ampliseed

BUILD, SUSTAIN, EVOLVE

A Network Builder's Toolkit

August 2025

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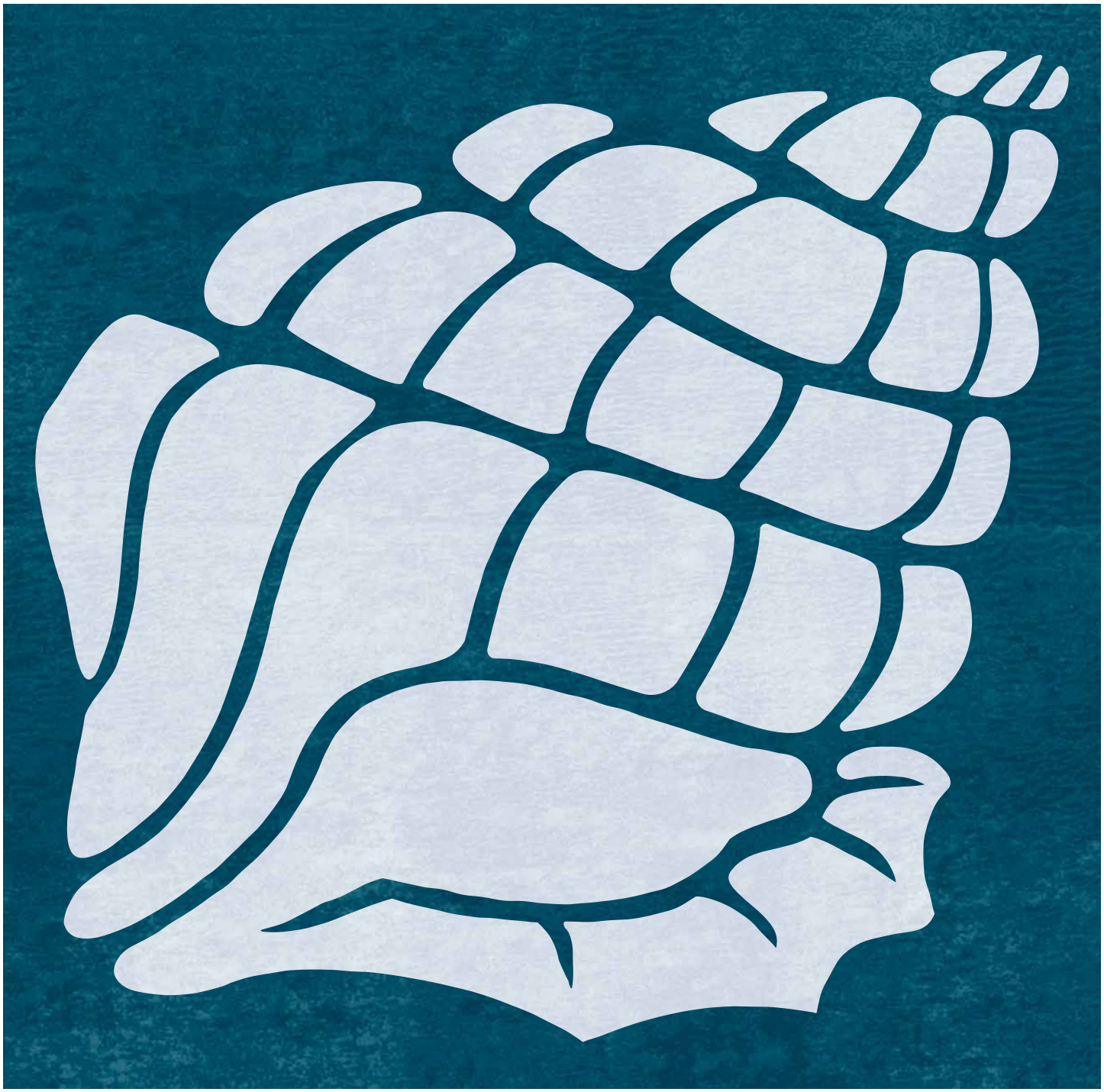

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the past, present and future generations
of Traditional Owners, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
across all the lands, waters and oceans in which we live, work and enjoy.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If you are looking to build or energise a collaborative community, this toolkit offers practical insights, inspiration, and step-by-step support.

1.1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The insights in this toolkit have been shaped by five years of practical experience leading Ampliseed, a dynamic global community of practice dedicated to knowledge-sharing, collaborative learning, and leadership growth (Appendix A). These real-world lessons are strengthened by established theories of learning and network development, offering you proven methods to build thriving and effective communities.

We focus primarily on how to build and strengthen learning networks and communities of practice (CoPs). A learning network is a group where people regularly connect, exchange experiences, and learn together to solve shared problems or reach common goals. Similarly, a CoP brings together people who share the same professional interests or activities to discuss ideas, improve skills, and deepen their knowledge over time. Both approaches use peer-to-peer learning, where members actively share lessons and experiences, helping everyone in the group grow and improve together.

WHAT'S IN THE TOOLKIT?

This toolkit is structured to provide both practical step-by-step guidance and insightful reflections on how to build, sustain, and evolve a learning network, and ways to support local leaders to implement systemic change.

The toolkit offers:

- Step-by-step instructions for network formation and management.
- Case studies and real-world examples from Ampliseed's experience.
- Checklists and templates to support implementation.
- Insights on advocacy, governance, and sustainability.

Toolkit Structure

Chapter	Focus area
Chapter 2	Understanding different network models
Chapter 3	Using co-design to build strong partnerships
Chapter 4	Designing a strong foundation for a learning network
Chapter 5	Key lessons in building a community of practice
Chapter 6	Activities that sustain engagement
Chapter 7	Tech tools for collaboration and knowledge management
Chapter 8	Overcoming challenges, and solutions for long-term success

Ampliseed event at Tingana, Moyobamba, Peru. © Bill Salazar

Who is the toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed to support organisations that are developing, managing, or engaging with learning networks and communities of practice. It offers targeted guidance and practical tools for:

- **Organisations and collectives** seeking meaningful connection aligned with shared values. Follow clear, step-by-step instructions to establish a strong foundation for your network.
- **On-the-ground practitioners** aiming to strengthen peer-to-peer learning. Use the checklists and case studies to refine your approach to learning and enhance operational effectiveness.
- **Philanthropic funders** looking to support sustainable, high-impact networks. Gain valuable insights into best practices for fostering and evaluating effective learning networks.
- **Development agencies** and NGOs facilitating cross-sector collaboration. Leverage resources and tools tailored to promote successful partnerships and integrated learning.

CHECKLIST: GETTING STARTED

- ○ Use the decision tree to identify which structures are most relevant to achieving your goals.
- ○ Identify which stage your network is at and focus on the most relevant chapters.
- ○ Engage your team and partners to review the toolkit's insights, together.
- ○ Explore your funding options and agree on the model (or combined models) to follow.
- ○ Use the checklists and templates to structure your network-building efforts.
- ○ Reflect on the case studies and adapt lessons learnt to your context.
- ○ Reviewing the questions in Appendix B will help ensure you have covered all the foundations for setting up a new network.

Resillient Reefs Initative © Joel Johnsson

Toolkit topics to explore

• **Co-design.** Found your network with the member interests at the heart. Regularly ask members for feedback and adapt your plans according to their suggestions. • **Test, learn and adapt.** Pilot new ideas, listen closely to your members' feedback and stay open to changing your approach as your network develops.	***Chapter 3: Partnership principles.***
• **Connection matters.** Curate intentional spaces for connection. Provide opportunities for members to meet face-to-face as well as online, to nurture relationships and grow the confidence for members to share 'out of the box' ideas and be honest about challenges. • **Build trust and inclusion.** Make sure your network is safe, respectful, and welcoming, especially for Indigenous Peoples and local communities. • **The knowledge is in the network.** Support your members share their own valuable knowledge from delivering project work on the ground. • **Curation is key.** Use skilled facilitators who make everyone feel comfortable and involved, organising a mix of informal discussions and structured activities.	***Chapter 4: Learning networks.***
• **Evolve.** As your network matures, it will move from sharing ideas to taking practical steps together and aiming to achieve real-world outcomes. • **Build leadership capacity.** Provide opportunities and resources for member growth. Encourage your members to become influential leaders, who drive systemic change beyond the network itself. • **Systemic change: scale your impact beyond the network**. Spread what your network learns widely to influence broader policy changes, foster new partnerships, and inspire best practices in your sector.	***Chapter 5: Communities of Practice.***
• **Balance virtual meetings with in-person exchange.** Use virtual meetings regularly for convenience, but organise face-to-face experiences to build deeper relationships. • **Working groups.** Form smaller, focused teams to delve deeply into specific topics or challenges. • **Storytelling and communication.** Develop clear and compelling narratives that resonate both within and beyond the network.	***Chapter 6: Activities and approaches.***
• **Simple tools often work best.** Don't overlook low-tech solutions. Prioritize clarity and accessibility over novelty. • **Invest in onboarding and support.** Pair every tech solution with human facilitation. Tools need "weavers" to make them useful.	***Chapter 7: Technical aspects.***
• **Stay agile.** Be ready to adjust quickly when circumstances change, ensuring your network can effectively handle new challenges. • **Plan for financial sustainability.** Explore diverse funding sources, such as grants, partnerships, and innovative financing, to ensure your network remains sustainable and resilient.	***Chapter 8: Challenges and solutions.***

2. NETWORK DECISION TREE

Treat this decision tree as flexible. Community structures naturally evolve - informal beginnings often transition to more formal arrangements. Hybrid approaches can also be effective, such as formal alliances hosting internal CoPs.

2.1 HOW TO CHOOSE A STRUCTURE

This guide aims to help you build a network or community of practice – however, many different structures are possible. You can use the decision tree and explanations below to help choose the best structure for your needs – but remember it's a tool, not a strict set of rules.

Communities naturally grow and change, so you might start with one structure and shift to another as your needs evolve. It's common to begin informally and become more structured later. You might also use a hybrid approach, like a formal alliance that includes an internal community of practice for training. Review your structure regularly to ensure it continues to meet your community's goals.

Step 1: Define your purpose

What is it you want to do?

- **Advocacy or Influencing Policy**: Advocating for rights, changing policy, or amplifying a collective voice.
- **Shared Learning or Knowledge Exchange**: Sharing knowledge, building skills, and learning together.
- **Coordination or Collective Action**: Coordinating activities or pooling resources among groups.
- **Cultural Strengthening and Community Building**: Strengthening cultural identity, language, or community ties.

If none of these fit, choose the closest or combine multiple options.

Step 2: Identify which structure best meets your needs

Follow the decision tree to identify which types of collaboration structures to explore first – and then read more about the different structures below.

