



Special report

# Defining and assessing the effectiveness of civil society networks working on forest governance issues in Africa and Asia



The project is funded by the European Union





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# Acknowledgements

This report is based on the results of a 2021 study conducted by the Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT) of the University of Wolverhampton, the Field Legality Advisory Group (FLAG) and RECOFTC. The study explored the concept of 'effectiveness' in relation to civil society networks working on forest governance issues in 12 countries. Tropenbos International also contributed by undertaking interviews in Ghana and Liberia. The surveys were funded by the European Union and the UK Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) under the Forest Governance Markets and Climate (FGMC) Programme. Funding for the production of this report was also provided by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) as core donors of RECOFTC.

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## Introduction

Tropical forests provide vital goods and services to people, both near and far, and are essential to humanity's defining challenges of addressing poverty, climate change and biodiversity loss. But for decades weak governance and powerful, vested interests have put immense pressure on these forests and the communities that depend on them.

In recent years, major policy shifts have been creating opportunities to reduce these pressures. Those have allowed civil society networks to play a greater role in forest governance. For example, when the government of the Central African Republic started negotiations with the European Union to develop a timber trade agreement called a FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) in 2009, civil society organizations in the country knew they needed to engage with this process.

A group of these organizations formed a network called the Platform for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and the Environment (*Plateforme Gestion Durable des Ressources Naturelles et de l'Environnement* or GDRNE). The goal was to build capacity to engage in the VPA process and to advocate for good governance and respect for communities' rights. Despite the political situation in

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### FLEGT

FLEGT stands for Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade. It is the name of the European Union's 2003 Action Plan for addressing illegal logging and associated trade. FLEGT involves demand-side and supply-side measures, the latter of which include Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) with timber-exporting countries. These countries commit to exporting only legal timber to the EU by reinforcing forest governance. CSOs have a seat at the table, alongside the government and the private sector, when a country negotiates a VPA with the European Union. They also support the implementation of the VPAs.

Central Africa and the low capacity of the network to mobilize funds, the platform was heavily involved in the VPA negotiations. It contributed to the development of the VPA's definition of legal timber, as well as to the legal reform processes and the drafting of legal texts.

“Previously, civil society had little involvement in decision making about the forest sector in the Central African Republic and had limited capacity to engage,” says Horline Njike, secretary general at Field Legality Advisory Group (FLAG). “Now, thanks to the efforts of GDRNE, there is substantive engagement between civil society and the government on issues relating to forests, land and natural resources. There is greater transparency and civil society groups have a recognized role as independent observers of the forest sector.”

In the past two decades, civil society networks like the one in the Central African Republic have formed across the tropics to address issues related to forest governance. Often they work to complement, replace or fill gaps in government actions. Such coalition building has emerged as a promising approach to expanding democratic opportunities and ensuring success of development and policy efforts. Civil society organizations (CSOs), public and private donors and development agencies are turning to these networks to deliver aid effectiveness.

These networks have sometimes been created around new spaces for dialogue with other stakeholders, as governments and others have increasingly recognized the role of civil society in forest governance. Along with FLEGT, other initiatives have also opened up opportunities for stakeholder engagement in forest policy processes, including REDD+, national community forestry programs, and deforestation-free value chains.

The participation of civil society networks in these dialogues has had substantial impacts, such as a better recognition of communities' rights, and increased transparency, accountability and practices in the forest sector. Integration of local realities and perspectives at the decision-making level has also improved. With the steady engagement of these networks over the past 15 years or so and the passing and implementation of new agreements and laws, it is now time to reflect on the effectiveness of such networks.

“The rise in civil society actions in the forest governance sector in recent years has been rapid,” says Robin aus der Beek, coordinator of the Voices for the Mekong Forests project. “Civil society groups are now keen to take stock of their experiences and explore the effectiveness of the networks they have formed. Governments, policymakers and practitioners are also interested in this, as are donors, having invested significantly to promote the emergence and

### What do we mean by network?

The study defined networks as collections of civil society actors that are connected to each other through a relationship they voluntarily enter into, in order to achieve a common goal. While the members of the networks maintain their autonomy, they are bound by some form of structural interdependence. These structures can be formal, informal or virtual, and are designed to bring about or advocate for change in their various spheres of intervention.

Whether called coalitions, networks, alliances, movements or platforms, the different

structures and ways of working emerge from the relationships, history and political context of their establishment.

Compared to other governance hierarchies, these autonomous organizations seek to achieve outcomes that could not be achieved by working individually, and they jointly define their aims and action plans. They seek to work together to achieve collective goals, while contributing to their individual goals.

development of civil society networks. Interestingly, there is a diverse interpretation on how effectiveness is perceived among different stakeholders.”

This special report summarizes the findings of a study on this topic by the University of Wolverhampton’s Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT), the Field Legality Advisory Group (FLAG) and RECOFTC. It provides an overview of why networks form and how their members benefit, how networks and external stakeholders define effectiveness, and what factors influence it. The report ends by analyzing the findings and introduces a guide that networks can use to define and assess effectiveness.

To explore this topic, CIDT, FLAG and RECOFTC surveyed civil society networks they have been working with on forest governance issues in Central Africa, West Africa and the Mekong region. The study looked at 14 networks in 12 countries. These networks are involved in independent forest monitoring, FLEGT VPAs, REDD+, land tenure issues, community forestry and forest policy processes.

The researchers interviewed 123 network leaders and members, and representatives of donor agencies, governments and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In addition, 83 network members and leaders in 10 of the 12 countries completed an online questionnaire. The study team made a commitment with all interviewees to maintain full confidentiality of their responses. Therefore, while this report includes some quotations from the interviews, it does not attribute them to individuals.

## What networks do

In many countries, CSOs and their networks have taken advantage of reform opportunities to cement themselves as legitimate actors in promoting good forest governance. Some have started monitoring and reporting on how effectively government officials and private sector actors comply with forest laws and other commitments. Some have focused on increasing transparency and accountability

with respect to community access to benefits from forest exploitation, or information on forest production and trade. Others have engaged in advocacy, calling for a greater recognition of land tenure, inclusiveness and women’s rights, as well as environmental protection and safeguards, in line with national priorities.

## Limitations

The study took place in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. This made it impossible to conduct in-person research. It also limited the overall number of respondents and prevented the study team from engaging with community beneficiaries of CSOs and their networks.

The study team did not receive any responses to the online questionnaire from the two countries in West Africa—Ghana and Liberia. The quantitative data are therefore limited to the questionnaire responses from countries in the Congo Basin and the Mekong region. Complementary evidence for West Africa was provided by interviews the study team carried out separately.

Representatives of external stakeholders were outnumbered in the interviews by representatives of networks, and they were not included in the online survey. This disparity contributed to there being less diverse answers from external stakeholders on, for example, criteria for a network’s effectiveness.

