purpose inspires people to join and contribute their time and energy." [9]

There is an important distinction to draw between:

- A vision or mission articulated by a group of founders or a leadership team in an organisation ('what we want to achieve in the world')
- A clearly defined purpose, evolved by a group of potential members who come together to address a particular issue and work to resolve different perspectives to align on a shared purpose

As existing networks, research participants had articulated a vision, mission or purpose and ambition for social impact prior to our engagement. For some, this had become less clear over time due to:

- The network's natural evolution. As a network evolves, the needs of members change and as a result, the role of the network shifts, usually to make a more strategic contribution within the system
- A tendency to step beyond the initial purpose out of a need to address gaps in an ecosystem that is not functioning well
- Taking on project work to meet essential revenue needs, which might be tangential to or even divert from the overall purpose of the network

In some cases, this resulted in lack of clarity for members, stakeholders, and funders as to what they can expect from the network.

Clarification of purpose sounds simple, however it can take time and requires patience. It requires understanding and integration of potentially conflicting and diverse perspectives and interests to reach alignment on a shared purpose.

From the Network's Perspective

UAA found clarification of purpose to be a particular challenge at the start of our engagement.

> "One of our biggest challenges, as UAA, was articulating what it is exactly that we do, to our various constituencies who are inherently as disparate and diverse as could be." Edward Katende, Former CEO, Uganda Agribusiness Alliance

In the early stages of our engagements most of the networks clarified their purpose in an iterative way, as they understood more about their stakeholder and member needs. As their shift to a networks approach gained momentum this has become a regular activity, built into convenings, so that there is an ongoing and timely refocussing and communication as the network evolves.

2. Convene the People

> "Fundamentally, cultivating networks is all about bringing people together to create a more interconnected whole. Connections are central to what makes networks work." [10]

Initially, most networks segmented their stakeholders into clear categories. Their members, funders, corporate sponsors, and consultants were viewed as entities to be engaged separately.

Through the stakeholder mapping exercise, network leaders began to see the potential of bringing diverse stakeholders together, of convening events where they can relate directly to each other, hear, and learn from each other's perspectives and emerge new and innovative solutions together.

This requires careful design, facilitation, and thoughtful interaction, to give each person the opportunity to be heard and work together drawing on their own experience and expertise. The focus is on the convening participants, their engagement and needs. When network members can hear each other, we see them make connections and deepen their relationships, commitment, and engagement.

We coined the term 'invisible work' to refer to this careful convening and connecting people between events. Creating the context for connections is patient work (which Converge refers to as 'weaving') that provides the opportunity for collaborations through which real change can emerge.

From the Network's Perspective

The **AFRACA** team recognised that if they were to cocreate new ways forward with their member financial institutions they needed to invite farmers' associations and their representatives, and other financial sector actors such as mobile network operators and telephone companies into the conversation. Eighteen months later, John Amimo explains how this evolved:

> "Whereas before our membership used to be financial institutions, MFIs, commercial banks, now we have new players who want to contribute to the agricultural lending space. We have FinTechs, we have AgriTechs, and mobile network operators. These are players that maybe ten years ago were not even there, we didn't even think about them." John Amimo, Head of Programmes, AFRACA

Carol Annang describes the way in which she is seeing the IIA Ghana network evolve:

> "We have started to see a mindset shift in how we engage our members, with greater awareness of collaboration opportunities with existing members of our networks as well as their networks we were previously not exposed to." Carol Annang, Country Director, Invest in Africa (IIA Ghana)

3. Cultivate Trust

> "When relationships deepen to a point of mutual confidence, where two people feel they can count on each other to act in service to the purpose – even if they might disagree – we call that trust. Trust is the fundamental element that establishes a culture of openness, commitment, and collaboration."[11]

Traditional thinking about successful networks might centre on indicators such as the number of members, the events held, member services delivered, and (where appropriate) the impact that they have in representing their members on policy issues. These are visible outputs, things that can be counted and measured. What is harder to measure yet pivotal for impact, is the trust cultivated between network members and stakeholders over time. This is far less visible.

Focussing on cultivating trust between network leadership and members and between members themselves through implementing a networks approach, led to a very different perspective on how a network could evolve.

The key to cultivating trust amongst diverse members and stakeholders is convening in a way that enables them to genuinely hear each other's perspectives. The effect of building trust over time is cumulative. Connections are shared and collaborations emerge through the patient work of network coordination.