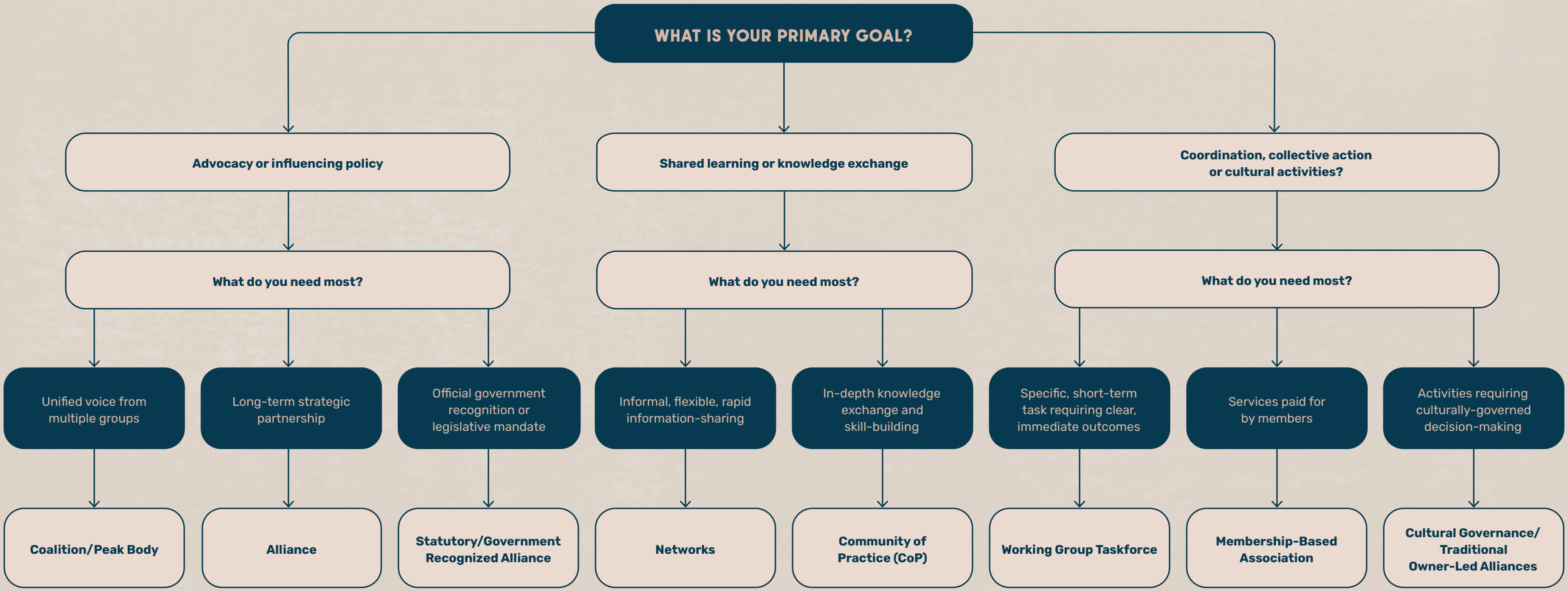
CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

All structures need to allow time for relationship-building and consensus in line with cultural styles of collaboration (for example, Indigenous collaboration styles may be more informal or story-based rather than forcing a more structured and formalised Western approach).

It is also helpful to consider at the outset how you'll thoughtfully steward Indigenous knowledge – any traditional knowledge shared in a group must be used only with permission and proper context.

Place-based knowledge exchange with the Alto Mayo Project, Peru. © Pollination Foundation

2.2 DECISION TREE TOOL



2.3 SHARED LEARNING/KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE MECHANISMS

Networks

A network usually begins as a loose web of relationships that enables people or organisations to stay connected, swap information and lend support. It is easy to start (an email list, chat group or periodic call) and can grow or evolve into something more formal or focused once trust, shared purpose and capacity increase.

Pros:

- Flexible and inclusive.
- Facilitate rapid information sharing.
- Reduces isolation.
- Adapts easily to members' needs.
- Can evolve into more formal collaborations once trust and shared ideas develop.

Cons:

- Limited accountability which means ideas don't always become actions.
- May struggle without clear objectives or leadership.
- Inconsistent participation may result in uneven knowledge exchange.
- Often rely on volunteer effort or minimal funding, risking burnout for the key convenors.
- Minimal external influence.

When to use: For broad inclusion and informal ongoing communication.

Capacity needs: Low. Participants mainly need the willingness and time to communicate. The most successful networks usually have a facilitator or "backbone" organisation to send updates, organize in person gatherings or online forums, and keep people connected.

Governance: Minimal governance is needed for an informal network, trust builds through regular interaction. As a network grows, the need for more formal governance will become more pressing. Some structure (like regular check-in calls or an advisory group) is required to help sustain connections.

Community of Practice (CoP)

A CoP unites practitioners who share a passion or problem and want to learn together over time. Regular interaction (online, in person or hybrid) builds collective knowledge, strengthens skills and nurtures a shared identity without requiring a heavy governance structure.

Pros:

- Deep knowledge sharing.
- Strengthens specialised skills, from peers who truly understand the context.
- Builds strong peer relationships.
- Ideal for generating innovative ideas, best practice guidelines, joint publications.
- Can nurture cultural knowledge.

Cons:

- Limited immediate external impact.
- Requires active, sustained participation.
- Risks becoming directionless without clear goals and facilitation.
- Can be difficult to measure outcomes.
- Requires supportive organisations so members can implement what they learn.
- In mixed groups, cultural misunderstandings are possible without careful protocols.

When to use: For in-depth learning and skill-building among committed participants.

Capacity needs: Moderate. A CoP needs members who are committed to participate consistently – this might mean attending monthly meetings or online discussions, sharing experiences openly, and either a dedicated facilitator or rotating facilitation roles. While a CoP doesn't necessarily require large funding, it may need some resources for workshops or travel.

Governance & trust: Trust is absolutely critical in a CoP, because members need to feel safe to share candidly (including challenges or failures). Relationships deepen as people realize they have shared experiences. Decision-making is typically informal and consensus-oriented (e.g. the group collectively decides on topics to explore).

2.4 ADVOCACY/POLICY CHANGE

Coalition

If you have multiple organisations or communities rallying around a common cause and sufficient capacity (staff, time, funding) to organize, a coalition or peak body is a group of organisations/individuals with a common interest working together toward a shared goal. This structure gives a strong, unified voice (e.g. joint campaigns or policy submissions) and clarity of purpose.

Pros:

- Strong, unified voice amplifies impact.
- Combines resources, skills, and networks of many groups, leading to wider coverage and legitimacy.
- Maintains member independence while benefiting from collective strength.

Cons:

- Complex coordination and consistent effort to keep members aligned.
- Potential for slow or contentious decision-making.
- Risk of larger organisations dominating.

When to use: When multiple groups want to unite around a specific policy change or advocacy goal.

Capacity needs: Moderate to high. Ensure each member can dedicate time and resources for meetings, joint actions (writing submissions, attending events), and communications. Coalitions often benefit from a coordinator or secretariat to manage activities.

Governance: Initial basic trust and goodwill are needed, but a coalition can start with relatively loose relationships focused on the issue. Clear governance arrangements (like a steering committee or agreed decision process) are important to ensure all voices are heard and decisions are transparent.

Alliance

When partners share a long-term vision and are ready to formalise commitments, an alliance provides a durable framework for collaboration. Members keep their own identities but agree (often in an MOU or similar) to pool resources, align strategies and speak with one voice on broad, ongoing goals.

Pros:

- Deep collaboration and strategic alignment.
- Strong collective voice.
- Avoids duplication of effort and fills gaps.
- Can build lasting relationships and capacity.

Cons:

- High coordination effort.
- May require compromise on individual priorities for the sake of a common goal.
- Risk of larger organisations dominating.
- Governance may become bureaucratic if the alliance grows, and progress may be slow as the group strives for consensus.

When to use: For sustained, strategic policy or system change.

Capacity needs: High. Organisations should be ready for ongoing collaboration (not just a one-off campaign) - check that you have leadership buy-in, staff time for regular meetings, and possibly resources for joint initiatives or an alliance coordinator. Capacity also means the ability to compromise and adapt organisational plans to fit the alliance's collective strategy.

Governance: Because alliances are often more formal and long-term than coalitions, invest time in relationship-building. Establish governance structures such as a formal agreement or MOU, and perhaps a rotating chair or leadership council so that power is shared.

Statutory / Government-Recognised Body

A statutory or government-recognized alliance is usually established through legislation or formal government recognition. It operates within specific legal frameworks with mandated leadership structures, clearly defined roles, and accountability mechanisms. These bodies have official authority, enabling direct influence on policy and advocacy, often with formal consultation roles.

Pros:

- Official recognition and authority.
- Clear governance structures and mandated accountability.
- Direct influence on government policy and decision-making processes.

Cons:

- Difficult and time-consuming to establish.
- May lack flexibility due to rigid legal frameworks.
- Can be bureaucratic and slow in decision-making.
- Potential risk of political influence limiting autonomy.

When to use: When formal government recognition is required or beneficial, especially for influencing poi.

Capacity needs: High. Requires dedicated administrative support, adherence to legislative requirements, and formal governance structures.

Governance: Clearly defined governance through legislative or government-established guidelines. Requires transparent processes and mandated accountability.

Informal networking happens during unstructured events, like this walk up Morro de Calzada, Peru © Bill Salazar

2.5 COORDINATION/COLLECTIVE ACTION/ CULTURAL STRENGTHENING

Working Group / Task-Force

A working group is a small, time-bound team convened to tackle a specific project or produce a concrete output (e.g. a policy brief, event, or service plan). It brings the right people together for focused action, then disbands or re-scopes once the task is complete, often reporting back to a larger network, coalition or alliance.

Pros:

- Practical, action-oriented.
- Produces tangible results quickly (e.g. a plan, a toolkit, a coordinated service model).
- Builds trust and ownership through focused collaboration.

Cons:

- Limited scope (tackles a specific issue so might not address broader systemic problems).
- Potential burnout as a small group shoulders a lot of work.
- Requires all key voices at the table.
- Needs attention to break down silos and keep focus on the task.

When to use: For focused, task-specific coordination or action.

Capacity needs: Moderate. Participants must have a clear mandate and time to actively work on the task. Often one agency / organisation will provide coordination – like scheduling meetings, taking minutes, and following up on action items – so capacity for project management is important.

Governance: A working group usually operates on shared professional trust – members are chosen for their expertise or role, so there's an expectation they'll collaborate in good faith. Governance is usually simple: the group may have a chair or facilitator and a clear terms of reference defining its scope and decision-making authority. Some working groups make decisions by consensus, others by agreement of all members' organisations – clarify this early.

Membership-Based Association / Non-profit Model

A membership-based association involves individuals or organisations joining through paid membership or meeting defined criteria. This structure typically has formal governance with a democratically elected board or management committee, and clear accountability mechanisms.

Pros:

- Clear, structured governance.
- Regular member engagement through defined membership criteria.
- Financially sustainable through membership fees and contributions.

Cons:

- Requires extensive administration and management.
- If engagement flags, financial model may fail.
- Potential for internal politics or conflict.

When to use: For ongoing coordination of services, collective action or advocacy, particularly when structured involvement is important and members have indicated willingness/ability to pay for membership.

Capacity needs: Moderate to high. Requires administrative staff, clear governance structures, and ongoing member engagement.

Governance: Typically involves formal governance structures with a board or committee and democratic decision-making processes.

Cultural Governance Model

Cultural governance models, such as a Nation-to-Nation partnership, or Traditional-Owner led alliance, are governed by recognised Indigenous authorities, Elders or cultural leaders. These structures may rely on cultural authority, consensus-building, and/or kinship-based decision-making.

Pros:

- Strong alignment with community values.
- Community support and legitimacy.
- Strengthens community bonds.
- Ensures respectful and culturally appropriate stewardship of cultural knowledge.