Unfortunately, the questionnaire response rate in the Congo Basin was lower than that in the Mekong region. Also, as the numbers of respondents per network were not equal in either region, this created a small bias towards results from networks with the greater numbers of respondents.

## Central and West Africa

### What networks do

Independent forest monitoring 1 3 6  
7 8

FLEGT VPA 4 6

REDD+ 2

Land tenure issues 9

Community rights 4 9

Forest land governance 5 7 9

## Mekong region

### What networks do

FLEGT VPA 12

REDD+ 13

Community forestry 10 11

Natural resource management 11 14

### Fourteen networks

#### West and Central Africa

1. Cameroon – Coordination Nationale d'Observation Indépendante Externe (CN-OIE)
2. Democratic Republic of the Congo – Groupe de Travail Climat REDD+ Rénové (GTCRR)
3. Democratic Republic of the Congo – Réseau Nationale de l'Observation Indépendante (RENOI)
4. Republic of the Congo – Plateforme pour la Gestion Durables des Forêts (PGDF)
5. Gabon – Gabon ma Terre mon Droit (GMTMD)
6. Central African Republic – Gestion Durables des Ressources Naturelles et de l'Environnement (GDRNE)
7. Ghana – Civil Society-led Independent Forest Monitoring (CSIFM)
8. Liberia – Independent Monitoring-Coordination Mechanism (IFM-CM)
9. Liberia – NGO Coalition

#### Mekong region

10. Thailand – Community forestry network (CF Net)
11. Myanmar – Myanmar Environmental Rehabilitation-conservation Network (MERN)
12. Lao PDR – VPA FLEGT network
13. Cambodia – CSO network for REDD+
14. Viet Nam – VNGO FLEGT network

These networks are involved in independent forest monitoring (1, 3, 6, 7, 8), FLEGT VPAs (4, 6, 12, 14), REDD+ (2, 13), land tenure issues (9), community forestry (10, 11), community rights (4, 9), forest and land governance (5, 7, 9) and natural resource management (11).



## Chapter 1

# Why networks form and how members benefit

Since 2010, tropical countries have made varying degrees of progress reducing greenhouse gas emissions from their forest sectors under the UN's REDD+ scheme. REDD+ could help finance forest protection and sustainable forest-based livelihoods. However, there are also concerns that vulnerable communities could lose their rights to use local forest resources, which they have used for generations.

Aware of such risks, CSOs in Cambodia joined forces in 2012 to form the CSO REDD+ Network. Its goal is to ensure that the government consults civil society and incorporated its views in national REDD+ policy development and implementation. Through its activities, the network has promoted transparency, accountability, participation and other aspects of good forest governance. It has contributed to the development of Cambodia's REDD+ Action and Investment Plan, the country's *prakas* or guidelines for the REDD+ greenhouse gas mechanisms, and safeguards to mitigate potential negative impacts arising from REDD+.

"Acting individually, the 32 members of the CSO REDD+ Network would unlikely have achieved what the network has," says Aus der Beek. "But while it is clear that there is power in a union, being effective is more than just a matter of having strength in numbers. Understanding effectiveness

### REDD+

REDD stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation. The '+' symbol refers to 'conservation of existing forest carbon stocks, sustainable forest management and enhancement of forest carbon stocks'. REDD+ developed under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as a mechanism for encouraging climate change mitigation in the forest sector through performance-based payments. Civil society organisations contribute to the development of REDD+ at the national level, alongside the government, to determine the main drivers of deforestation and the country's strategy to reduce emissions.

is crucial not only for civil society networks, but also for the governments, donors and international organizations that interact with them.”

Understanding why networks like the CSO REDD+ Network form, what they do and how their members benefit are important to understanding their effectiveness. In some instances, the reason and conditions behind the creation of networks may directly impact their effectiveness.

“The environment in which a network is formed can offer good insights into its functioning and the challenges it faces,” says Nathalie Faure, senior program officer for governance, institutions and conflict transformation at RECOFTC. “I have witnessed the lasting struggles of a network in the Congo Basin that was formed to fulfill the requirement of a political process, without having a strong internal drive from civil society organizations to come together. However, the networks’ own evolutions show they are adaptable, and other networks created in better conditions continue to thrive.”

The study showed that the need and opportunity to engage in political processes, such as VPA negotiations and REDD+, influenced network creation in the other countries the study surveyed. The only exception was Gabon, whose network formed largely to meet the needs of communities that depend on forests.

“Engaging with political processes can bring benefits, including access to capacity building and resources,” says Zora Nina Tbatupe, technical assistant at FLAG. “It can also give civil society organizations a seat at the table to engage in important national dialogues. But networks can also be exposed to certain risks if the process comes to an end or if funding is no longer available to support their meaningful participation or role.”

In the Central African Republic, all of the respondents to the online survey said the political process was the only reason for their network’s creation. Elsewhere, some respondents identified other reasons alongside political processes. Some highlighted the influence of donors and international organizations. Others said their networks had formed organically to meet their founder members’ needs or to fill gaps left by other networks. This suggests that when networks form it is often because of a variety of interconnected drivers. The perceived importance of these drivers can vary greatly within networks.

This diversity of perspectives is also apparent in the variety of responses people gave when asked to identify the main objectives of their networks. In both the Mekong region and the Congo Basin, at least one fifth of respondents selected each of the options listed in the questionnaire. In both regions, respondents most often selected the same five suggested network objectives: advocacy, information sharing, training and capacity building, information exchange and mobilization, although in a different order in each region. They were less likely to select innovation, evaluation, research or combination.

In the Mekong region, 80 percent of respondents selected “sharing information with the wider public” among the objectives of their networks; 58 percent selected “information exchange”; and 54 percent selected “training and capacity building”. All other answers were selected by less than half of the respondents.

In the Congo Basin, 86 percent of respondents selected “advocacy”; 64 percent selected “training and capacity building”; 57 percent selected “information exchange”; and 50 percent selected “mobilization”. All other answers were selected by less than half of the respondents.

The survey suffered from some ambiguity in the difference between the meanings of “information sharing” with the public and “information exchange”. Looking at these options together, shows that about 90 percent of respondents from the Mekong region, and almost 80 percent from the Congo Basin, selected one or both of these options.

## Formal or informal?

Apart from the Citizens’ Forest Network in Thailand, all of the networks the study considered in the Mekong region are formal networks, registered in the government system. By contrast, all of the networks in the Congo Basin are informal, apart from one in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (GTCRR), which is registered. This big difference between the regions may be a factor in the apparent differences in how networks in the two regions view and engage with governments.