However, this trust is fragile. When working with the networks on building trust we realised how important it is that every team member has the skills to cultivate trust in every engagement, rather than this responsibility sitting solely with the network coordinator.

From the Network's Perspective

IIA Kenya committed to deepening their understanding of, and building trust with, their membership. They focussed on establishing one to one connections with their SGB members, resulting in an increase in member engagement through personalised relationships and increased trust in the network.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, all members of the IIA Kenya team participated in these calls with their members. We supported their team to build coaching skills to continue to build trust and provide support to entrepreneurs in extreme difficulty.

Following our initial engagement IIA Kenya began to convene in a way which gave members the opportunity to get to know each other and to build trust within the network. This has further deepened as consultants and coaches have been brought into the membership. Entrepreneurs and consultants lead and initiate events and are themselves introduced to a networks approach. Ways in which to build trust and deepen relationships between members are considered in the design of every event and engagement.

"Through the networks approach we have been able to reenergise member relationships. We are reengaging our network members constantly, and we are able to build a network which has a buzz …. We have been able to showcase more impact and to showcase it more intentionally. This is not the impact of Invest in Africa, but the collective impact of the entire network. From our members, we are seeing greater energy, there are enhanced collaborations between network members and connectivity among them…. We are being referred to other members, so we're able to really attract new members who clearly align with our mission." Terry Kinyua, Country Manager, Invest in Africa (IIA Kenya)

AFRACA's approach to building trust was also based on one to one engagement with their member institutions. They began convening regular strategic meetings. Their initial focus was with institutions that had undergone a change in leadership and member institutions who had not been active in **AFRACA** activities. **AFRACA** shared their new strategic plan, planned activities for the year and the contribution towards their knowledge management activities and subscription payments.

"What we had in mind as a work plan has been made obsolete because of the feedback we are getting; it has changed the whole mindset of how we are thinking of our work plan; we may want to convene more virtual meetings to hear what members want." John Amimo, Head of Programmes, AFRACA

This personalised interaction and dedication to building closer relationships between the network leadership and its members resulted in deeper trust and engagement from member institutions.

4. Coordinate Actions

"When flows are accelerated across networks, new opportunities arise for data, expertise, and capacity to be distributed quickly to where they're needed most. As a result, people are better able to coordinate their efforts." [12]

Shifting to a networks approach results in refocussing network activity to bring members and wider stakeholders together. It enables engagement in a way that ensures consistent connection with the whole membership and with subgroups of members with shared interests. Opportunities to coordinate actions at several levels become clear.

We observed this shift at two levels. As we worked with each network they immediately identified potential synergies. When we brought the networks together through the Network of Networks convenings members shared insights, learning and experience. This in turn led to deepening collaborations through understanding other perspectives and needs, identifying shared commitments and working together to achieve new outcomes.

Coordinating actions in this way has proved to be an effective way of engaging more widely with limited staff resources.

From the Network's Perspective

SE Ghana coordinated their actions to build trust across stakeholders:

> "We now update members and stakeholders through newsletters and hold virtual quarterly meetings on the challenges and successes of our members. This has built trust among the members and led to an increase in contributions. We also engage their members to determine the impact of these connections." Edwin Zu-Cudjoe, Executive Director, Social Enterprise Ghana

The Fairtrade Africa, West Africa Network team noticed that they were engaging less effectively with some stakeholders and producer organisations than with others. To address this, they explored the potential of adapting technology and social media to facilitate engagement with their members.

> "…We used social media more to keep our members engaged, to keep them informed on what we're doing. In preparation towards the annual general meeting last year, they were able to put questions of clarification, we were able to put our information out…That really kept them engaged…within Fairtrade our West Africa delegates were very much engaged at the annual general meeting… we want to continue to empower our producers so they can speak and engage better at every single level that they find themselves." Edward Akapire, Head of Region, West Africa Network, Fairtrade Africa

5. Collaborate for Systems Change

> "When identifying opportunities to create change, it's necessary to first make sense of what's happening in the system from many different perspectives……Without seeing the whole system, we have little chance of creating the systemic changes we wish to see in the world." [13]

One way of thinking about the networks are as hubs of knowledge within a wider system. Each network understands their members, their context, their goals and what needs to happen to change the system or subsystem in which they exist.