Cons:

- Complex and time-consuming coordination when many communities are involved.
- May struggle to integrate with external institutional requirements.
- Potential for internal politics or conflict.

When to use: For culturally-focused projects requiring deep community involvement, cultural legitimacy, and decision-making authority derived from cultural practices.

Capacity needs: Moderate to high. Needs culturally competent facilitators, ample time for consensus-building, and resources to support traditional governance processes.

Governance: Rooted deeply in traditional authority, kinship relationships, and cultural protocols. Typically emphasises consensus and collective decision-making.

CHECKLIST: BUDGETING & FINANCE

- Sketch out a three-lane budget that covers:
  - **backbone coordination** (staff time, digital tools and fiduciary services)
  - **relationship-building events** (moderated launch workshop and at least one exchange visit or virtual immersion)
  - a **working capital buffer** of ~20% of operating costs for contingencies
- Work with your members during the co-design stage to reality-check these figures against their preferred activity mix and travel realities.

Place-based knowledge exchange in the Northern Territory, Australia © BHP Foundation

3. BUILDING THROUGH CO-DESIGN

Effective networks thrive through genuine co-design, continuous adaptability, and meaningful member engagement.

3.1 CO-DESIGN: FOUNDED IN PARTNERSHIP

Networks thrive when they are co-designed with members, ensuring alignment with their needs and goals.

As networks develop, hosts need to be comfortable with remaining agile and responsive to member feedback. At Ampliseed, this included seeking iterative feedback directly from members, as well as informal regular monitoring of member engagement in activities. Throughout this process, it also means remaining open to the possibility that responding might mean a shift away from the types of activities that were originally planned and/or re-designing these activities as the network develops to respond to member needs.

CHECKLIST: HOW TO CO-DESIGN A NETWORK

- **Collaborate from the start:** Engage members early to share their perspectives, priorities and needs.
- **Define shared objectives:** Clearly articulate the common goals and outcomes members want the network to achieve.
- **Establish feedback mechanisms:** Decide how you will gather and integrate member input to continuously refine your activities.
- **Pilot and test initiatives:** Implement a structured approach to trial activities, collect feedback, and adapt quickly.
- **Encourage active participation:** Provide ample opportunities for members to suggest and lead initiatives.

Local hosts explain the cultural context of a project in Alto Mayo, Peru © Bill Salazar

3.2 EXAMPLE: AMPLISEED IN PRACTICE

Ampliseed is a global 'peer-to-peer' **learning and leadership network, community of practice** and **informal advocacy alliance** that aims to connect practitioners with a rights-based, human-centred approach to building environmental resilience. Ampliseed's members are made up of a group of diverse project partners that were funded under BHP Foundation's environmental resilience program, including global conservation groups, local community and Indigenous-led organisations, as well as various practitioners, technical advisors and members from funding partners who are considered 'friends' of the network (Appendix A).

Pollination Foundation are Ampliseed's backbone delivery partners with funding and strategic guidance from BHP Foundation. However, the network has been co-designed with members and is highly adaptive, with activities continuously evolving based on member feedback. As the host and facilitator of Ampliseed, Pollination Foundation's role is to plan and shape the co-design process and framework and to curate the suite of activities attuned to member needs. A cornerstone belief is that **"alone, we only get so far: through sharing insights and learning together, we can become extraordinary."**

LEARN AND ADAPT

Maturation includes making space, stepping back, and remaining open to change – co-design should remain a focus even as the network matures. For Ampliseed, this meant seeking consistent input from members, not just in the pilot phase but throughout the life of the network's operation, on how the network is meeting their needs and where they would like to take the network in future years.

This also involved regular internal reflection by Pollination Foundation as the host, to ensure that new directions aligned with internal resourcing and funding priorities and that the network was adequately supported to grow into its next phase. We found throughout this process that creating spaces for members to take on leadership and advocacy roles in the network is also a vital part of maturity and an evolution of the co-design approach.

Over the past five years, Ampliseed's practical activities have revolved around three core pillars: knowledge sharing, community building, and advocacy. These activities have included:

Virtual engagement

- An **interactive online portal** housing resources, project insights, and regular updates tailored directly to member interests and needs.
- Topic-focused virtual **working groups** where members collaboratively explore shared challenges and opportunities.
- Informal **virtual catch-ups** to foster camaraderie, strategic alignment, and knowledge exchange.
- An **inspiring speaker series** that bring in external experts and amplify internal knowledge.
- Tailored **training sessions** on member-identified priorities, using both internal and external expertise.

In-person connections

- **Cross-project exchanges** that immerse participants in member-led projects, facilitating deep, experiential learning and meaningful peer connections.
- **Partner workshops** aimed at deepening relationships, sharing strategic insights, and collectively identifying priority actions.

Knowledge Amplification

- **Coordinated advocacy** at global events, amplifying member voices and creating connections with external stakeholders, including Indigenous leaders, policymakers, and funders.
- Production and dissemination of **publications and reports** that reflect and amplify key findings and learnings from the network.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM AMPLISEED'S EVOLUTION

- Ampliseed's learning approach evolved to emphasise **"learning while doing,"** allowing members to test and refine knowledge in real-world contexts.
- The **transition from knowledge exchange to action-oriented advocacy** was driven by members' desire to move from discussion to implementation as the network evolved from information-sharing to active community of practice.
- As Ampliseed grew, ensuring a balance **between scaling the network and maintaining quality engagement** became a key challenge to manage.

Further reading

- Pollination Foundation (2025). *Seeds to Systems: Building and nurturing networks for lasting impact.*
- Etienne Wenger, Beverly Trayner & Maarten de Laat (2011). *Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: a conceptual framework.*
- Results for Development (2019). *Collaborative Learning Toolkit.*
- Wegner, Holsgens & Bitencourt (2023). *Orchestrating collaborative networks for social innovation: orchestrators' roles in socially innovative initiatives.*

Knowledge-sharing workshops should balance structured learning with informal bonding. © Pollination Foundation

4. NETWORK FOUNDATIONS

4.1 WHAT IS A LEARNING NETWORK?

What is a Learning Network?

A learning network is a structured group of organisations and individuals who collaborate to share knowledge, solve challenges, and build capacity. Learning networks enable peer-to-peer exchange, facilitate collective problem-solving, and strengthen impact through shared experiences and adaptive learning.

A community of practice (CoP) is a subset of learning networks where members actively develop knowledge together, usually around a specific domain or profession. Unlike more static knowledge-sharing groups, CoPs emphasise active learning, relationship-building, and its members drive iterative development of best practices.

CONNECTION MATTERS

Creating space and time for building the connections between members has been a key part of the success of the Ampliseed network. This hive-based approach seeks to foster connections between members, actively avoiding a one-way knowledge transfer process.

This includes creating opportunities for in-person connection – which was consistently and emphatically mentioned by our members in their feedback as a highlight of their participation in the network. But it also includes online spaces (using different modes and forums) where members can create informal connections, as well as structured working groups to cross-share insights and learning from their projects.

Encourage participation and sharing. Financing workshop in Cali, Colombia © Pollination Foundation

4.2 CORE PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING NETWORKS

In essence, the foundations of an effective learning network include a **clear purpose and shared vision**, relationships built on **trust and reciprocity**, a **collaborative design** that values member input, and a **commitment to equity and decolonising practices**. With these interconnected elements in place, a learning network can function as a living system that not only shares information, but also sparks innovation and collective action, adapting over time to meet its members' needs and the challenges they face.

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL NETWORKS

- **Trust & relationship-building:** Deep engagement is built through strong personal and professional relationships.
- **Co-design & ownership:** Networks work best when co-created with members to ensure alignment with their needs.
- **Equity & inclusion:** Diverse participation, particularly Indigenous leadership, enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of networks.
- **Dedicated resources:** Networks need funding for tools and events, as well as a resourced curator to drive activities, engagement and longevity.
- **Adaptive learning:** Networks should be flexible, allowing members to test, reflect, and iterate on new approaches.

EMBEDDING EQUITY, INCLUSION & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

When the Covid-19 pandemic forced our network online, the pre-existing trust among members helped sustain participation during the virtual pivot. Members felt comfortable sharing openly on Zoom because they had formed bonds earlier. Trust enables honest reflection: for example, Ampliseed hosted a "'failfest' dinner" at one of our partner workshops where participants candidly shared stories of failures and what they learned. Such an activity is only possible in a high-trust environment.

4.2.1 BUILDING TRUST AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

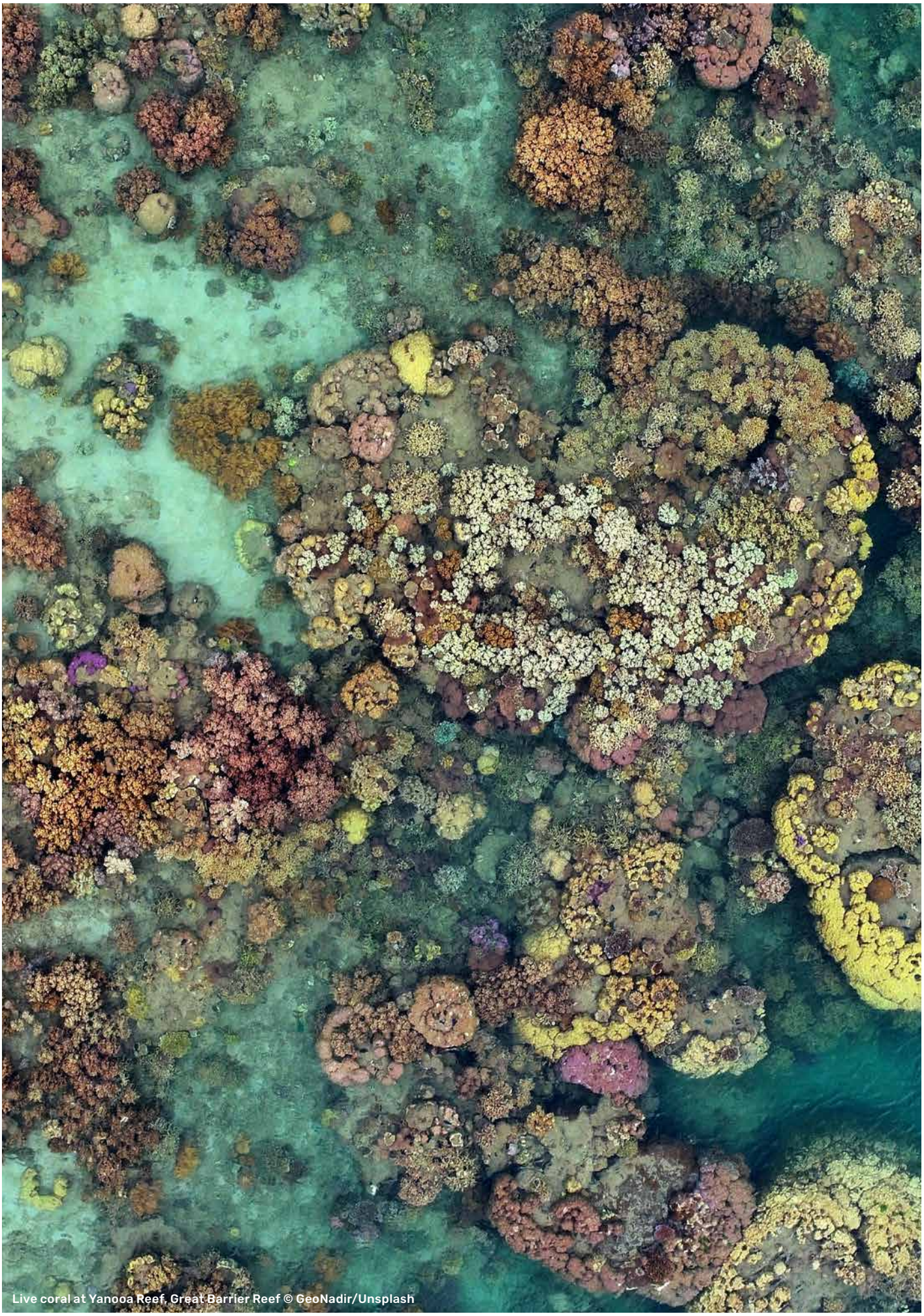
Trust is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing practice. Ampliseed learned that intentionally creating conditions for trust – through consistent engagement, transparency, and follow-through on commitments – is essential. Face-to-face exchanges and informal interactions are invaluable for breaking down silos and humanising relationships. Even a simple activity like a campfire chat or travelling together to visit a community project site helped our members "see the person behind the project," fostering empathy and camaraderie.