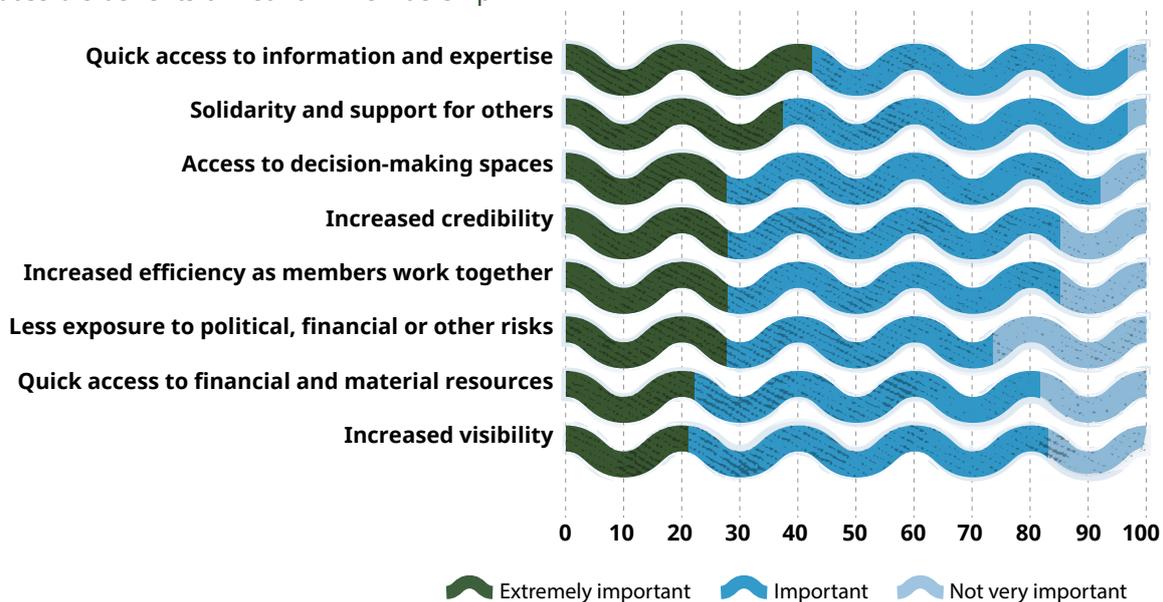
“Our analysis shows that facilitating information sharing with the public, targets of advocacy or among network members is a very important role that networks of civil society organizations play,” says Faure. “Networks are often seen as spaces of information sharing and learning among members and with external stakeholders.”

Another finding relating to the purpose of the networks concerns whose needs networks serve. When presented with a range of choices, survey respondents in both regions were most likely to say that responding to the needs of vulnerable groups, including communities, women, youth and Indigenous Peoples was most important.

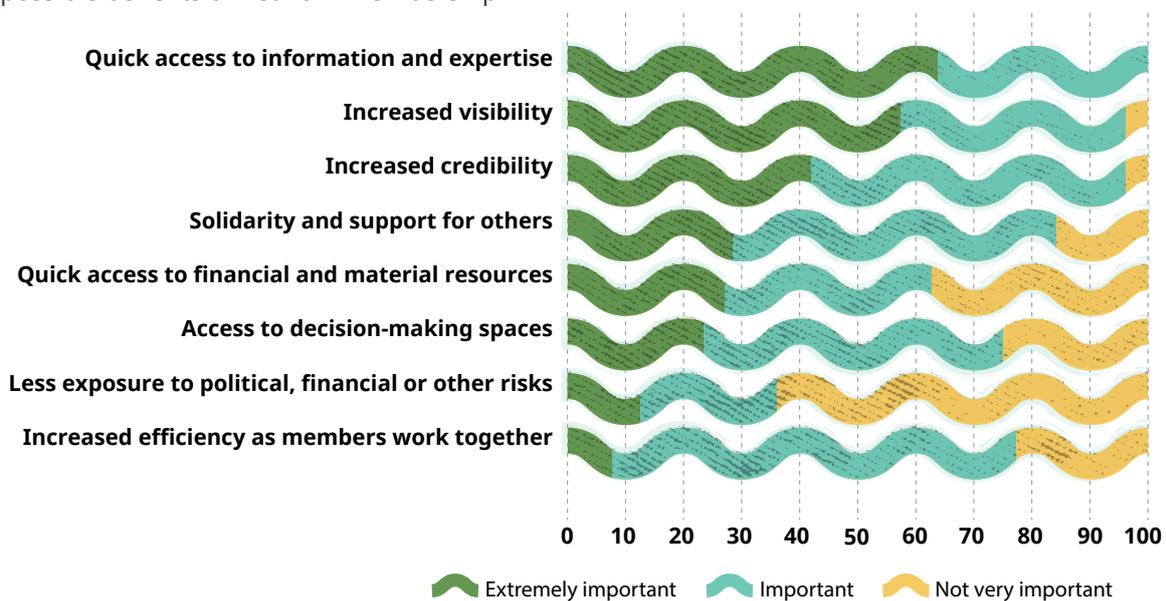
### How network members benefit

The survey asked respondents to rate the importance of eight benefits obtained from their engagement in their network. In the Mekong region, for all eight options, at least 70 percent of respondents said they were important or very important (Figure 1). In the Congo Basin, this was true for six of the eight options (Figure 2).

**Figure 1.** The extent to which network leaders and members in the Mekong region value each of eight possible benefits of network membership



**Figure 2.** The extent to which network leaders and members in the Congo Basin value each of eight possible benefits of network membership



In both regions, “Quick access to information and expertise” was the benefit that most respondents valued most highly. This was followed in the Congo Basin by “increased visibility” and “increased credibility”, and in the Mekong region by “solidarity and support for others”.

On the other hand, mitigation of exposure to risks, such as political and financial ones, is not considered a very important benefit of their network’s engagement by 67 percent of respondents from the Congo Basin. A fairly large proportion (38 percent) of these respondents also said “access to financial and material resources” is not a very important benefit they gain. These two kinds of benefits were also the lowest rated by respondents in the Mekong region, although a majority of respondents there still said each was important.

“Our findings suggest that the priorities and expectations of network members can sometimes differ from those of the networks themselves, as when a network is focused on advocacy but its members seek capacity building, access to funding, and so on,” says Aus der Beek. “Where there are mismatches in objectives, this might negatively influence member engagement in collective actions if members do not see how their individual organizations will benefit from those actions.”



## Chapter 2

# How networks and others define effectiveness

What does an effective network of CSOs look like? As the study shows, it depends on who you ask. This matters because it means that when networks, donors or governments talk about effectiveness, they might mean very different things.

The study's interviewees suggested a diverse set of criteria for defining network effectiveness, and the study team clustered these criteria into six categories (Figure 3). One thing that all interviewee groups agreed on was the importance of networks achieving their goals.