As an example, each of the participating networks has a different view of the agricultural ecosystem. For the entrepreneurial networks, working with rural entrepreneurs was one part of their work. The agricultural networks brought deep understanding of the agricultural ecosystems in which they were operating. Others brought a wider understanding of rural lending through financial institutions and the investment environment, as seen by impact investors.

By bringing participating networks together, they were able to build understanding of the other networks and their purpose. Each network expanded their visibility of the broader system and were quickly able to identify potential areas for collaboration. Over time, systemic gaps also become more visible.

We saw immediate results from these collaborations. The networks drew on each other's experience to evolve their own roles.

Gaining visibility of the broader system, the networks have been able to create linkages between funded programmes looking for opportunities to implement, and entrepreneurial networks seeking opportunities for their entrepreneurs, create wider platforms for advocacy and align with existing and new partners on shared funding bids.

The role of the networks also evolved, inspired in part by these conversations. Networks that experienced reduction in membership during the Covid-19 pandemic report that membership is now increasing. Profound changes in the quality of engagement are documented throughout this report.

The networks reach and impact has increased through their evolving advocacy role, broadening membership by attracting new categories of members and cascading learning to network members.

As the networks engaged more widely, the visibility of their work has increased, creating a virtuous cycle of activity, visibility, and advocacy which will continue to evolve as they change and grow.

From the Network's Perspective

We have seen a shift towards a wider advocacy role across the networks, exemplified here by SE Ghana:

"We applied stakeholder mapping to our work on the Ghana Social Enterprise Policy and took a systematic approach to engagement. As a result, we brought twelve new government agencies, seven new community service organisations together with our members to inform this work and move towards a policy that genuinely meets the needs of social entrepreneurs." Edwin Zu-Cudjoe, Executive Director, Social Enterprise Ghana

UAA works across value chains to bring diverse actors to form platforms or associations. As these platforms evolved, they begin to function independently, with their own governance structures and with reduced need for UAA's engagement. Recognising and supporting this evolution, UAA continues to convene and provide support to these associations, handing over leadership and turning their attention to meeting other systemic needs.

AFRACA have focussed on building and deepening partnerships:

"That list (of collaborations) keeps on growing … we are getting new collaborations almost, every other day, it is growing quite positively." John Amimo, Head of Programmes, AFRACA

IIA Kenya developed four new partnerships with corporate foundations and funders since the commencement of our engagement. The nature of these and relationships with other partners has shifted, from that of deliverer of projects specified in advance by the funder, to cocreation of longer term engagements based on IIA Kenya's understanding of their audiences.

Impact Measurement and Management (IMM)

We observed that the purpose of most of the evaluation carried out by the networks was to meet donor requirements on specific projects. We identified the need for networks to:

- Use the data generated to coordinate their actions, focus their activities on meeting member needs and deepen member engagement
- Track the evolution of their network
- Identify and respond to trends, rather than simply producing output data to meet donor requirements
- Capture their overall impact and communicate this to members and funders

The Small Foundation Evaluation Toolkit

Small Foundation, together with Converge, have developed an IMM approach that focusses on understanding network evolution and performance, rather than compliance to a set number of quantifiable targets and indicators.

Where networks have applied and maintained this approach, it has transformed their ways of working by measuring levels of member engagement, providing information that enables them to understand and quickly respond to member's needs.

The toolkit, based on the network theory of change, is designed to measure four elements of a network's evolution: [14]

- Network health
- Connectivity
- Interim outcomes
- Longer term impact

It includes four tools which can be applied pragmatically to serve the unique purpose of each network:

- Administrative information (which most networks already maintain)
- Social network analysis
- Network participant survey
- Collaborative activity dashboard

Our work supported networks to implement the toolkit and enable them to measure the evolution of their network, in support of decision making and prioritisation.

Whilst this was a significant undertaking, this approach has given network leaders critical information to support their ability to coordinate, grow and sustain their networks.

These tools place the network's membership at the heart of understanding, guiding and informing network development and creating opportunities for network members to voice their opinions.

IIA Kenya used their IMM data to inform their 2021 Stakeholder Engagement Strategy, MSME Risk Resilience Initiative and to refine their platform member experience. They draw on their information channels and the tools they put in place to continuously relay data for decision making and data driven engagement of network members and potential members.