If your network includes culturally and linguistically diverse members like Indigenous Peoples, inclusion goes hand-in-hand with cultural safety. This means not only respecting, but also protecting and uplifting Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. It involves creating spaces where all members feel their cultural practices, traditions, and leadership styles are acknowledged and valued in decision-making processes. This is supported through co-design and active feedback loops.

The insight here is that **trust-building is not separate from the work – it *is* the work** in a learning network. Time and resources devoted to relationship-building (e.g. icebreakers, cultural exchanges, personal check-ins) are not a luxury, but a necessity to support deep collaboration.

THE KNOWLEDGE IS IN THE NETWORK.

One of the most significant lessons that was revealed early in Ampliseed's journey was that the members themselves held the most critical knowledge that was highly useful to other members and applicable to the projects they were running. During its first pilot year, the network quickly shifted from an externally-focused knowledge-sharing approach, to creating spaces for members to share learning and insights with and between each other. This was later complemented with targeted external training and knowledge sharing sessions, based on topics of interest nominated by the members, but peer-to-peer learning always remained a key focus.



Live coral at Yanooa Reef, Great Barrier Reef © GeoNadir/Unsplash

MEMBER PERSPECTIVE: CO-DESIGN & CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

WITH AMY ARMSTRONG, RESILIENT REEFS INITIATIVE

The Resilient Reefs Initiative (RRI) partnered with reef managers in four key global sites to design resilience projects and partnerships and build a more adaptive reef management practice. This was hard work for managers, and they needed and valued a collaborative network to support them. To strengthen their capacity to deliver this change-management work, RRI embedded co-design principles, focused on long-term relationship-building, and provided practical tools and support. In this way, RRI helped foster a network where members actively collaborated to address climate resilience in marine ecosystems.

Lessons learned include:

- Long-term engagement and trust-building efforts before implementing conservation actions.
- Ensure local efforts were led by diverse governance bodies that include Indigenous knowledge and leadership.
- Foster and continually strengthen relationships through peer learning exchanges.
- Trial and adaptively manage tools and resources with partners.

Moving at the pace of trust:

Central to an effective partnership is taking the time to listen and learn up front — to test and ground truth assumptions one might hold about needs, capacities, values, and constraints of partner organisations before moving forward. In some of our partnerships in the RRI pilot, the time that took was substantial. But essential. Without a common foundation based in trust, this kind of work will fall over — either because it doesn't account for the root causes of the challenges, participants won't give authentic feedback, or it won't be designed in a way that understands local context.

Aligning and activating political will across key actors is essential for driving action:

This needs to be done in a way that recognises the challenge of competing demands and short political timelines. Strategies we used to engage and align diverse stakeholders included:

- Start early. Prioritise stakeholder engagement from the outset, especially with Indigenous Peoples
- Listen to elders and those that have come before to ensure we are building on the past for a robust future
- Create diverse and collaborative steering committees
- Tie the work to other political processes or imperatives that already have momentum

Consider timing, and build a foundation for future action:

Not everyone will be ready for action at the same time, so focus on work that can be done to prepare communities and governments for future efforts, when they are ready. This includes:

- Build the cohesion of communities through robust stakeholder efforts
- Fund feasibility studies or analysis to inform future work
- Co-design frameworks for collaboration action
- Leverage these foundational efforts for action design and delivery when the political time is right

For more lessons from the Resilient Reef Project, read their report Resilient Reefs Initiative: Successes and lessons from the first six years (2024).

4.2.2 EQUITY AND INCLUSION: DECOLONISING METHODOLOGIES

Decolonising methodologies inform a crucial foundation of modern learning networks, especially those involving Indigenous peoples. Decolonising an initiative involves actively centering Indigenous leadership, knowledge systems, and values rather than imposing external frameworks. In practice, this involves acknowledging and remedying power imbalances – for instance, ensuring Indigenous partners guide the priorities and that traditional knowledge is honoured on its own terms. Ampliseed's rights-based, people-centred approach exemplifies this: it was explicitly designed to support Indigenous peoples and local communities in stewarding nature, valuing their knowledge alongside global expertise.

A diverse network must avoid "flattening" that diversity with one-size-fits-all definitions. Instead, local context and cultural protocols must guide interactions, with multiple knowledge systems coexisting. In practical terms, this might mean beginning gatherings with a local ceremony or acknowledgment of country, using Indigenous facilitators and protocols, and valuing storytelling alongside scientific data. Such practices help to create an atmosphere of respect, care, and shared learning. The result is a space where all participants – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – feel seen, heard and supported as their authentic selves, which strengthens the entire network.

It may also be helpful to understand where a given learning network sits on the spectrum of structures. Some networks start top-down, initiated by a central authority or donor with predefined objectives and content (e.g. a funded knowledge hub that disseminates best practices). Others are grassroots or bottom-up, emerging organically from communities with minimal formal structure. In between are hybrid models that combine elements of both. Ampliseed represents a hybrid: it was seeded with dedicated coordination resources, but operated in a highly participatory manner with members co-leading content and direction. By investing in facilitation and weaving connections, the network achieved multi-directional learning rather than a one-way transfer.

4.2.3 ADAPTIVE LEARNING

Learning networks must be able to evolve in response to new challenges and opportunities: flexibility in formats and continuous iteration make a network resilient. Ampliseed maintained a practice of regularly gathering member feedback through surveys, interviews, and debriefs after each activity. They treated the network itself as a living system to be tuned – dropping activities that were less valued, enhancing those with high demand, and trying new approaches in a safe-to-fail manner. By the end of year two, members noted that it's "unique for a funding partner to invest in peer-to-peer learning" and that this facilitated cross-project learning in a way that standard grant programs did not. An insight for others is to embed an adaptive management cycle in the network: plan -> act -> reflect -> adjust. This might mean having iterative planning meetings or using developmental evaluation to capture emergent lessons. Adaptive learning also implies being open about failures and setbacks, as mentioned – normalising the idea that "what didn't work" is as valuable to discuss as what did.

EVOLVE FROM LEARNING NETWORK TO COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE.

A learning network is a powerful tool for knowledge exchange, but as it matures, it should evolve into a community of practice - one that supports deeper collaboration and the application of shared insights. In Ampliseed's journey, this shift was marked by a growing sense of shared purpose and collective identity among members. As the network evolved, it moved from simply sharing knowledge to creating actionable practices that members could implement in their own contexts. Such transformations require a shift in mindset: from knowledge transmission to collective action, where the network's success is measured not just by what is learned but by what is changed and achieved in the world as a result.

CHECKLIST: FOUNDATIONS OF A LEARNING NETWORK

- Use the decision tree to identify which structures are most relevant to achieving your goals.
- Identify which stage your network is at and focus on the most relevant chapters.
- Engage your team and partners to review the toolkit's insights, together.
- Use the checklists and templates to structure your network-building efforts.
- Reflect on the case studies and adapt lessons learnt to your context.

Further reading

- Jessica Hernandez (2022). *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes through Indigenous Science.*
- IUCN CEESP (Dawson et al) (2021). *The role of Indigenous peoples and local communities in effective and equitable conservation.*
- Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021). *Decolonizing Methodologies.*

Huascayacu, Alto Mayo © Pollination Foundation

Valdivia © Carolina Pino

5. CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

5.1 WEAVING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Weaving a genuine community of practice requires more than simply connecting people - it demands ongoing, intentional curation. In Ampliseed's experience, the strength of the network stemmed from the active, relational work of network facilitators who continuously fostered connection, trust, and shared purpose. These facilitators play a behind-the-scenes but crucial role: they welcomed new members, catalysed dialogue across cultural and geographic lines, and gently bridge silos by spotting synergies between people, ideas, and projects.

For Ampliseed, curators also helped surface and amplify the community's own knowledge. They didn't just share content - they created rhythm, relevance, and reciprocity across the network. Through curating information sharing opportunities, organising inclusive workshops, facilitating meetings, and tracking emerging themes, Ampliseed's facilitators transformed the network into a cohesive, evolving ecosystem of practice. Their care in holding space allowed members to feel seen, valued, and heard. As such, curation is not an add-on; it is the invisible infrastructure that sustains momentum, deepens learning, and weaves the community together.

Tip: For any learning network aspiring to build a resilient community of practice, investing in skilled, dedicated curators is not optional - it's foundational.

CURATION IS KEY

Facilitation and curation are at the heart of a thriving network. A well-curated network ensures that members are not just passive recipients of information but are actively engaged in creating and sharing knowledge. Facilitators are not only organizers but also enablers of deeper connection, fostering an environment where conversations can flow freely, everyone's voice is heard, and collaboration is encouraged.

Ampliseed's success relied heavily on the active role of facilitators in structuring activities to promote participation, guiding discussions, and ensuring that the network remained agile in response to member needs. Facilitators are also key to nurturing psychological safety, as they set the tone for respectful engagement and help diffuse any tensions that may arise within the group. Curating the right mix of activities, from informal chats to structured workshops, helps maintain engagement and fosters a culture of collective learning and growth.

Curating the right mix of activities, from informal chats to structured workshops, helps maintain engagement. Ampliseed exchange in Moyobamba, Peru.

5.2 ADVOCACY AS A NETWORK FUNCTION

Advocacy has become a key function of many learning networks, helping to mobilise funding, influence policy, and amplify impact. Networks that integrate advocacy are more likely to achieve systemic change by aligning local efforts with global policy frameworks.

In Ampliseed's early years, the focus was largely internal – helping the member projects succeed on their own terms. However, a significant evolution was recognizing the network's potential for external advocacy and influence. By year three, Ampliseed introduced a dedicated advocacy strategy. This included amplifying Indigenous voices through media (e.g. an Indigenous climate leaders interview series) and connecting local initiatives to global policy arenas. A highlight was the network supporting a delegation of its Indigenous and community members to attend their first UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15) in Montreal in 2022. There, Ampliseed members jointly presented a side event titled *"Culture First: How does support and funding that puts culture at the front of conservation create enduring resilient ecosystems?".* The event, which was well-received and covered in media, showed how a learning network can translate its on-the-ground lessons into influence on international discourse.