### Categories of criteria

The following are examples of criteria for assessing the effectiveness of civil society networks that the study team grouped into six categories:

#### Ability to achieve goals and have impact

- Set and reach objectives
- Have tangible results
- Create positive change

#### Cohesion

- Work together
- Raise joint concerns
- Influence external stakeholders
- Provide network support to members
- Link between national and local levels

#### Communication and information sharing

- Share knowledge at all levels
- Transparency

#### Resource availability

- Resource mobilization
- Financial autonomy and sustainability
- Wise use of resources

#### Representation and inclusiveness

- Raise voices of communities
- Gender equality
- Involve and empower all network members

#### Network structure and governance

- Leadership
- Efficient coordination body

“Effectiveness is the achievement of actions and results,” said one network member in Gabon. “An objective is set over time. And if after a certain amount of time we do not achieve the results we have set for ourselves, it means we are not effective.”

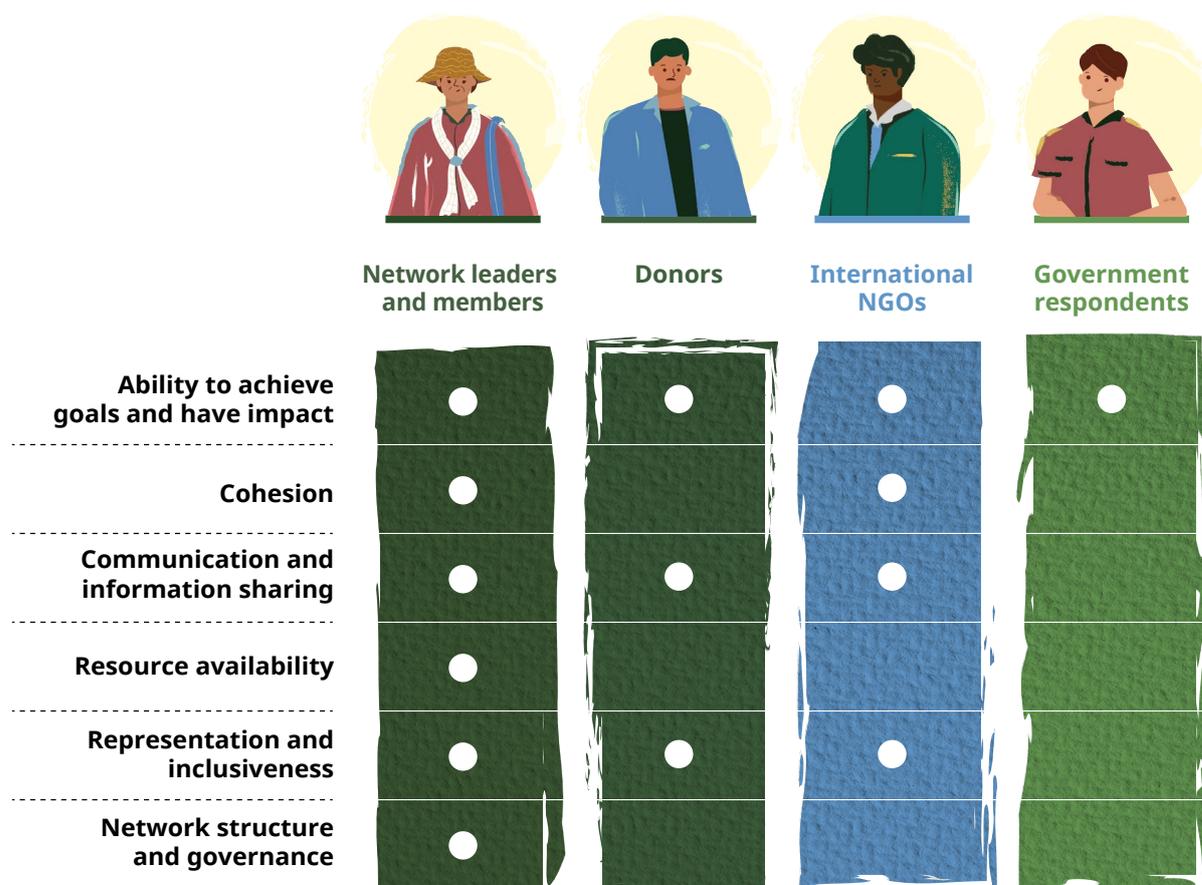
But as Figure 3 shows, network leaders and members also referred to criteria in all of the other five categories.

“From the perspectives of its members, an effective network has several characteristics,” says Aurelian Mbzibain, professor in international development and program manager at CIDT. “It achieves its goals and has impacts, and it demonstrates cohesion and power of influence. It has functional communication and information sharing systems as well as strong governance structures. It mobilizes and uses resources efficiently. And it operates with fair representation and inclusiveness.”

By contrast, the external stakeholders, such as governments and donors with which networks interact, seem to see effectiveness primarily through the lens of delivering network goals and objectives. They did not mention some of the other criteria during their interviews. However, if they had been given the option to score on these additional criteria they might have considered some of those as well.

The views of staff at international NGOs were more aligned with those of network leaders and members. They agreed that key characteristics of effectiveness include the ability to achieve goals and have an impact; network cohesion and power of influence; communication and information sharing; and representation and inclusiveness.

**Figure 3.** Six categories of criteria for assessing the effectiveness of CSO networks, as suggested by interviewees



conceptions of ‘effectiveness’ differ between networks and external actors, such as donors or government agencies. This is particularly the case around perspectives on the importance of sustainable finance.”

The study further examined the question of how to define effectiveness with its online survey of network leaders and members. The survey asked respondents to rate the importance of 10 characteristics of networks in contributing to effectiveness. In both regions, all 10 characteristics were rated as important or extremely important by more than 80 percent of respondents.

In the Mekong region, a majority said communication, involvement, shared vision and cohesion were extremely important. In the Congo Basin, a majority said this about communication, shared values, proactivity, influence and cohesion. The main difference between the regions was that respondents in the Congo Basin were much more likely than those in the Mekong region to say that ‘proactivity’ and ‘influence’ were extremely important.

This may reflect the broad inter-regional differences in network aims discussed in Chapter 1 of this report, with networks in the Congo Basin focusing more on advocacy than those in the Mekong region.

In both regions, the top-ranked criterion was ‘communication’. While a little more than half of respondents in the Mekong region rated it as extremely important, all respondents in the Congo Basin said so. This viewpoint was exemplified by one of the network members interviewed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

“Communication is the key word. Communication is a major element to ensure good functioning within a network. When there is no good fluidity of communication, whether it is internal or external, I think that the network will encounter huge problems. From my experience working in large networks, the biggest problem is often related to communication that is not optimal.”