The implementation of a robust IMM process has transformed IIA Kenya's position with their members:

"We have moved from chasing our members with phone calls and trying to set up meetings that they're not interested in to where we are today, where our members call our SME engagement team...This has come from the fact that we have understood their needs...we are engaging them in the way that they needed, because we understand what kind of solutions they're seeking, what kind of gaps they have or what kind of needs they have and are responding to that." Terry Kinyua, Country Manager, Invest in Africa, (IIA Kenya)

Bringing the networks together as a Network of Networks accelerated learning and implementation across the group. In 2020–21, four networks came together to form the East Africa Network of Networks. The West Africa networks joined at the end of 2021 and we collectively initiated workgroups to address the networks' highest priorities, deepening member engagement, IMM, and access to funding.

> "You linked **AFRACA** with the other networks. This is something that has never happened. We've never really talked to other networks and got to hear their experiences. You gave us that platform. So that has also helped us understand some of the common issues and challenges facing networks like AFRACA. One of the key takeaways from the working groups you organised is the role of invisible work." John Amimo, Head of Programmes, AFRACA

Commitment to participation has been high. Seven networks of the nine attended nine or more of the twelve workgroup events held in the first six months of 2022. This led to:

- Accelerated learning across the networks for network leadership and their teams
- Sharing learning and approaches with other networks/service providers
- Establishment of professional relationships across similar functions e.g. IMM and fundraising
- Widened visibility of the systems in which other networks operate
- Evolution of collaborations as trust deepened (sharing of information on approaches on membership fees, collaboration on funding bids)
- Increased awareness of advocacy approaches

The ecosystems in which these networks operate are flooded with information and duplication, 'noise' about what is happening and who is doing what. Networks report that it is extremely challenging to filter all that noise. By deepening relationships across their existing stakeholders, connecting with and gaining visibility of participating networks' activities and contexts, each network has been able to cut through this noise, demonstrating wider engagement within their operating context, extending their reach with other relevant networks, organisations and potential partners.

As the networks continued to meet and engage, they understood more about each other's ambitions and challenges. They individually and collectively became more visible to each other. Trust was built, generating a willingness to share what was previously seen as strictly confidential information, and the collective realisation that bids for larger funding opportunities were more likely to be successful in partnership. Collaborations emerged with networks sharing information about potential funders, connecting each other with those funders, resulting in six joint bids for funding. We are also research participants making strong contributions to other sectoral networks.

The Network of Networks is a rich, inclusive learning environment for the networks to share their learning and experience of implementing a networks approach. The networks have gained personal experience of a networks approach in action, including direct experience of the value of IMM. This experience mirrored that of their own network members. Engagement in the Network of Networks demonstrated the network theory of change in action.

The true impact of these interactions will be seen over the coming years, as these initial collaborations come to fruition. The relationships formed through the Network of Networks continue to evolve and flourish, building a sustainable community of mutual support. The potential will be seen and captured through longer term evaluations.

We have demonstrated the value of implementing a networks approach, both for participating networks, and for the networks as they came together through the Network of Networks.

We also identified the challenges for leaders, in balancing this transition with the practical considerations that we explore below.

For new networks, coming together, perhaps around a specific issue or shared interest, there is a need for network coordination (which might be a paid or voluntary role). Other responsibilities may be taken up by network members. These networks may come together, evolve to meet emerging needs, and dissolve when their purpose has been served.

For the networks we worked with, with a long term mission, addressing societal issues that are complex and seemingly intractable, meaningful change can only be achieved over a long time horizon.

Working with a networks approach implies comfort with emergence. The focus shifts from an internal, organisational focus to an external focus with flexibility to continuously evolve to meet member and stakeholder needs. At the same time, there is a parallel need for underlying stability, the essential underpinning to maintain viability for the longer journey.

We found that for existing networks, there is a need to balance the implementation of a networks approach with constant attention to three fundamental underpinnings to ensure that they can thrive and build. This creates a challenge for impact networks transitioning to a networks approach and is a key finding of our research.

Visibility: Creating clarity and building awareness of their work with potential members, stakeholders and funders

Vibrancy: Embedding a networks approach internally through team engagement, skills building, culture and governance

Viability: Evolving and maintaining a sustainable business model

It is essential for network leaders and coordinators to pay attention to these fundamental underpinnings, alongside constant awareness of the need for the network to evolve in response to the environment and member needs. The need to maintain this balance will always be present, always required and always a fundamental skill in a network leadership role.