The advocacy function of a network means using the collective voice and evidence base of the network to push for broader change – whether it's policy reform, increased funding for community-led approaches, or shifts in industry practice. Ampliseed discovered that many members wanted this function: they were not only implementers but also changemakers eager to share what was working (and what wasn't) with the wider world. By acting as a platform for joint advocacy, the network increased its value proposition.

However, this came with lessons about focus and balance. One potential tension is ensuring advocacy messaging truly represents and is led by the communities involved, rather than the network speaking for them. Ampliseed addressed this by letting Indigenous members lead public storytelling (for example, publishing articles in members' own voices) and by grounding any advocacy in the lived experiences of its projects (e.g. showcasing case studies like the Alto Mayo "Tajimat Pujut" initiative to illustrate points about carbon markets and culture). Another lesson was that advocacy doesn't have to mean deviating from core goals – in Ampliseed's case it was a natural extension: sharing the collective insights outward to effect change at scale.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE: SCALE YOUR IMPACT BEYOND THE NETWORK

The true power of a learning and leadership network lies not only in the direct impact it has on its members, but in how it influences broader systems and practices. This may take the form of influencing policy decisions, fostering new partnerships, and ultimately catalysing sector-wide shifts in thinking and behaviour. For Ampliseed, scaling impact meant ensuring that insights, practices, and learnings were shared and implemented beyond the immediate circle of participants. Through the amplification of successful initiatives and the documentation of key learnings, the network worked to inspire broader change, ensuring that its influence extended far beyond its own community.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR INCORPORATING ADVOCACY INTO A NETWORK

- Framing messages for different audiences: tailor advocacy efforts for policymakers, funders, and local stakeholders.
- Using member expertise to enhance credibility: engage trusted voices within the network to strengthen advocacy impact.
- Leveraging data and storytelling to build compelling narratives: combine qualitative and quantitative evidence.

5.3 DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR CHANGE

Leadership within a network must evolve from a focus on internal capacity-building to a broader commitment to systemic change. For Ampliseed, this meant supporting leaders not only in their professional growth but also in their ability to influence external change. By cultivating leaders who are equipped to act as advocates and change agents, the network helped shift the conversation beyond individual learning to collective transformation. This focus on leadership development ensured that participants were not only gaining new skills and knowledge but were also empowered to challenge and reshape systems in their communities, organisations, and industries.

Embedding place-based, Indigenous, and collective leadership principles deepened Ampliseed's approach. Grounding leadership learning in the specific lands, waters, and cultures where participants live ensured that solutions remained responsive to local ecological realities and community priorities. Drawing on Indigenous worldviews further emphasized relational accountability - to the land, to ancestors, and to future generations. Collective leadership practices (shared decision-making, distributed authority, and peer-to-peer mentoring) reinforced the idea that complex environmental and social challenges cannot be solved by a single "hero" leader: progress emerges when knowledge, power, and responsibility circulate through the network. Together, these three lenses helped make Ampliseed's leadership culture locally rooted, culturally grounded, and collaboratively powered

The interplay of themes such as trust, collective leadership, adaptive learning, and advocacy develops an effective network that is more than the sum of its parts. Ampliseed's trust-building enabled Indigenous leadership to flourish; collective leadership approaches enriched the learning content and helped advocate for change; adaptive learning practices allowed the network to embrace advocacy and new ideas; and advocacy efforts, in turn, reinforced the network's identity and purpose. A key takeaway is that learning networks are dynamic. Designers should be prepared for the network's focus and functions to grow over time. Early-stage priorities (like internal knowledge exchange) may evolve into later-stage priorities (like external influence) as trust deepens and lessons accumulate. Embracing this evolution, rather than rigidly sticking to an initial plan, is crucial.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

- Culturally appropriate capacity-building programs: Providing resources tailored to Indigenous governance systems.
- Co-management frameworks: Recognizing Indigenous rights and integrating traditional knowledge with scientific approaches.
- Funding models that prioritize Indigenous autonomy: Ensuring that financing mechanisms respect Indigenous decision-making processes.

Further reading

- June Holley (2012). Network Weaver Handbook.
- John Kania & Mark Kramer (2011). Collective Impact. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011.
- Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2015). Introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses.

MEMBER PERSPECTIVE: INDIGENOUS RANGER NETWORK INVOLVEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES

WITH THE INDIGENOUS DESERT ALLIANCE

In these unprecedented times of global shifts and change, Indigenous Peoples around the world face shared challenges and opportunities in caring for land and continuing strong culture and community. International exchanges create powerful opportunities to connect, share knowledge, and strengthen the collective global Indigenous voice.

For the Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA), collaboration with Ampliseed's international knowledge exchange network has reinforced the importance of connection and peer-to-peer capacity building. Whether hosting global Indigenous conservation leaders at its national conference at Uluru – the largest gathering of Indigenous rangers in Australia, or supporting staff and rangers to attend international forums like the World Ranger Congress and the UN Biodiversity and Climate Change Conventions, these forums have enabled the IDA to keep the Australian desert connected to the powerful global Indigenous conservation movement. These exchanges have strengthened leadership and advocacy pathways, and opened doors to new partnerships and resources, positioning the IDA as a leading best-practice network for Indigenous land management in the Australian desert.

For more information, visit the IDA Website.

Sam Murray, Indigenous Desert Alliance Chief Executive with Uziela Achayap from Alto Mayo Awajun Communities Landscape/Bosque de las Nuwas, Peru at the 2022 COP15 in Montreal as part of the Ampliseed delegation. © IDA

6. APPROACHES & ACTIVITIES

6.1 CROSS-POLLINATION THROUGH FIELD EXCHANGES

The heart of a learning network is its activities – the convenings, dialogues, and collaborative projects through which learning and sharing occur. Ampliseed experimented with a range of approaches, from hands-on workshops and field exchanges to virtual storytelling and working groups. This section outlines several proven activities and approaches, with practical tips on how to implement them to foster adaptive learning, peer exchange, and thematic collaboration.

Cross-pollination through field exchanges

One of the most powerful approaches is organizing exchange visits or immersions, where network members visit each other's sites or communities. Ampliseed's cross-project exchanges were cornerstone activities that brought diverse project teams together in one location to learn on the ground. A well-designed exchange typically includes a mix of field trips, workshops, and reflection session. Participants get to "touch, feel, and experience" the host community's realities – such as trekking through a rainforest carbon project in Peru, or walking with Indigenous rangers conducting controlled burns in Australia. Ampliseed's exchanges often lasted around a week and balanced structured learning (e.g., thematic discussions on governance or finance) with informal bonding.

Core elements to include in an exchange

- **Field visits and immersive experiences:** seeing projects first-hand, guided by local hosts who explain the cultural and ecological context.
- **Knowledge-sharing workshops:** group sessions where all participants present something (their challenges, innovations, or questions) – this ensures everyone has a voice, not just the host.
- **Group reflections:** daily and end-of-trip reflections where participants discuss what surprised them, what ideas they are taking home, and how they might apply insights.
- **Informal networking:** unstructured time during travel, meals, or evenings for people to connect personally. Ampliseed found these unplanned moments often sparked rich conversation, knowledge sharing and enduring connections even more than the formal sessions.

If travel is challenging (due to cost or other restrictions), consider a **virtual exchange**: Ampliseed piloted a "virtual site visit" where we used video and live Zoom sessions to simulate an on-site experience. We shared footage of project sites, and cultural elements like food and music, as well as holding virtual roundtables with on-ground staff so that others could ask questions in real-time. Key to making a virtual exchange engaging is to include visuals (maps, short videos, slideshows), keep sessions short and focused (we split ours over two days, keeping sessions to two hours each), and allow plenty of time for interactive question and answer time. Always debrief afterwards to capture lessons learned and participant feedback for next time.

Tip: Develop a template agenda for your exchange but remain flexible to adjust to local opportunities (e.g., if an unexpected community event or wildlife sighting occurs, be ready to seize the moment!).

CHECKLIST: FOUNDATIONS OF A LEARNING NETWORK

- ○ Define clear learning objectives and expected outcomes.
- ○ Ensure diverse representation among participants.
- ○ Use interactive and participatory methodologies.
- ○ Plan for documentation and follow-up actions.
- ○ Evaluate impact and refine for future sessions.

6.2 THEMATIC WORKING GROUPS

As networks grow, members often benefit from smaller focused groups dedicated to specific themes or challenges. Ampliseed established working groups on topics like Biodiversity & Carbon Markets, Communications, and Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), which met regularly to dive deeper into those areas. Working groups function as mini-communities of practice within the larger network. They typically have voluntary membership – people opt in based on interest/expertise – and meet perhaps bi-monthly or quarterly. In Ampliseed's case, the carbon and biodiversity markets group discussed emerging issues such as global biodiversity framework negotiations and nature finance opportunities, allowing project teams to stay ahead of global trends and align their strategies.

For a successful working group:

- **Define a clear scope and goal:** For instance, the M&E group might set a goal to produce a shared set of social impact indicators, or simply to troubleshoot evaluation challenges together.
- **Identify a facilitator or co-leads:** Ampliseed's groups were often facilitated by network staff or enthusiastic members who prepared the agenda and kept discussions on track. Rotating leadership among members can also empower participants.
- **Encourage preparation and sharing:** One approach is to have one project present a case or problem at each meeting, and others offer input. This rotates "spotlight" and keeps it practical.
- **Document outcomes:** Take notes or record sessions, and circulate key insights. This ensures knowledge from the group is captured for the wider network.

Tip: Keep working groups voluntary and passion-driven – interest may wax and wane, so be ready to launch new groups or sunset old ones based on energy.

6.3 CAPACITY-BUILDING WORKSHOPS AND TRAINING

Targeted workshops – whether standalone or part of a series – are effective for building specific skills across the network. Ampliseed organized several trainings on topics identified by members as common challenges, for example series covering Conservation Finance, Scaling and Systems Change, and Communication Strategies

To design an effective workshop:

- **Conduct a brief needs assessment:** ask members what skill gaps or knowledge would help their projects and identify common themes.
- **Leverage network assets:** often members themselves have expertise to share. Ampliseed mixed external experts with member presenters, ensuring global knowledge was tied to local context.
- **Interactive elements are crucial:** include breakouts, scenario exercises, or live problem-solving so that participants apply concepts to their contexts.
- **Documentation and resource-sharing amplify a workshop's impact:** record the session, share slides and reference materials, and create a concise summary handout that participants can refer back to.

Investing in capacity building of members not only increases their effectiveness on projects but also strengthens the network's collective competence – everyone rises together.

Tip: Include an evaluation at the end of workshops (even a quick poll) to gauge if objectives were met and how to improve next time, and encourage participants to set one goal for how they will apply the learning (to ensure it's actionable).

6.4 STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a powerful tool for knowledge-sharing, advocacy, and community-building within networks. It helps capture lived experiences, amplify Indigenous and local voices, and inspire action.

Ampliseed held "Inspiring Stories" sessions where leaders (often from outside the immediate network, e.g., an Indigenous technology expert, an activist from Malawi) shared personal journeys. These were meant to inspire and connect broader themes (like community empowerment or cultural safety) back to members' own contexts.

Similarly, casual events like a "social photo share" – Ampliseed did one where members posted photos from their home landscape with entertaining captions – can create a buzz and high engagement. The key is to diversify formats to keep the network experience lively: some highly structured, some informal and fun (don't underestimate the value of fun in keeping people engaged).