This quote is revealing in that, when describing a criterion for defining effectiveness, the interviewee was also describing a factor that contributes to effectiveness. It emphasizes the nebulous nature of effectiveness as a concept, highlights the need for networks to define and assess their effectiveness, and also shows that effectiveness is not something that exists in a vacuum. The next section of this report explores in more detail what other factors can promote or limit a network’s effectiveness.

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## Proactivity

Respondents highlighted the need for networks to anticipate issues and work together to address them. For example, one interviewee from the Central African Republic emphasized “proactivity: the ability to act on problems that arise from the very beginning. Being able to take the lead, having the information to be able to influence decisions.”



## Chapter 3

# Factors influencing network effectiveness

Thailand's Citizens' Forest Network, which formed in 2018, brings together 34 CSOs and hundreds of community forestry groups across the country. It focuses on ensuring that people who depend on local forests can play active roles in sustainably managing and benefiting from those resources. This involves developing partnerships between communities and local governments, influencing policy and legal reforms, building capacity, doing research and raising awareness.

Interviewees were asked which factors would influence the network's effectiveness. One person stressed the need for a complementary mix of experiences and competences, adding that this increases trust in the network among both its members and the government:

"The Citizens' Forest Network benefits from the diversity and complementarity of expertise of leading organizations within the secretariat, with one more focused on conservation, another focused on livelihoods and citizens' rights, and another being good on integrating green and people-centred approaches."

Independence and cohesion are also important, said another member: "It is important to not get trapped by donors and to not get owned by individual network member organizations. Ownership must be with all participants."

These are just some of the factors that network leaders and members mentioned in interviews with the study team. In fact, interviewees in most countries identified a similar set of factors.

The three factors promoting effectiveness that interviewees in 11 of the 12 countries mentioned were financial autonomy and resource mobilization; communication and information-sharing; and commitment and motivation.

“The network must have a certain level of information exchange that comes either from the network coordination unit, its members or its partners,” said one interviewee from Cameroon. Another said: “Dynamism here means the network communicates about its actions and the actions of its members and also the network ensures its visibility, and that of its members.”

On the issue of finance, an interviewee from Ghana said: “Continuous funding ensures effectiveness.” One from Liberia said that: “Internal income generating mechanisms can help reduce dependency on external donor funding and ensure financial viability of the organization.”

It is notable that while the networks themselves emphasized finance in this way, representatives of governments did not seem to indicate the lack of funding as a challenge for networks.

In 10 countries, interviewees mentioned internal governance and structures, and expertise, capacity and skills. For example, one from the Democratic Republic of the Congo emphasized, “having the technical capacity to carry out these activities and achieve these objectives successfully.”

And in nine countries, interviewees mentioned unity and speaking with a common voice, and the network’s ability to function as a learning platform for capacity building. “The element that catalyses the effectiveness of the network is cohesion,” said one from the Republic of the Congo. Another from Liberia said: “Togetherness and sharing information with each other make us more effective in what we want to deliver on.”

Network leaders and members highlighted the importance of sharing certain values such as adaptability, trust and harmony, accountability, autonomy, transparency, work ethics, patience, innovation and creativity. Interviewees at international NGOs also mentioned values such as transparency, neutrality, unity and innovation. They were, however, most likely to mention knowledge, expertise, advocacy skills and sustainable funding as internal factors promoting the effectiveness of networks.

“The international NGOs also highly rated synergies, complementarities and sustainability of supported initiatives, as well as commitment, engagement, availability and accountability of members,” says Aus der Beek. “They said it is important for network members to work together, based on consensus and cohesion, and so avoid competing according to their individual interests. This depends on strong leadership and network management, as well as related internal governance and structure.”

Network leaders and members also highlighted some internal challenges that can limit effectiveness. These included a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, conflict or competition among members, and turnover of network members.

“It is hard to find people with good knowledge as they leave for other organizations,” said an interviewee from Lao PDR. “We try to attract highly educated people to work with us, but it’s difficult as we don’t have so much income to offer.”

## Digital futures

Donors were the only interviewees to mention the importance of digital access, use of social media and digital security. This is important for networks to consider in the contexts of not only effective working practices, but also the safety of individuals who may be working on sensitive issues.



Internal income generating mechanisms can help reduce dependency on external donor funding and ensure financial viability of the organization

Member of civil society network from Liberia

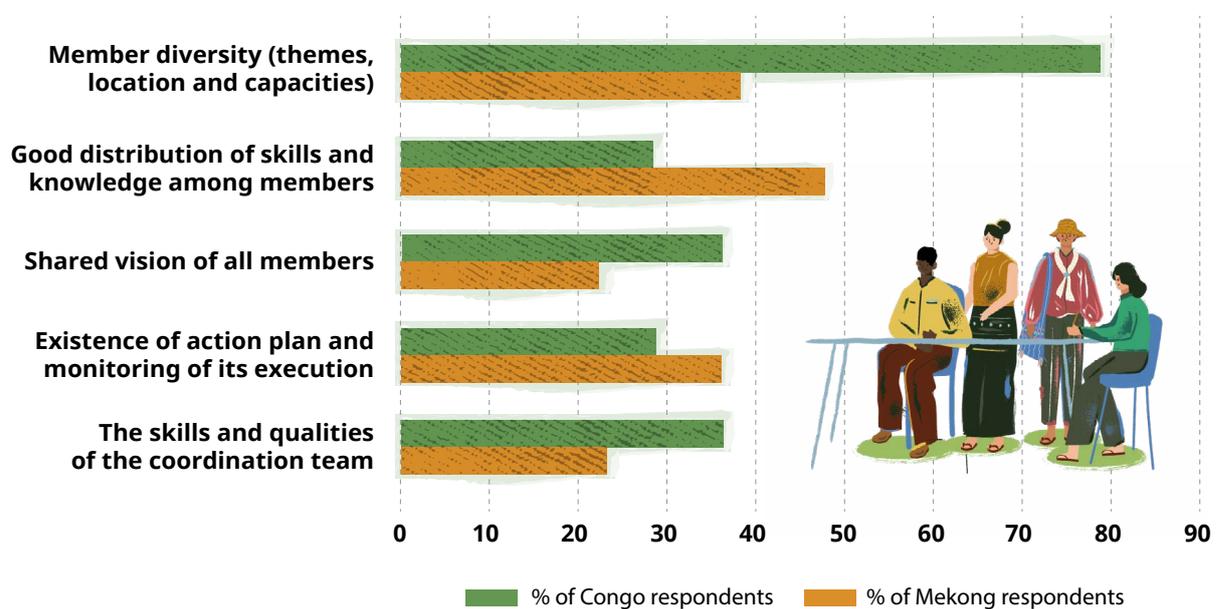
## Comparing regions

The online survey allowed the study team to explore regional differences in the internal and external factors that help or hinder networks. In the Congo Basin, 79 percent of respondents overwhelmingly identified the diversity of a network's members as being a key factor promoting effectiveness (Figure 4).