Visibility

As we have said above, much of the work for network coordinators and teams involved in cultivating a network is invisible. Actions to build relationships, reach out to potential partners, connect members to others who can support them, all take time, yet largely go unseen.

The network leaders involved in this research have a strong commitment to social impact and to achieving their mission and vision. Energy, and often limited resources, tended to be focussed on meeting member needs rather than on building the visibility of their work.

This often resulted in their potential contribution to system change being less visible to themselves, their members, stakeholders and funders, than it should be given their potential impact.

The networks' efforts to align on, and communicate, their purpose, value proposition and membership benefits to network members and wider stakeholders through our work gave an initial boost to their visibility.

From the Network's Perspective

UAA clarified their value proposition through conversations with their members and then realigned their website to articulate their value proposition to different stakeholder groups.

> "Working with Creative Metier has helped us document the 'invisible work' we do and the contribution it makes to our stakeholders, as well as to be able to effectively communicate this and the respective value propositions for each of these stakeholder groups." Edward Katende, former CEO, Uganda Agribusiness Alliance

Improved strategic prioritisation and aligned communications enables energy and commitment to be focussed on delivering the network's ambition. Clarifying what the network does, also involves clarifying what it does not do, and potentially saying no to opportunities that do not align with their purpose. For some networks this involved confidence and courage.

IIA Kenya has progressively strengthened their communications and brand visibility by engaging members to understand the needs of their network, collecting and sharing stories and impact data:

> "Brand visibility is both in print and other media: Last month we were in three different magazines with our stories, the stories of our impact. We have robust social media engagement and have been invited to give TV appearances on expert opinion shows …. So, whereas we were struggling to position ourselves along with our mission, now it's becoming a kind of normal to have this high level of visibility." Terry Kinyua, Country Manager, Invest in Africa (IIA Kenya)

AFRACA recently reported that their visibility substantially increased with over 1,700 visits a month to their website launched in April 2021, an increase of 70% compared with their previous website. Traffic on LinkedIn has increased by 73%, and on Twitter by 94%. AFRACA is also gaining visibility on the international stage being asked to represent Africa on behalf of their members and to regularly present at international conferences:

> "In preparation for the G20 meeting we were invited to give a presentation in (Asia), to represent Africa and to contribute to a recommendation that was given to the presidents. We have also been invited to speak on platforms with major agriculture sector funders. So, the visibility is rather pushing us higher." Thomas Essel, Secretary General, AFRACA

Vibrancy

Realising and sustaining a shift to a networks approach is dependent on the capacity of leadership and team to engage in cultivating and facilitating the network. We tend to focus on actions, tasks done, the things we can count.

Focussing on building and deepening relationships may seem counterintuitive at first. For many of the networks we worked with, focussing on building partnerships and trust involved a new approach, a new set of skills and a new (and often exhilarating) way of working.

Governance

The focus of our initial engagement was primarily with network leadership. Some networks brought their full staff into the research engagement from the outset, while others invited board members into the initial engagement. Others waited until the outcomes of their changes were noticed, and then shared more on the approach they were taking. Whatever the initial approach, board members and other stakeholders needed to be brought in to the shift as it evolved and be ready to support it.

FATE Foundation engaged their member led Alumni Executive Committee in the conversation at the start. As a result, the Committee President and Executive Committee developed their governance to engage more members in responsibility for their network. They established what at first glance looked like a traditional governance structure, with standing committees on finance, public relations and member welfare. Working together, we built on this to design an induction programme for the twenty entrepreneurs elected to these governance roles, embedding and maintaining the Foundation's unique and inclusive culture.

> "The programme inculcated the FATE vision and values of service, emphasised accountability and giving back, and introduced a networks approach in what was a truly inspiring induction workshop. This now serves as the backbone of our governance structure and process going forward." Max Menkiti, President, FATE Foundation Alumni Executive Committee

Culture and Team

For many of the networks, the transition involved a gradual structural and cultural shift, from a hierarchical leadership structure to a flatter and more collaborative approach. Network members started taking more responsibility and accountability, in many cases.