KEY STRATEGIES FOR INCORPORATING ADVOCACY INTO A NETWORK

- **In-person Exchanges/Visits:** for deep immersion and trust-building (do when possible, even if just one per year).
- **Virtual Exchanges:** using video and digital storytelling to simulate travel (great backup when physical travel isn't feasible).
- **Working Groups/Forums:** ongoing sub-groups focusing on specific themes or problems, meeting regularly to share and co-create solutions.
- **Workshops/Trainings:** structured skill-building sessions with interactive elements and outputs, often involving both external and internal experts.
- **Storytelling & Peer Showcases:** member-led presentations, inspirational talks, interviews, or creative sharing events that build community and highlight diverse voices.
- **Continuous Knowledge Capture:** newsletters, blogs, case studies, podcasts – turning the ongoing learning into tangible knowledge products for current and future members

Indigenous Awajún women in Shampuyacu, Peru. © Conservation International/ Freddy Guillen

MEMBER PERSPECTIVE: DATA-DRIVEN STORYTELLING

WITH HEATHER ELGAR, LANDSCALE

LandScale provides a holistic framework for assessing, monitoring and reporting on the sustainability performance of landscapes, helping landscape initiatives and organisations make informed decisions and track progress toward sustainability goals. It is a more impactful approach to drive improvements in sustainability at scale beyond a single community, farm, or project. It provides an impartial, holistic, and globally recognized system for assessing the cumulative impact of activities within landscapes dominated by natural resource-based industries.

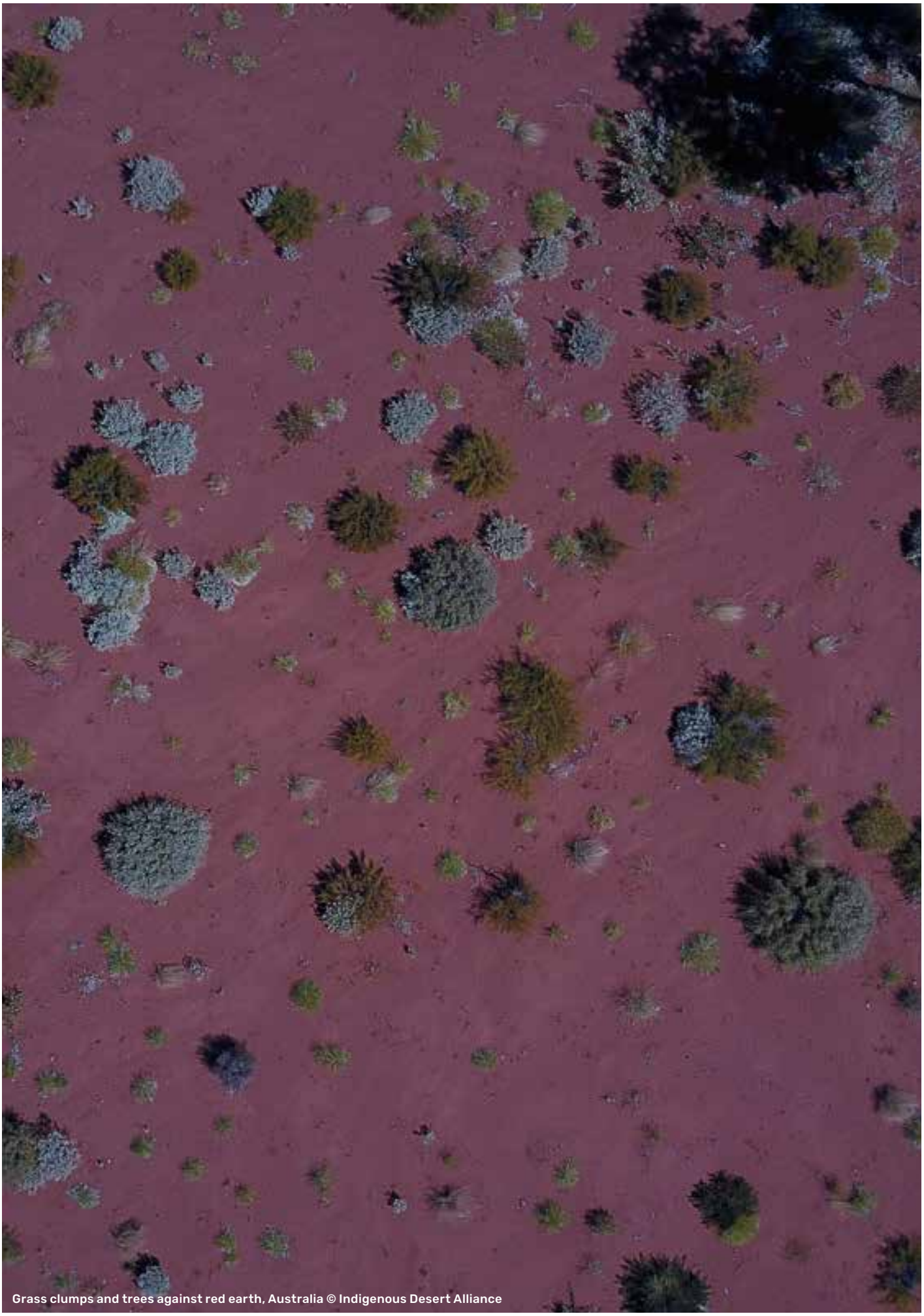
A core strength of the LandScale framework is its participatory and holistic approach, which facilitates inclusive planning, strengthens stakeholder trust, and supports shared ownership of sustainability goals. This methodology has demonstrated effectiveness across a range of geographies, including agroforestry systems in Peru and coffee-producing landscapes in Mexico.

To deepen this impact, particularly among Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), women, and youth, LandScale is advancing localized engagement mechanisms such as the LandScale-Approved Service Provider model. This model emphasizes culturally appropriate training and tailored technical support, ensuring that assessments are grounded in local contexts and responsive to specific needs. By building in-region capacity for conducting robust assessments, the approach aims to generate actionable insights and direct value for communities, thereby reinforcing the relevance and utility of LandScale as a tool for sustainable landscape management.

For more information, visit the LandScale website.

7. TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Building and sustaining a learning network requires thoughtful technical infrastructure and user experience (UX) design. Technology is not a panacea, but when used well, it can greatly enhance connectivity, knowledge sharing, and inclusivity.



Grass clumps and trees against red earth, Australia © Indigenous Desert Alliance

7.1 CHOOSING YOUR DIGITAL TOOLS & PLATFORMS

To determine a digital platform solution for Ampliseed, we started with a human-centred design 'discovery activity' working with members of the community to understand their ways of working, systems, tools, processes and identify how and why they needed or wanted to engage with other members of the network. This focussed on those who would be using the solution – the end-users – what they need, how they are most-likely to engage – and why. First, we diverged – going wide of the problem space to gather as much information as possible about the end users through a survey and series of 1:1 interviews. This information was then collated and synthesised to better define the problems – the unmet needs of our members – and what features or functions an online knowledge portal would need to provide to represent value and ensure engagement.

Whilst this process will surface different themes, features and functions for every community, most effective learning networks make use of:

A central online platform

- A central hub for connections, resources, and collaboration.
- Features to look for may include a member directory, events calendar, ability to send out news updates, and a place to store resources.
- Cost effectiveness should be considered along with maintenance and support requirements.

Communication channels:

- Regular newsletters or messaging app updates to keep members informed and engaged.
- Popular choices include email newsletters, WhatsApp groups, or other messaging platforms.

Public outreach tools:

- A website and social media presence to share stories, attract members, and reach wider audiences.

SIMPLE TOOLS OFTEN WORK BEST

- **Prioritise ease of use**—short emails or concise summaries often outperform elaborate platforms.
- **Use feedback and analytics** to continually refine user experiences.
- **Facilitation is key:** technology must be actively supported and facilitated to stay relevant.

When comparing tools, you'll also need to consider:

- one-off implementation and data-migration costs
- recurring licence or subscription tiers
- on-boarding and training time
- information security compliance
- ongoing maintenance, integrations and feature upgrades.

It's usually worthwhile to investigate if pricing discounts are available for multi-year commitments or mission-driven organisations (non-profits, educational, or Indigenous-led often qualify).

The takeaway is that a combination of tools – a robust platform for depth and archiving, plus push notifications (email, WhatsApp groups, etc.) for convenience – can maximise engagement. It's important to monitor how members are using (or not using) a tool and adapt accordingly.

7.2 ENSURING GOOD USER EXPERIENCE (UX)

A learning network may have participants with varying tech literacy, languages, and connectivity. Good UX design means tools are inclusive and accessible for all users.

Simple and clear content

- Avoid jargon, provide background information, and ensure content is clear and actionable.

Accessibility

- Ensure low-bandwidth accessibility, offering offline options such as email summaries and downloadable resources.

Diverse engagement methods

- Mix quick, regular updates (email, messaging) with occasional detailed sessions (webinars, deep-dive workshops).
- Offer both live and recorded options to accommodate different schedules and connectivity.

Language and tech support

- Look for user-friendly technologies and provide easy onboarding, regular demonstrations, and one-on-one support to help members confidently use the solutions.
- Provide translated or multilingual resources as needed.

INVEST IN ONBOARDING & SUPPORT

A tool without facilitation risks becoming a ghost town. Pair every tech solution with human facilitation - offer demos, guides, and person-to-person support, especially early on or after major updates.

Early in the portal's launch, Ampliseed realised members benefited greatly from walkthroughs and personal, hands-on support to feel confident using it. Tools need "weavers" to make them useful.

7.3 INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY & KNOWLEDGE GOVERNANCE

A critical technical consideration – especially in networks involving Indigenous knowledge – is who owns and controls the data and knowledge being shared.