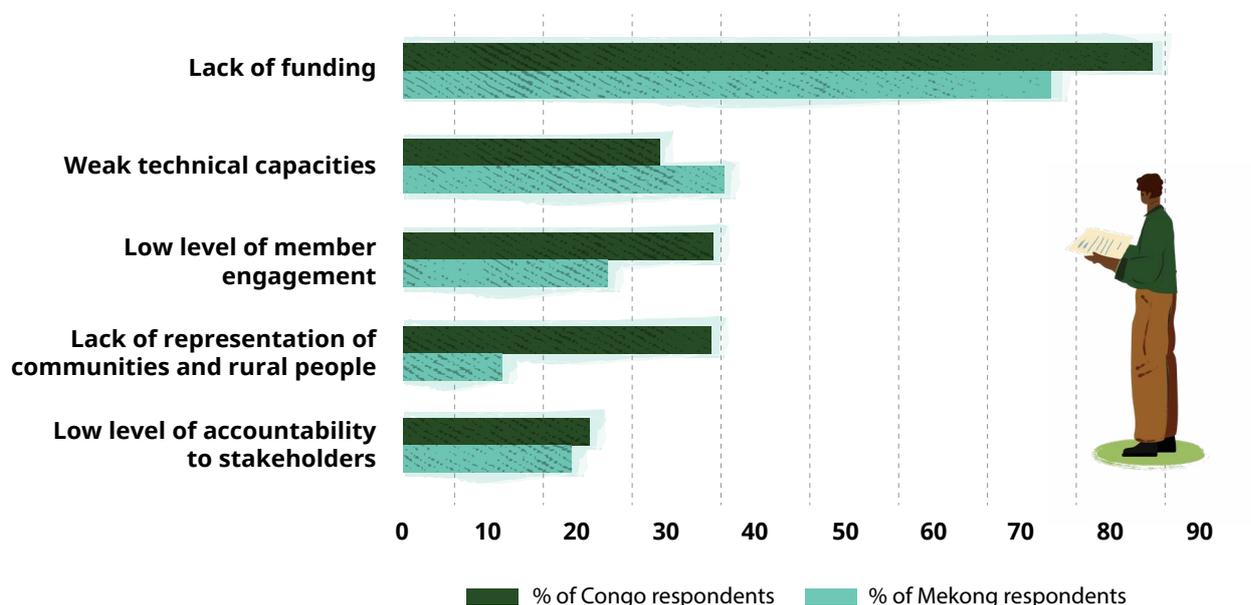
In the Mekong region, 48 percent of respondents identified the distribution of skills and knowledge among network members as an important factor. All of the other factors, such as shared vision between the members, the decision-making process or the structure of the network, were fairly evenly selected by network members in both regions.

In both regions, large majorities of respondents identified a lack of funding as an internal barrier (Figure 5). About a third or less of respondents in each region identified any of the other options as being important internal barriers, including the low level of members' engagement or the lack of representation of communities.

**Figure 4.** Top five internal factors contributing to effectiveness, according to network leaders and members



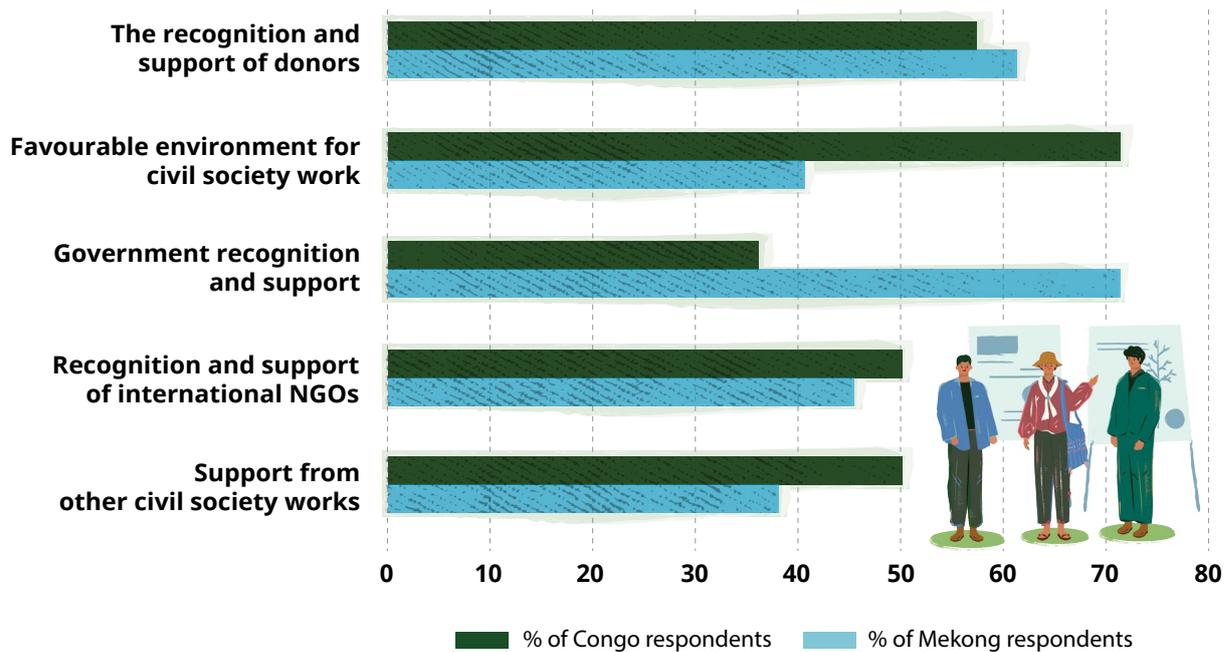
**Figure 5.** Top five internal barriers to effectiveness, according to network leaders and members who completed the online survey



