

# Networks learn from Learning Histories

The research programme *Networks in Animal Husbandry* began in 2004 without any concrete final objectives. The programme did have to contribute in all sorts of ways: by making “knowledge from the shelf” applicable, to making animal farming more robust, stimulating new knowledge arrangements and even to system innovations. It did all that – and more – in its facilitating role in the networks of animal farmers and other stakeholders in the sector. The programme began in effect as a big experiment.

From the start of *Networks in Animal Husbandry*, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation (EL&I) who commissioned it, wanted the main focus to be on concrete relevant output from the research programme. But because of the experimental character of *Networks in Animal Husbandry*, it became quickly apparent that the learning experience needed to be explicated and shared. Because of this, monitoring and evaluation in the network played a double role: it fostered both learning and accountability. The relevant questions played at two levels within the project as well. In the first, the facilitators wanted to reflect on and learn about the effectiveness of their intervention strategies (can we do things better?) and the project leadership was interested in both tracing the network’s development and testing the network as an instrument in itself. As well as that, the project was accountable to the EL&I for the achieved results. This variety of goals made it difficult to monitor and evaluate the programme. The network had to decide where it should focus its attention. In the course of the project the answer became clearer (see figure 1).

## >> The first round of networks

For the network facilitators in the first sixty networks, it was a search to find out which tasks they should and could do. Was it a question of clearly leading the networks or was it more a case of assuming a less directive role. What did the networks need most? Knowledge input, contribution to the process or working on the conditions for realising the network objectives? The ideas of the networks and network facilitators often differed dramatically. These differences were discussed at length in combined network facilitators meetings, which were supported by a methodical and conceptual contribution from the action research team. This team was set up in the project to support the network facilitators in the implementation and development of their role and their task was to provide the monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

The action research team began by designing a coordinated monitoring model. They did this by looking at what was happening in a few networks, but also by approaching the network facilitators with

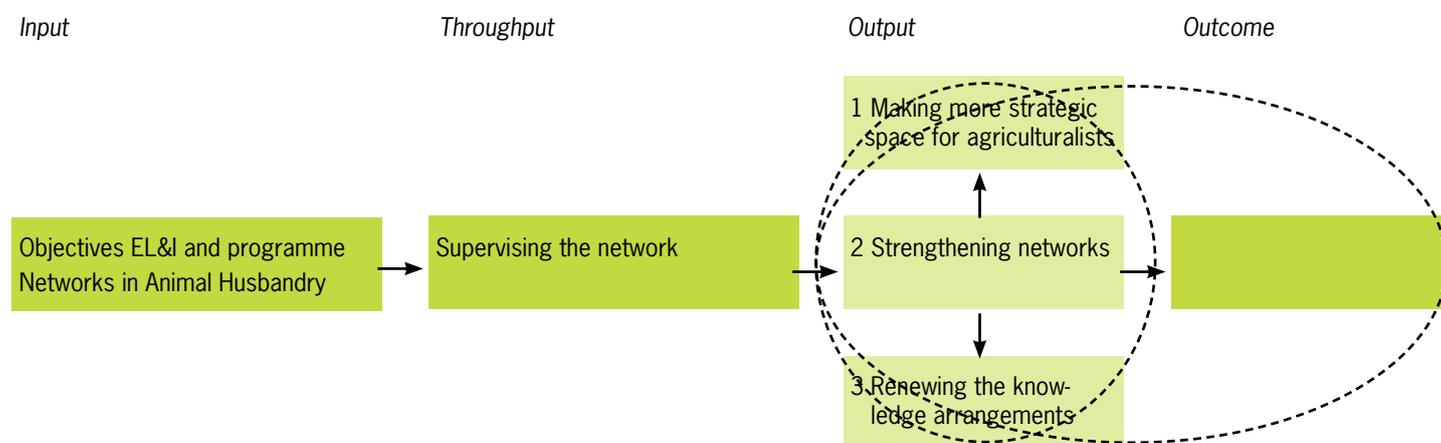


Figure 1. Flow chart of input through to outcome of Networks in animal husbandry. The dotted lines show the focus of the monitoring and evaluation.

lists of questions such as: what are you doing? What are the network's main activities? The idea was that this would deliver a significant amount of information on how the network functioned and how the network facilitators approached their role. In many cases, the network facilitators saw this method of working as a form of interference or sign of mistrust. They were themselves surely responsible for the functioning of the network? No-one else other than the network leadership had anything to do with this? In the end it was not so much the monitoring by the action research team but the combined meetings with network leaders that offered the most insights. Among other things about the way in which network facilitators guided the network; about the differences in perceptions about the project goals and the priorities within it; in the necessary criteria for participation in networks and in how the programme can better support the networks and their facilitators. The meetings revealed clearly that a number of network facilitators had difficulty dealing with the change from being a researcher to being a process manager.

### >> The second round

The network facilitators in the second round of networks in 2006 were also recruited as action researchers. This involved not only supervising the networks but at the same time also reflecting on the network's functioning and then looking for improvements to the working methods. In this way a foundation was laid for monitoring and evaluation "on the job". Every network facilitator began with at least two networks to acquire more, more rapid and broader experience. Facilitators from outside of Wageningen UR were brought in to provide different supervising skills and to anchor the working methods outside of Wageningen UR as well.