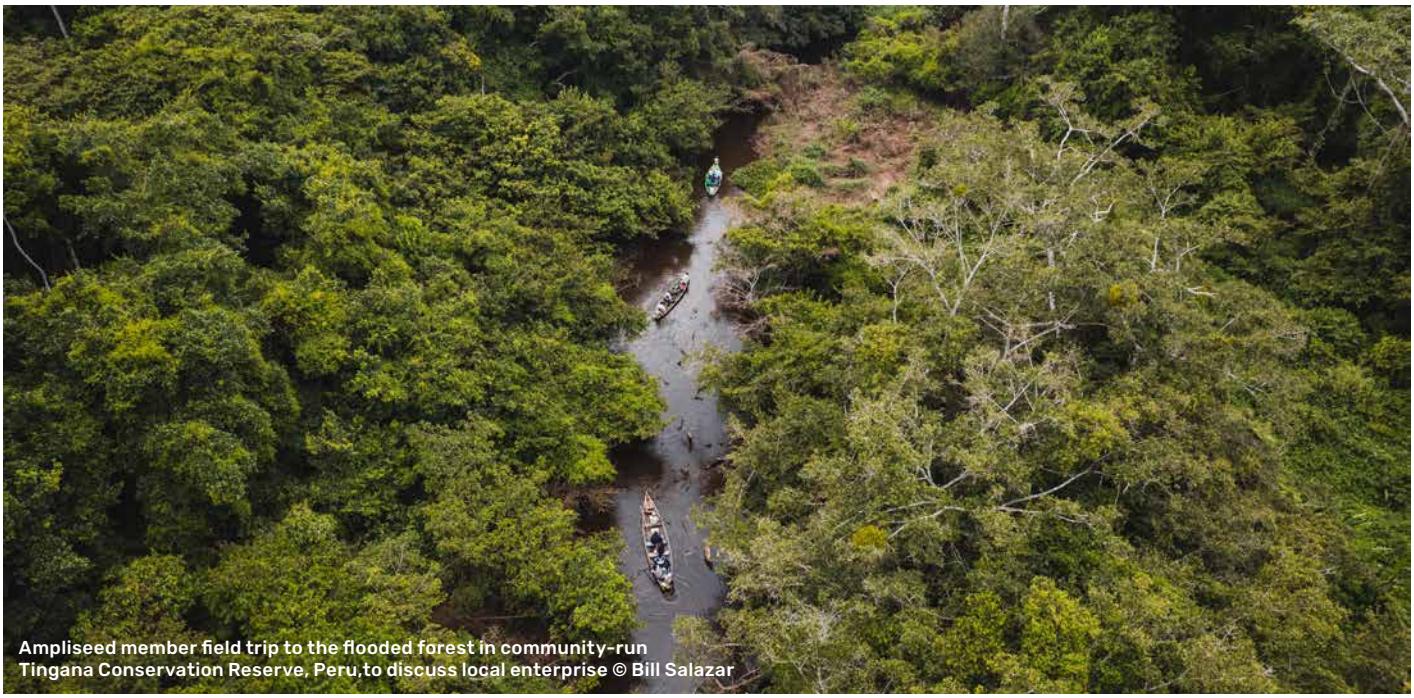
- **Ownership:** Clearly establish who owns and manages shared knowledge.
- **Consent:** Always obtain explicit permission before sharing sensitive or traditional information.
- **Data governance policies:** Create clear policies aligned with Indigenous-led frameworks (e.g., CARE Principles).
- **Qualitative storytelling:** Include storytelling and narratives to balance quantitative data and honour cultural contexts and decolonise information sharing.

Establish data governance protocols early: decide what information can be openly shared, what needs permission, how traditional knowledge will be protected, and how to give credit appropriately. This might be documented in a knowledge-sharing agreement or an Indigenous data policy for the network.

Indigenous data sovereignty principles assert that Indigenous peoples have the right to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data derived from their communities, traditions, or territories. Indigenous-led protocols like the CARE Principles (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics) can help protect Indigenous data. The network also prioritised qualitative storytelling alongside quantitative data, which is an aspect of decolonising information sharing.

Further reading

- Global Indigenous Data Alliance: CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance.
- Australian Government (2024). *Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data*.



Ampliseed member field trip to the flooded forest in community-run Tingana Conservation Reserve, Peru,to discuss local enterprise © Bill Salazar

8. CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

Every learning network faces challenges due to their voluntary, distributed, and multi-organisational nature. Here are some clear strategies and practical solutions to tackle common issues.

8.1 OPERATIONAL STEWARDSHIP

Challenge: Choosing the right backbone model

Practical solutions:

A network can be run in three broad ways:

- **Participant-managed:** responsibilities rotate through a small 'stewardship circle of members. This keeps overheads low and maximises ownership, but struggles when activities need complex logistics or grant compliance.
- **Resourced backbone:** this is the Ampliseed network model, where dedicated staff, fiduciary services, curation and facilitation are funded to support network development and most of its activities.
- **A hybrid path:** typically this begins with a backbone and gradually transfers day-to-day coordination once systems have matured. Some Ampliseed's advocacy activities also followed this path, for example where events were organised through funded core activities, but participants paid for their own travel.

MEASURE FOR SUCCESS

Assessing the success of networks is inherently challenging due to their complexity, evolving structures, and the intangible nature of many of their outcomes like connections between members. Despite these challenges, there are qualitative and quantitative metrics that can provide valuable insights into a network's effectiveness, sustainability, and overall impact. Methodologies and indicators suitable for evaluating network success are provided in Appendix C.

8.2 FUNDING & SUSTAINABILITY

Challenge: Ensuring long-term sustainability beyond initial funding.

Practical solutions:

A pragmatic approach to funding is to diversify funding through a blend of four revenue streams.

- **Anchor philanthropy or multi-year grants** (particularly to cover operating and evaluation costs)
- **Tiered membership fees** (this mainstreams costs throughout the network; in-kind contributions such as hosting an exchange may also be an option)
- **Mission-aligned sponsorship** (works best for visible assets, such as an annual workshop, peer exchange event, podcast series, etc.)
- **Fee-for-service offerings** (turning internal know-how into income, e.g. training, study tours, advisory support).

Additional considerations include:

- **Fund dedicated coordination:** If possible, allocate resources specifically for dedicated curation and facilitation roles – networks that rely on volunteers rarely endure over the long term.
- **Local empowerment:** Equip members with skills in fundraising and grant writing.
- **Transparency:** Regularly communicate openly about funding status and involve members in sustainability planning.

PLAN FOR SUSTAINABILITY

A strong, sustainable network needs diverse funding sources to ensure its long-term viability. Financial models may include a mix of grants, partner contributions, and innovative financing methods, such as offering capacity-building services in exchange for financial contributions or pursuing partnership opportunities that provide mutual benefits. By exploring multiple avenues for funding, networks can reduce their dependency on any one source and position themselves to weather financial fluctuations.

8.3 BREAKING DOWN SILOS

Challenge: Members often stick to familiar circles, limiting cross-project collaboration.

Practical solutions:

- **Structured mixing:** Intentionally mix participants in meetings and workshops.
- **Regular communication:** Profile diverse projects or people regularly through newsletters or stories.
- **Matchmaking:** Actively connect individuals with shared interests or challenges.

Some degree of silo is natural – projects have different contexts, and not everything is universally relevant. Indeed, it's important to respect differences and avoid "flattening" diversity. The nuance is to connect silos where there's synergy (e.g., two landscape projects both working on Indigenous land rights can share governance models). And the key is to facilitate discovery of common ground: once people find a shared challenge or goal, they will often enthusiastically continue the conversation without further prompting.

CURATE CONNECTIONS

As a coordinator, track who has connected with whom; if certain members remain on the fringe, personally introduce them to others with similar interests (perhaps via email or in a meeting) to seed new relationships.

8.4 MAINTAINING ENGAGEMENT & AVOIDING FATIGUE

Challenge: Sustaining long-term member engagement, especially when members become busy or experience fatigue.

Practical solutions:

- **Balanced frequency**: Poll members on their preferred communication frequency and adapt accordingly.
- **Inclusive formats**: Use short, focused communications and occasional deep-dives rather than constant demands on members' time.
- **Varied voices**: Rotate facilitators or feature guest voices to keep interactions fresh.

MIXING IT UP

Networks thrive on energy, but energy ebbs and flows. The key is flexibility - regularly check in with members about their preferences, and experiment with different formats or voices to renew enthusiasm and help sustain engagement over time.

8.5 POWER ASYMMETRIES & INCLUSION

Challenge: Ensuring equal participation among diverse organisations, preventing dominant voices from overshadowing others.

Practical Solutions:

- **Neutral facilitation:** Use neutral facilitators who actively encourage input from all participants.
- **Diverse expertise:** Explicitly value and give equal prominence to diverse forms of expertise, including lived experience.
- **Inclusive practices:** Offer language interpretation, regional meeting times, and direct outreach to quieter or remote members.
- **Open dialogue:** Regularly discuss power dynamics openly and set clear ground rules for inclusive participation.
- **Cultural protocols:** Be sensitive to any host protocols. It may be appropriate to begin with a local Elder or custodian's Welcome to Country, and/or observe speaking orders. Respect silent periods – some cultures honour listening before speaking, so allow pauses rather than rushing to fill them.
- **Physical design:** Arrange seating in a circle or horseshoe so that everyone is equally "in the centre". Offer flexible space for smaller breakout circles, particularly for some member who may need more intimate settings to open up. Rotate the first speaker role through different stakeholder or community groups.

MEMBER CHECK-INS

Regularly ask, "Whose voice is missing?" and take proactive steps to include them. Facilitators should maintain periodic personal check-ins with less active members. You can help people feel valued by reaching out personally.

8.6 MISSION CREEP VS. EVOLUTION

Challenge: Preventing mission drift as the network expands its activities.

Practical solutions:

- **Prioritise core activities:** Regularly review which activities deliver the most value and focus/reallocate resources accordingly.
- **Collaborative decision-making:** Involve members in prioritising activities, openly discussing resource limitations and making collective choices.
- **Clear review cycles:** Periodically assess and streamline the network's portfolio to maintain quality.

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Focus on doing fewer activities very well rather than spreading resources too thinly.

9. CONCLUSION

Effective learning networks are powerful catalysts for change. When designed and nurtured with care, they become more than the sum of their parts – not only do they help individual members and projects succeed, but they also build a community that can drive system-wide impact.

Ampliseed's five-year journey illustrates how a learning network can evolve into a force for adaptive learning, Indigenous leadership, and advocacy. Ampliseed started with a simple premise: bring people together to learn from each other. Through trials and adaptations, it ended up weaving a global web of practitioners who are now better equipped, more connected, and more influential than they would have been alone.

None of this progress happens by accident. Behind every vibrant learning network are two drivers: skilled facilitation and intentional curation. Facilitators create psychologically safe spaces, bridge cultures and power gradients, and design engagements that transform passive attendance into active co-creation. They sense when energy is dropping, surface silent voices, and negotiate conflict before it derails trust. Curation harvests the network's raw insights – stories, data, emergent patterns – and crafts them into digestible products that members can act on and share. Together, these form the connective tissue that keeps the network learning, accountable, and moving toward collective impact. Investing in people with these skills, and giving them the mandate to experiment and adapt, is therefore not an optional extra; it is the engine that turns a loose gathering into a community of practice capable of changing systems.

For practitioners and organisations looking to foster similar networks, the key lessons are clear: invest in relationships and trust from day one; centre the voices and knowledge of Indigenous and local leaders; remain flexible and willing to learn and pivot; leverage technology thoughtfully to connect but don't forget the irreplaceable value of in-person connection; support the people who design inclusive dialogues, hold space for tough conversations, and continuously distill the group's insights into usable knowledge; and be bold in using your network as a platform to amplify voices and influence beyond the group. Just as importantly, approach the work with a decolonising and inclusive mindset – question whose knowledge is prioritised, create space for marginalised perspectives, and design governance so that power is shared. This makes the difference between a network that merely exchanges information and a community that transforms how things are done.

Facilitation and curation drive vibrant learning networks. © Cristian Rojas

Morro de Calzada, Moyobamba, Peru © Bill Salazar

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: ABOUT AMPLISEED

In 2018, the BHP Foundation was funding seven large-scale conservation initiatives through multi-year grants on four continents, all "*aiming to change the way conservation at landscape scale is achieved*" (Figure 1). These projects ranged from sustaining the world's largest Indigenous-led conservation network in Australia's deserts, to empowering First Nations in Canada's boreal forests, to building climate resilience strategies for coral reefs and communities in the Pacific and Caribbean, creating new protected corridors in Chile, and community-driven rainforest stewardship in Peru. Despite the different ecosystems and country contexts in which each project operated there were many similarities. All shared common aspirations to create innovative governance models, strengthen local leadership and invest in resilient communities, and they faced similar challenges like long term sustainable financing solutions.