> "We have extended this training to our network members to make sure that they understand the role of a network coordinator as well as their own role in the IIA network. There is an expectation that they will codeliver value to the network, as opposed to before, when Invest in Africa Kenya viewed ourselves as the entire provider of value to the network." Terry Kinyua, Country Manager, Invest in Africa (IIA Kenya)

Two defining factors of transition are:

Visionary Leadership

Transition to a networks approach involved a shift in leadership style, for some, from management and control to inspiration and facilitation. Leaders needed to be comfortable with emergence as the network evolved, together with the capability to engage with complexity and uncertainty. Network leaders, inspired by a networks approach, inspired their teams and wider stakeholders throughout the transition. Peer conversations through the Network of Networks and coaching with the Creative Metier team supported this shift in leadership style.

Committed Team

Trust can be built or broken in every engagement with a member or stakeholder. The networks' own systems needed to shift to collect new information, incorporate new ways of working, and embed a new approach to IMM. We noted that a successful transition impacts every role.

Terry Kinyua describes her approach at IIA Kenya:

"We are so driven by the mission that we have had a total culture shift for Invest in Africa Kenya, aligning even our roles in terms of the network role in everybody's job description, in the language, the deliverables, through the training that we have had consistently over the last two years .... the entire team has totally shifted. Our thinking is always around the mission .... we have embedded work streams driven by the impact that we are seeking."
Terry Kinyua, Country Manager, Invest in Africa (IIA Kenya)

Viability

The shift to a networks approach needs to be underpinned by a viable business model to be sustainable. Whilst the transition opened up new opportunities for the research participants, these took time to come to fruition. All but two of the networks identified continuity of funding as one of their most significant challenges.

The following factors make achieving financial sustainability challenging:

- Participating networks are working in a world which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, a VUCA world. The Covid-19 pandemic presented additional challenges during the period of our research, with networks experiencing non payment of membership fees, the need to support members to meet urgent needs, and the disruption of in person events and meetings. It also presented opportunities as funding became available to provide support to entrepreneurs and other members through this period.

- Networks without a centralised business development function were learning as they went, each going through their own learning journey to understand the funding environment, build relationships and invest team resources on writing proposals for competitive public tenders with limited opportunities for success.

- Some perceived a power dynamic in conversations with funders, aligning with their perception of funder expectations, rather than clearly articulating their own vision and needs. This often led to projects that were less well specified than they would have been with more open discussion. Many networks agreed to terms that did not cover the full cost of delivery.

Each network's learning process tended to take place in isolation in what was perceived as a highly competitive environment, resulting in a lack of visibility of available opportunities and significant investment of resource in very small teams.

The unpredictability of funding experienced by the networks led to:

- Challenges in planning and maintaining their strategic intentions and directions

- **High staff turnover due to the short term or programmatic nature of contracts. This has implications for the long term implementation of a networks approach, as team members leave and new team members need to be inducted**

Access to Funding Workgroup and Funder Dialogue

To address this, the Network of Networks came together to initiate:

- **The Access to Funding workgroup: Members came together to articulate their funding needs, consider business models and explore potential sources of funding**

- **A Funder Dialogue: Where we invited funders to meet the networks for an open conversation about funder requirements and broader opportunities. This also provided an opportunity for funders to learn more about the potential of networks and the networks' needs**

At the start of our engagement, all but two of the participating networks received the majority of their funding through delivery of specific projects already designed by funders, which were not always aligned with the network's mission. Membership fees alone were (and continue to be) insufficient to cover even modest network operating costs. One focus for the workgroup was on ways to increase revenue from membership fees. Some networks have increased their membership and attribute this to the changes they have implemented. As an example:

IIA Kenya:

January 2020: 2,400 registered website members
January 2022: 5,000 registered website members

SE Ghana:

May 2021: 742 social enterprises as members
July 2022: 900 social enterprises as members

"We have added 270 new members and thirteen women led hubs to our fold and ensured visibility of our network and activities and as a result, we have seen an increasing interest in social enterprise." Edwin Zu-Cudjoe, Executive Director, Social Enterprise Ghana

Other networks report that they are seeing an increase in their fee revenue following the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of actions arising from conversations in this workgroup.

As a result of participation in this research, and in the Network of Networks, we have seen a shift from reliance on project funding, to deepening relationships with funders and cocreating programmes based on the network's learning, research, knowledge and expertise as they better understand and communicate their member needs.

Participating networks are now collaborating on funding bids, sharing ideas and experience and continuing to learn from each other.