The network facilitators received focused support by the action research team with a number of new instruments to acquire more insight into network processes and to develop intervention strategies which could help the network progress. The instruments chosen were: network analysis, triangle of change, innovation spiral and coherency circle (see figure 2).

The network facilitators could also ask questions and share experiences during intervention meetings. This was the first form of interactive monitoring and evaluation whereby the relevant information from intervention meetings was shared at programme level. As well as that, the effect monitor was developed to explicate the effect of the networks on the evolution of new knowledge arrangements; on the entrepreneurs' strategic space; and on the contribution to sustainable agriculture. Strategic space refers to the opportunities and possibilities which the entrepreneur sees for developing his business (space to move in).

### >> Learning history as M&E method

The search was on for an M&E method that could include all relevant levels (facilitator, network and programme) and would deliver usable results quickly. This was found in Learning History (see box and figure 1). This method offered the networks, in modified form, the opportunity to explicate what was learned and achieved up till now. Facilitators could describe and evaluate the intervention strategies with it. At programme level, the goals for working with networks as well as the results could be explained. The instruments that were developed for the network facilitators could be integrated into this M&E approach (see figure 2). The instruments enhanced the possibility for reflection on the network processes. Both the

## Networks in Animal Husbandry

The research programme *Networks in Animal Husbandry*, financed by the Ministry of EL&I was set up in 2004 with the objective of developing a network approach which would give an impulse towards a more sustainable animal husbandry sector. Guiding principles in this programme were: issue-steered from within agrarian business practice; the desire to learn together; and forming connections. Collaborative entrepreneurial initiatives could apply to the Ministry for support via public tender. Selection was made on the basis of the importance to the sector and to society in general and the innovation and drive of the applicants. In the first tender, in 2004, 165 ideas were submitted and 60 of them received support. In the second tender, the criteria were more severe. There were fewer applicants for that reason, but they had a higher sustainability quotient. Finally, the third and last tender delivered once again 60 supported networks. In the four year duration of the programme, a total of 120 different networks were supported; some for one year and a number for several years. The support involved providing process supervision by a network facilitator, who could if necessary access knowledge from within Wageningen UR or other knowledge institutions. There was also a team for the external communication. An action research team provided the monitoring and evaluation methods and support for the network facilitators.



## Learning History

The Learning History method was originally developed for organisations in transition processes with the objective of involving workers more closely with these processes and to allow everyone to learn from them. In the setting of the *Networks in Animal Husbandry* programme, this method was modified and named “Network Story” (figure 1). The basis for this was the Time-line Method, an interactive session with network participants where they named the most striking moments and occasions along a time-line. The network story was written on the basis of this, supplemented with reflections by the network supervisor and the action researchers, viewed through different glasses such as the Network Analysis, the Triangle of Change, the Innovation Spiral and the Circle of Coherence (figure 2). The Effect Monitor was also added; the network results described in terms of increasing the entrepreneurs’ strategic space and that of the networks and the resulting knowledge arrangements.

network facilitators and the network participants were very enthusiastic about simultaneously sharing ideas and learning about network processes and the parts of the story that were suitable for external communication.

In 2007, 29 learning histories from the second round of networks were analyzed. The network facilitator’s own development from project director via network facilitator to the new role as free actor emerged from this analysis (Wielinga et al., 2008). From being a network manager that is the type of project leader who plans the network activities, minds the budget and reports on progress; working from and with the linear knowledge transfer model. Via the network facilitator who guides the process and is less involved in the content; someone who stimulates co-creation of knowledge in the network and consciously steers towards increasing the strategic space for the participants. To the free actor who mirrors and reflects and above all stimulates on the basis of energy and connection; someone who continuously fosters learning within the network. The network facilitators observed that research colleagues slowly began to see the value of their changing research role. In short, we not only perceived a change in approach in the entrepreneurs’ business practice, but also in the entrepreneurial researcher who took up the role of free actor. The learning histories have also shown what the output was from the networks’ activities (effect monitor). Entrepreneurs became more conscious of their environment and could more easily make their own connections with other parties. They also applied this approach with other challenges. And new coalitions were created between entrepreneurs, other parties in the chain and education.

### >> What have we learned from Learning History?

The method, Learning History has proved itself in *Networks in Animal Husbandry* to be a suitable instrument for monitoring and

evaluation in learning environments, for both the network participants and facilitators. An inspirational organisational form creates insight into how the network dynamics evolve; how different organisational forms can be guided and steered; and which processes of change can be identified in the field. The network stories (learning histories) are a fascinating form in which to communicate both the content and the process of networks and their results to third parties. It can be an example to others to take a similar approach and to show what can be achieved. To conclude: the chosen organisational structure in *Networks in animal husbandry* created a close collaboration between the different programme components. Because of this, and the informal consultation structures based on the network philosophy, the programme set-up and supervision structure could be continually modified and optimized. The inter-*vis*ion structure turned out to be a valuable form in which to address the network facilitators as action researchers and to help them share experiences with each other and to learn together.