BHP Foundation aspired to foster cross-project learning across its portfolio of projects. Through these networks, the aim was to maximise impact by bringing together organisations and professionals to learn from each other while also creating a space to understand the important concepts and inherent tensions important to BHP Foundation investments. These include, for example, measurement, learning and evaluation methods and concepts like scaling, sustainability, amplification and advocacy, as well as core capacity building activities such as leadership and cultural connection.
A benchmarking study of existing public networks across the environmental resilience space didn't offer the experience BHP Foundation was searching for. So, it engaged Pollination Foundation to co-design a learning network to connect BHP Foundation partner organisations.

Pollination Foundation offered deep understanding of the focus area of these partnerships and exceptional facilitation skills to ultimately test, establish and grow a network to support partner organisations focused on environmental resilience, The intent was to create a learning model with potential to sustain support past the lifecycle of BHP Foundation's investment and be scaled to include other practitioners and organisations in the future.

Together the organisations developed a learning and leadership model which was hosted and facilitated by Pollination Foundation with guidance on content from BHP Foundation and its partner organisations.

Reserva Costera Valdiviana, Chile © The Nature Conservancy.

Ampliseed's network consists of diverse conservation and Indigenous-led organisations working across multiple landscapes. The member organisations share a commitment to biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and Indigenous leadership. These organisations contribute expertise, innovation, and lived experience, making Ampliseed a powerful hub for cross-sector learning and action.

Indigenous Desert Alliance
Keeping the desert connected

INDIGENOUS DESERT ALLIANCE

Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA) facilitates the largest Indigenous-led and culturally connected conservation network on Earth to enable a strong and united voice for desert rangers, to build strong and sustainable ranger teams and to ensure the future health of the Australian desert.

© Indigenous Desert Alliance

Nature United

NATURE UNITED

Forest Conservation in the Boreal is working with Indigenous Nations in the Canadian boreal to help build a socially, economically and environmentally resilient future for Indigenous communities and for nature.

CONSERVACIÓN INTERNACIONAL
Perú

CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Alto Mayo Project is supporting Awajun indigenous communities and migrant farmers to become effective stewards of the landscape's natural resources.

©Conservation International

Great Barrier Reef Foundation

GREAT BARRIER REEF FOUNDATION

Resilient Reefs Initiative is partnering with global reef managers and front-line communities in four UNESCO World Heritage sites to design and deliver integrated solutions that build the resilience of coral reefs and the communities that depend on them.

FUNDACIÓN TIERRA AUSTRAL

FUNDACIÓN TIERRA AUSTRAL

The Boldo to Cantillana Conservation Corridor project is demonstrating an innovative new model for conservation in Chile by using the country's landmark private lands conservation agreement, the *Derecho Real de Conservación*, to advance the permanent protection of a habitat corridor comprised of Mediterranean habitat, Chile's rarest, least protected and most threatened ecosystem.

LANDSCALE

RAINFOREST ALLIANCE

LandScale is a global framework and online platform to generate trusted landscape-level insights that can align and incentivise local and global action to deliver sustainability at scale.

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Valdivian Coastal Reserve protects one of the largest areas of temperate rainforest in Chile and seeks to promote a model of public-private co-management of protected areas of reference for the implementation of the Nature Law in the country.

MEMBER LOCATIONS

1 Indigenous Desert Alliance, Australia

2 Canada's Boreal Forest

3 Alto Mayo Landscape, Peru

4 Chile Conservation Corridor

5 Valdivia Coastal Reserve, Chile

Resilient Reefs

6 Ningaloo Coast, Australia

7 Lagoons of New Caledonia

8 Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, Belize

9 Rock Islands Southern Lagoon, Palau

LandScale

10 LandScale Mexico

11 LandScale Peru

APPENDIX B: FOUNDATIONS FOR A NEW NETWORK

When establishing a new learning network, use this checklist to ensure you've covered the foundational elements:

- **Clarify purpose and scope:** Define the primary purpose of your network and what success looks like. Identify the domain or thematic focus that binds members.
- **Stakeholder mapping:** Identify who should be involved. Consider diversity (regional, gender, knowledge system) and ensure key groups are represented. For each potential member, clarify motivations to join – this will inform value propositions.
- **Governance and facilitation:** Determine who will coordinate the network (individual or team) and how decisions will be made. Set basic governance structures – e.g., an advisory group of members, rotating co-chairs, or a simple charter that outlines roles and responsibilities.
- **Resource plan:** Secure initial funding or support for at least a pilot phase. Budget for convenings (travel, venue or virtual platform costs), a part-time/full-time facilitator, and communications. If grant-funded, align on expectations with funders but maintain flexibility for co-design.
- **Co-design session:** Hold an inaugural design meeting or survey with prospective members to co-create the activity plan. Ask: "What do you most want to learn? What skills do you have to share? What network activities would be most valuable?" Use this input to draft an initial calendar of events and initiatives.
- **Platforms and tools setup:** Choose your communication channels (e.g., email list, WhatsApp) and consider an online repository or portal for documents and discussions.
- **Kick-off event:** Host a launch event (virtual or in-person) to build relationships. Include introductions, icebreakers, and a collaborative activity (like mapping common challenges). This sets the tone for an interactive, inclusive network.
- **Establish communication rhythm:** Decide how often you'll send updates (e.g., monthly newsletter) and hold meetings. Create a contact list of members and test communications to make sure everyone is in the loop.
- **Set Norms and Values:** With member input, articulate a few guiding principles (e.g., confidentiality rules, openness to diverse knowledge, commitment to respect). For instance, Ampliseed's norm was "the knowledge is in the network" – emphasizing peer knowledge over hierarchy.
- **Monitoring plan:** Choose a few key performance indicators (KPIs) or feedback mechanisms to monitor network health (participation rates, member feedback, etc.). Consider a baseline survey to later measure progress. (See Appendix B for example KPIs.)
- **Logistics:** Develop templates for meeting agendas, a shared calendar of events, and ensure all members have access to necessary tools (provide training if needed).
- **Risk mitigation:** Anticipate potential challenges (low engagement, tech issues, conflict) and have a basic mitigation strategy (e.g., one-on-one outreach for disengaged members, backup communication methods, a process to handle disagreements respectfully).

APPENDIX C: EVALUATION & KPIS

Measuring the impact and health of a learning network can be challenging, but it's important to track progress and make the case for continued support. Below are some Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and metrics that networks like Ampliseed have used or recommend:

- **Member engagement:** e.g., Number of active members (participating in at least one activity in a given quarter). Tracking membership growth and retention (how many original members are still engaged) is fundamental.
- **Event participation:** As well as measuring average attendance at network events (workshops, calls, exchanges), also track diversity of participation – are all member organisations represented? If certain groups are consistently absent, that flags an issue.
- **Knowledge exchange outputs:** Count of knowledge products generated by the network – e.g., number of newsletters, number of case studies or reports published, number of blog articles or interview pieces featuring members. These tangible outputs indicate active knowledge sharing.
- **Peer-to-peer collaboration instances:** How many instances of collaboration between members occurred as a result of the network? This could be measured via survey ("In the past year, did you start a new collaboration or receive help from someone in the network?" with options to describe). Ampliseed captured anecdotes like multi-project design sprints and cross-project partnerships forming. You can track the number of cross-project initiatives, joint proposals, or even simple resource sharing occurrences that participants report.
- **Capacity building and learning:** After trainings or exchanges, ask participants to rate how much their capacity in topic X improved. You can also track if members adopt new tools or practices shared through the network.
- **Satisfaction and perceived value:** Through annual surveys or interviews, measure overall satisfaction with the network and qualitative feedback. E.g., "90% of members say the network provides significant value to their work" or Net Promoter Score type questions ("Would you recommend joining this network to others?").
- **Inclusivity indicators:** Track representation (e.g., % of members who are Indigenous, % women in leadership roles or leading network activities). Also measure if members feel the environment is inclusive (e.g. "I feel comfortable sharing my perspective in this network" – agree/disagree). High agreement would indicate success in inclusive facilitation.
- **Advocacy/influence metrics:** If the network aims to influence beyond its own members, you can track metrics like: number of network members participating in external forums, number of external presentations or side-events by the network, media coverage.
- **Knowledge application (outcomes):** Hard to measure but very telling – try to document specific cases where network learning led to on-ground impact. For instance, a project might credit the network for helping them design a new governance model or avoid a pitfall (as learned from a peer).
- **Visual mapping tools:** Network mapping tools like Kumu can provide powerful insights into the network's development. But even simple mapping exercises are valuable, like building a network map template where each member can place a node (themselves) and draw lines to others they have collaborated with, to visualize connectivity and identify potential gaps or hubs.

These KPIs should be tailored to the network's goals (a network focused on policy change might include different indicators than one focused on community practice). It's useful to present some metrics in dashboard form annually to stakeholders and to use them internally to reflect – e.g., if event attendance is dropping, adjust strategy; if outputs are plentiful but members still feel low value, examine the gap. Remember to combine quantitative KPIs with qualitative insights for a full picture.

APPENDIX D: GLOSSARY

Adaptive learning: An approach where strategies and methods evolve based on continuous feedback, reflection, and real-world experiences.

Advocacy: Activities designed to influence policies, practices, or decisions, especially through collective action.

Capacity building: Activities aimed at enhancing skills, abilities, and knowledge of individuals or organisations.

Co-design: A collaborative approach involving network members in actively designing strategies, activities, and solutions.

Community of Practice (CoP): A group of practitioners who share an interest in a specific field or topic, regularly engaging to develop and improve their collective skills and knowledge.

Cross-pollination: The sharing and integration of ideas, knowledge, and practices between different individuals, groups, or projects.

Curation: Actively organizing and facilitating interactions, resources, and information exchanges to maintain a dynamic and engaging community.

Decolonising methodologies: Approaches that actively challenge traditional power structures, centring Indigenous knowledge systems and leadership.

Equity and inclusion: Practices ensuring fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all members, while actively addressing barriers faced by underrepresented groups.

Facilitator: A person responsible for guiding, supporting, and managing group interactions, ensuring productive and inclusive engagement.

Governance: The processes and structures used to manage the operations, decision-making, and accountability of a network.

Hybrid Model: An approach combining elements of structured and flexible systems, often mixing online and in-person interactions.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Principles recognizing that Indigenous communities should have control over their own data, information, and knowledge.

Knowledge Exchange: Sharing insights, lessons, and experiences among peers to enhance collective learning and problem-solving.

Learning network: A structured group of organisations or individuals collaborating regularly to share knowledge, solve common challenges, and build collective capacity.

Mission creep: The gradual shift of a network's original objectives towards broader or different goals, often unintentionally.

Network: A group of interconnected people or organisations that communicate, collaborate, and support one another toward common goals or shared interests.

Network backbone: An individual or organisation providing essential coordination, administration, and support to a network.

Peer-to-peer learning: Learning through direct interaction and exchange of knowledge and experiences between individuals facing similar challenges.

Psychological safety: Creating an environment where members feel safe to openly share ideas, experiences, questions, and failures without fear of judgment or negative consequences.

Social capital: The value derived from relationships, trust, and cooperation among network members, enabling effective collaboration.

Sustainability: Ensuring that a network or its activities can continue effectively over the long term, often through diverse funding and resource strategies.

Systemic change: Fundamental, long-lasting shifts in policies, practices, behaviors, and norms across a sector or community.

User experience (UX): Designing tools and platforms to be intuitive, accessible, and user-friendly, accommodating diverse member needs.

Morro de Calzada, Moyobamba, Peru © Bill Salazar

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