"We have engaged and secured interest from two existing dormant funding partners and two potential new partners as a result of sharing the networks approach. We have also collaborated with new partners in responding to expressions of interest. Our member subscriptions are being positively impacted by the increased engagements and participation." Carol Annang, Country Director, Invest in Africa (IIA Ghana)

"We have significantly widened our funder base over the past year, through our own direct efforts and through working with new partnerships with universities and others who share our values and goals. We have received funds from three new funders and are in conversation with five other potential new funders. Meeting with the East and West Africa networks and working together on financial sustainability has led us to partnering on six new applications and broadened our awareness of other potential funders." Edwin Zu-Cudjoe, Executive Director, Social Enterprise Ghana

The tension between a programmatic approach, with clear quantifiable outputs, and a more emergent network approach presents an ongoing challenge to networks. The networks need to maintain financial viability while ensuring alignment to the mission and allowing for emergent outcomes, while funders need to make the case for funding based on predictable and demonstrable impact.

Our research demonstrates the potential to build on the footprint that locally led networks have already created to accelerate systemic change. Whilst there is attraction in funding the new, resourcing and sustaining existing locally led networks may create more impact per funding dollar. The rationale for funding networks is covered in Section 3 of this report, 'The Critical Role of Networks In System Change'.

The acceleration of learning through the Network of Networks also demonstrates an opportunity for funders to bring investees or grantees together to facilitate peer learning and deepen engagement. Funding a locally led network, offers an opportunity to fund direct action and impact on the ground.

The pathways we identify below are based on the different ways that participants were funded during the period of our research, and on the ways that additional funding might have supported them in achieving their ambitions.

Funding the Transition to a Networks Approach

Core Funding Support for a Clear Transition Plan

Transitioning to a networks approach requires time to refocus the leadership and team, and patient application of emergent learning to evolve new ways forward. Providing core funding support over a two to three year transition period can provide the stability required to invest in and accelerate this transition.

Funding for Specific Roles

The networks typically worked with small teams who were fully engaged in working with their members. Funding for new roles to implement knowledge management, communications or to set up and maintain IMM systems may enable acceleration of the transition process.

Funding for Visibility

The transition to wider visibility may also have associated costs, to support articulation of vision and purpose, clarify membership value propositions, develop and deliver a communications strategy and the supporting website, social media and other engagements.

Consultancy Support

Consultancy support for the transition for an individual network, through transition coaching for network leadership, orientation of the team and clarification of roles, setting up new systems and processes, can accelerate the transition, as can engagement with a Network of Networks.

Funding to Maintain Sustainability

Continuity of Funding as Networks Change and Grow

It is important to maintain continuity of these new functions as the network's identity evolves. Continuity and patient funding will be valuable in the short term as a new balance is sought

between meeting revenue requirements through membership fees and diversification of sources of funding. Funding is also important to support the new costs associated with effective network function.

Network of Networks

The Network of Networks played an important role in the acceleration of learning. Funding to support the set up and facilitation of peer learning networks as they transition to a networks approach, or come together to address aligned issues, can play an important role in strengthening implementation.

Mitigating Against Dependence

We observed a fine balance between funding to accelerate transition and the potential for dependence, rather than independence, from core funding sources. Funders can support achievement of this balance by:

- Setting targets for revenue generation and diversification of funders
- Supporting networks of networks as an ongoing and stable mechanism for learning and growth

There is a balance to be struck here, between ownership of the transition by network leadership, ensuring opportunities for learning through networks of networks that addresses the networks' priorities, with external support only as required to complement the networks' existing resources and capacity.
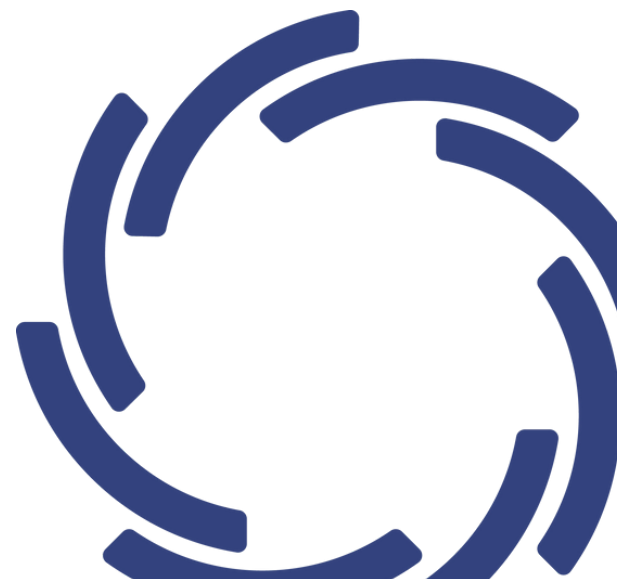
The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, global political instability and the resulting challenges to food security and global supply chains has highlighted the need to build local resilience.