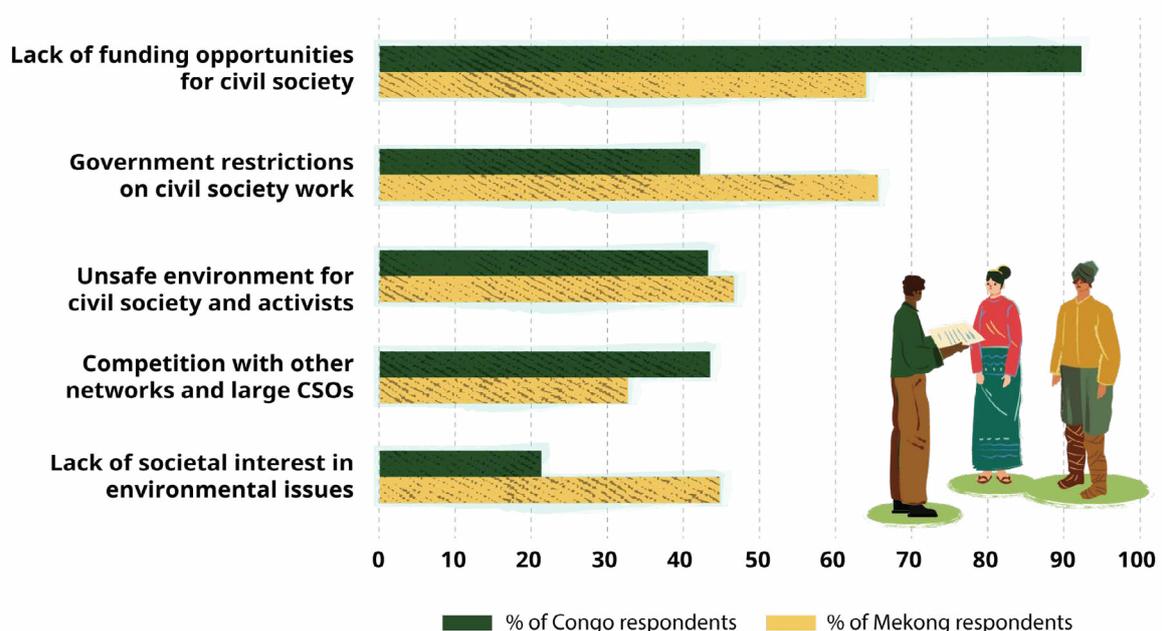
Among external factors promoting network effectiveness, large majorities of respondents in the Mekong region identified recognition and support by government (71 percent) and by donors (61 percent) as important (Figure 6). In the Congo Basin, majorities of respondents identified a favourable working environment for civil society (71 percent) and recognition and support of donors (57 percent).

In both regions, a majority of respondents said a lack of funding opportunities limited effectiveness: 91 percent from the Congo Basin and 65 percent from the Mekong (Figure 7). In the Mekong, a majority also identified government restrictions on civil society work as a factor to take into account.

**Figure 6.** Top five external factors contributing to effectiveness, according to network leaders and members



**Figure 7.** Top five external barriers to effectiveness, according to network leaders and members who completed the online survey



It is notable that large majorities of respondents from the Mekong region highlighted the importance of government recognition and emphasized government restrictions as a challenge to their work. In this region, CSOs have to comply with several requirements, including those relating to their procedures, eligibility and reporting. Processes in which governments seek contributions from civil society, such as FLEGT VPA and REDD+, can create opportunities for networks to gain the recognition they need to perform their work. But perhaps more than in the Congo Basin, this may demand networks in the Mekong region to tread a fine line between engaging in advocacy and collaborating with national governments to contribute to those processes.

Concerningly high proportions (more than 40 percent) of respondents in both regions identified an unsafe environment for civil society and activists.

“Many of the processes in which civil society organizations intervene promote good forest governance with a peaceful and open participation of all stakeholders, including civil society,” says Faure. “But the lack of security experienced by civil society networks, whether it is through a restrictive legal or political environment or other types of threats such as physical ones, may seriously challenge the quality of that participation. This must be taken into account when assessing the results of a specific process. In addition, monitoring how safe the environment is for civil society to operate and creating safeguards for their meaningful participation are key areas that these processes can themselves help to improve.”



## Chapter 4

# How networks perceive their effectiveness

As leaders and members strive to improve the effectiveness of their networks, it is important for them to understand the current status, including strengths, weaknesses and gaps. Their perceptions of network effectiveness can highlight areas for improvement.

The survey asked network leaders and members to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with 17 statements about network effectiveness. The responses show that, overall, network members are satisfied with the performance of their networks.

People from the Mekong region were far more likely to say this than those in the Congo Basin. The average level of agreement across all of the statements was 75 percent of respondents from the Mekong region, but only 53 percent from the Congo Basin.

There were only five statements that more than 70 percent of respondents agreed with in both regions:

- Network leaders help members take an active role in defining priority issues for the network
- Network members feel free to discuss issues of gender and social inclusion in the network
- Network leaders systematically integrate gender issues into decision-making and activities
- The structure of the network is suited to its objective
- The structure allows for the diversity of knowledge, skills and abilities of its members to achieve its purpose

“It is encouraging that network members and leaders in both regions agree on this set of statements, as they encapsulate core aspects of effectiveness that relate to inclusion, diversity, knowledge and network structure,” says Njike. “But it is concerning that a majority of respondents in the Congo Basin did not agree with seven of the 17 statements.”

In particular, it is notable that only 27 percent of respondents from the Congo Basin said that their network’s structure allowed the coordination team to be financially and technically sustainable, compared to 76 percent from the Mekong region. And just 7 percent said that network members communicate and collaborate with each other without going through the leadership or the network coordination unit, whereas 69 percent of respondents from the Mekong region said this.

This finding draws attention to the key roles that leaders have in shaping their networks and enabling members to operate effectively. As an interviewee from Viet Nam said: “Networks need to have a responsive leader, someone who has respect from members, who can convince and persuade members, who can analyze the situation and can encourage active participation.”

In the Mekong region, it is notable that a great majority of respondents (over 85 percent) agreed to all statements relating to gender and social equity inclusion as being applicable to their network. This includes having a gender and inclusion policy in place within the network; the network leaders having received specific training on social inclusion and gender mainstreaming; and systematically encouraging the participation of less powerful and marginalized groups in setting the network’s priorities.

“RECOFTC’s Voices for Mekong Forests project has put much effort and emphasis on supporting CSOs to increase gender and social inclusion awareness, so it is encouraging to see this reflected in the networks’ actions and the processes with which they engage,” says Faure.

In both regions, respondents indicated concern about the risk of influential members leaving the network. In the Mekong region, slightly more than half of respondents agreed that the network would remain strong in such a scenario. While this is still a majority of respondents, it was by far the lowest level of agreement with any of the 17 statements in this region. In the Congo Basin, only 23 percent of respondents agreed that the network would remain strong.



Saisavanh Thaviphone from Lao PDR, vice president of the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) in Paklai District, Xayabouly Province, discusses how she participated in the Voices For Mekong Forests project to learn more about FLEGT and REDD+ so she could participate in decision-making processes.



## Chapter 5

# Towards a better understanding of network effectiveness

Unsustainable exploitation of natural resources in conflict with customary land rights has increased environmental degradation, land conflicts and accelerated impacts of climate change. Calls for stronger engagement of communities and civil society in the management of natural resources can ensure that people's rights and concerns are integrated in the governance of natural resources they depend on, and prevent land conflicts, deforestation and climate change.