In this section, we return to our original hypotheses and consider the extent to which they can be said to be proven. The context of our work is quite specific:

- Nine locally led African networks have applied a networks approach and addressed fundamental underpinnings, to strengthen their visibility, vibrancy and viability
- Whilst the networks are diverse, they are 'transition networks', already operating prior to our engagement

The hypotheses can only be said to be demonstrated in this context. Further evidence will accrue over time, through wider application of different networks approaches, longitudinal evaluation to understand how the evolution of these networks continues over time. Let us consider each hypothesis in turn.

Local multi stakeholder networks are an under utilised and often invisible resource in efforts to build sustainable local ecosystems

The transition that these networks have achieved demonstrates their widening utilisation, increasing visibility and the evolution of their contribution within their local systems. This hypothesis can be said to be proven, with the caveat that the research engagement supported a pivot.

Participating networks had access to a model for transition, access to learning and varying levels of financial support for the transition. Evidence for this hypothesis is detailed below.

During the course of our work, participating networks have iteratively transitioned from:

- Fitting in to standing out
- Providing services to facilitating and collaborating
- Invisibility to confidently sharing their work
- Project implementation to thought partner with stakeholders and funders
- Project implementation to more sustainable business models
- The role, reach and visibility of the networks substantially evolved

Entities addressing complex issues can achieve greater impact through adopting a 'networks approach'

All the networks found a networks approach to be helpful, regardless of their stage of maturity, scale, reach or purpose, and demonstrated the significant changes reported throughout this report.

The networks' own impact measurement and management systems demonstrated increasing engagement with members and stakeholders over the period of the research.

Entities transitioning to a networks approach face particular challenges as they change and grow

As the networks pursued their transition journey a fundamental challenge emerged in managing the balance between:

- Delivering the practical and mindset transition to a networks approach
- Maintaining the fundamentals of visibility, viability and vibrancy
- Maintaining sight of the overall ambition for impact that this transition serves

Maintaining this balance, alongside vigilance around the need for the network's role to evolve as the environment and members' needs evolve, is an essential skill for network leaders and coordinators. This need for balance will always be present, always required and always a fundamental skill in a network leadership role.

The full impact of these changes, and the corresponding response to these hypotheses will be demonstrated in the longer term through three and five year evaluations.

Locally led networks, with their wide reach, have the potential to evolve practical and sustainable solutions to complex issues, grounded in local contexts.

We have deeply enjoyed this work in the rapidly evolving Africa networks space. In parallel with this research, we are seeing the breadth of application and the resulting impact of networks approaches in different sectors and the impact that is being achieved as a result. We continue to be impressed by the dedication and commitment of the participating network's teams to achieving their purpose and look forward to continued collaboration and learning.

- The action research process successfully supported networks to pivot towards a networks approach, and in doing so opened opportunities for further impact with members and within the systems in which they operate

- The peer learning process accelerated the mindset shift and learning of new networks compared to networks which participated at an early stage of the research

- The action research approach identified common challenges for the networks and thematic learnings, which are shared in the body of this report

- Through our work together, and the application of a networks approach, the networks have achieved a genuine shift in the way they work

In Conclusion

- Transition has, and continues to be, iterative and organic as each network embeds more deeply in their ecosystem. This process will continue as the networks change and evolve, with the long term impact becoming apparent over the years ahead

- Transitions have been emergent rather than planned and linear. The networks have addressed their immediate challenges first, learned from this and then implemented another aspect of the approach

- The rich learning environment, in which network leaders and their teams could come together, has significantly accelerated learning and application

- What is powerfully emerging is the dynamism and momentum that comes from a trusted, aligned and empowered network. The achievements of the networks to date are enhanced by the potential long term impacts of the new collaborations and opportunities arising from this work

Do get in touch to discuss and debate this research, and to explore opportunities for collaboration and working together.

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Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration and Catalyze Systemic Change (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2021)