### 1. 'Effectiveness' means different things to different people

The leaders and members of civil society networks take a far broader view of effectiveness than do other groups, especially representatives of governments and donor agencies. To networks, effectiveness means much more than simply achieving goals. It is important, therefore, for governments, donors and NGOs to appreciate how networks define effectiveness and which factors, particularly external ones, improve or hinder it. It is also important for the networks to understand the different perspectives of the external groups that they interact with. This will help networks focus on areas that satisfy the needs of their supporters, while working on the other key internally relevant measures such as resource availability and internal governance structures.

### 2. Finance is a weak spot

Network leaders and members mentioned sustainable financing of their networks throughout the interviews and surveys as a criterion for assessing effectiveness, and as both internal and external factors influencing effectiveness. Here, the mismatch in perspectives between networks

and others matters. International NGOs, donors and government representatives were all less concerned about finance.

### **3. Communication is central to what networks do**

In both regions, survey respondents and interviewees repeatedly raised the importance of communication, both within networks and externally with other stakeholders such as targets of advocacy and the wider public. With members prioritizing information sharing and communication, networks need to invest in effective strategies and systems for internal and external communication. Donors could focus their support on strengthening such systems to enable platforms to meet their needs. By doing so, they could enhance members' motivation and commitment to network-level objectives. As mentioned by interviewees in donor agencies, digital communication and social media are increasingly important aspects of communication for networks to consider, paying close attention to sensitivity as well as legality risks and restrictions.

### **4. Networks are vulnerable to turnover in personnel**

Network members in the Mekong region and the Congo Basin expressed concerns about the ability of their networks to retain, or cope with the loss of, key personnel. Most CSOs and networks depend to a large extent on volunteers, or pay comparatively low wages. This helps them to overcome resource gaps but unfortunately also results in high turnover, as many leave when opportunities for paid employment arise. This leads to a loss of institutional memory and capacity, and can create a vicious capacity-gap cycle that tends to weaken networks over time as they struggle to motivate and retain competent staff. At the same time, this also implies continuous re-investments in capacity building of new members.

### **5. The environment in which networks operate is significant**

Mekong region respondents ranked government recognition as the most important external factor, while Congo Basin respondents ranked a favourable civic space as most important. In both regions, respondents ranked unsafe working environments for CSOs and activists among the top four constraints. These findings highlight the need for networks to navigate and manage relations with the state. Failure to do so could lead to conflict, which will limit the intention or willingness of governments to integrate their contributions to different policy processes.

### **6. The networks value gender equality and social inclusion**

Network representatives, donors and international NGOs all cited representation and inclusiveness as a key criterion of effectiveness, although less often they mentioned other criteria. Representation and inclusiveness relates to the ability to amplify the voices of communities, to ensure gender equality and to involve and empower all network members. In the Congo Basin, a slight majority (about 60 percent) of the male and female respondents confirmed that their networks have a gender and social inclusion policy, that the networks feel free to discuss related issues, and that network leaders systematically integrate gender issues into decision-making processes. In the Mekong region, the vast majority (about 90 percent) of male and female network representatives said the same. In both regions, respondents also believe that the leaders of the networks systematically encourage marginalized groups, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, to participate in setting networks' priorities.

### **7. It is important for networks to define and assess their effectiveness**

Governments, donors and international organizations that engage with civil society networks need to understand how these networks define and perceive their effectiveness to focus efforts and account for actions taken as they spend internal or externally mobilized resources. Having

a shared understanding of what effectiveness means can inspire success and avoid unintended impacts of actions taken by all stakeholders, from network members to donors and international development agencies.

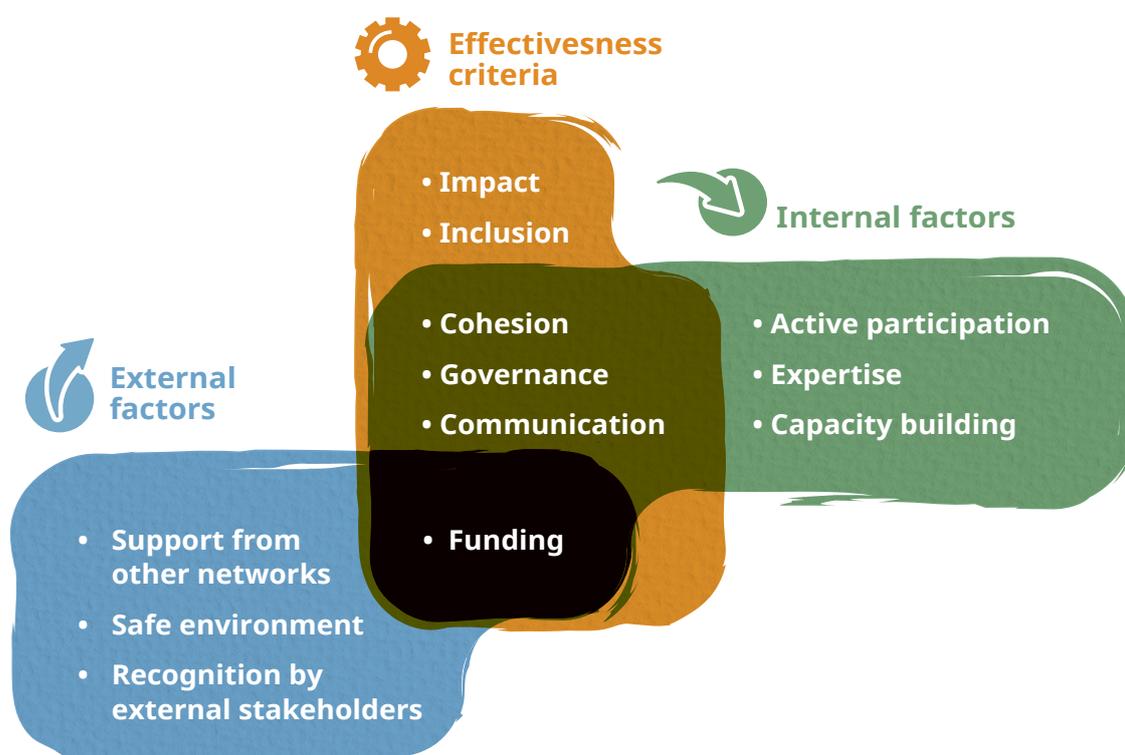
CSO networks can assess their effectiveness using the guide *Assessing the effectiveness of civil society networks*. This guide allows for a participatory assessment of the main criteria for network effectiveness as well as the internal and external factors that promote effectiveness.



### Assessing the effectiveness of civil society networks

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The results of such an assessment will be a rating of the criteria, internal factors and external factors of the network. The assessment can be used to design an action plan to improve effectiveness in the identified areas.



Main criteria and factors of effectiveness of civil society networks, *Assessing the effectiveness of civil society networks*, RECOFTC, 2021.



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