



NETWORKING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Reflections on the experience of Bucaramanga's 'red inclusiva'

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*'Never doubt that a small group
of thoughtful, committed citizens
can change the world; indeed it's
the only thing that ever has.'*

Margaret Mead

Introduction

The famous quote from Margaret Mead on our cover is a source of inspiration to countless ‘small groups of committed citizens’ working away, often over many years, to promote improvements in their own lives and that of their communities in different parts of the globe. But what does it mean in practice? How do such groups go about achieving sustainable social change in the face of the many barriers to citizen action in contemporary societies? And what do they need to be effective?

This pamphlet is an exploration of these questions through reflection on five years in the life of one such group, the *red inclusiva* (perhaps best translated as ‘network for inclusion’) of Bucaramanga.

Bucaramanga is a cluster of four municipalities (including Bucaramanga itself and Floridablanca) towards the North East of Colombia. Heidi comes from Bucaramanga and we have been visiting the city, whenever possible together, since 2007 as the guest of her mother Gloria. (In David’s case, at roughly six-monthly intervals.) A lot has happened in five years but we try to offer a short version of their story *italicised in what follows*. Reflecting on their experience and that of other similar networks that we know, we also try to draw out wider lessons about networking for social change in text boxes which address five key questions.

How do ‘Meadian’ networks:

- ✓ Develop and define a shared purpose?
- ✓ Find the strength to persevere in their efforts?
- ✓ Work together effectively to use their members’ skills?
- ✓ Develop strategies to achieve positive change?
- ✓ Contribute to social change on a larger scale?

The red inclusiva story

Gloria is a school teacher with a passion for advancing inclusive education, a passion she shares with some of her friends. When we visit, we always meet up with this growing network of citizen activists, the core group of which has come to identify themselves as the red inclusiva. Over the last five years the red has evolved from a group of like-minded colleagues and friends into a self-organising network plotting a route to a more inclusive city and supporting each other to make a positive difference.

In 2013, this core group has 12 members. Four are disabled people: Carlos José, Miguel Jr., Santi and Sonia. Three are parents and one a sibling of disabled people. Three are teachers, one of whom, Adriana, directs a small private school, Aldebarán, with an inclusive philosophy. There is a doctor, Miguel Sr., a psychologist, Carolina, and two social workers. Of course,



members may have more than one role. Moreover this is not just an association of individuals but also a coalition of 'inclusive' agencies. For example, Cecilia directs a local NGO, Fundown, established to support children with Down's Syndrome. Elia, Lila and Santi are involved with a Catholic Foundation, Guanella, which provides services to people with intellectual disabilities. And Carlos José leads a Foundation which, among other things, provides a rural health centre for disabled children.

*Not surprisingly therefore, the group's focus has been on advancing the inclusion of disabled people, especially through inclusive education. (See **Box I**)*

Box I: Defining network purpose

In choosing their title, the *red inclusiva* expressed their common interest in advancing social inclusion. What they mean by this has evolved over time as they have worked together. An effective network can 'live' with members holding overlapping but not necessarily identical priorities.

Colombia is a diverse country in which there are many kinds of division that need to be addressed in building more inclusive communities. Inclusion can't be just about action addressed to particular sub-groups (e.g. disabled people) even though it is important to identify what kind of adjustments individuals with specific impairments require to participate fully. Rather the goal is changes which make everyone welcome, across differences of gender, ethnicity, income, disability etc. And while education is the starting point, this has led to an interest in the transition from school to adulthood, the requirements for full participation in community life and ultimately, what this means for all of us if we are to live in harmony with our planet in order to achieve a sustainable future.

Characteristically, small groups evolve through a process of 'forming, storming, norming and performing'. This has been true of the red. Indeed, the networking in 2007 got off to a false start when the 'storming' overtook the 'forming' and

needed to start again in 2008. Since then the group has expanded and no-one has dropped out. Indeed there has been growing commitment to the network as both a strong source of personal support and a vehicle for advancing the inclusion agenda locally.



It has helped that at Aldebarán and also at the home of Miguel, Cecilia and Miguel Jr. the red has great hosts and comfortable 'spaces' in which to meet. The culture has been one where everyone's contribution is welcomed and people take on different group roles (initiator, includer, questioner, reflector, philosopher, story-teller, summariser...and interpreter) as the situation requires.

Boxes II and III draw out further what is required for network's to both 'stick at it' and work effectively.

Box II: Seven attributes encouraging perseverance

'Sticking at it' depends on networks identifying an inspiring purpose, finding good ways of working together and gaining reinforcement through effective action. It also depends on the identities and personal attributes which members bring to the network and the way these are cultivated through continuing participation. Seven such attributes seem especially important: Responsibility - recognising that 'we can't rely on others to create a better world, we have to take responsibility ourselves for doing the right thing for our communities'.

Direction – shaping common effort not so much through a set of tasks, but rather from a sense of direction out of which more concrete action can emerge.

Engagement – developing a way of engaging with each other and external challenges which links heart (love of humanity), head (vision of a better future) and hand (doing things which make a difference).

Mutuality – being willing to welcome diversity within the network, listen carefully to where other members are 'coming from' and take up different group roles at different times in the interests of the common good.

Resilience – adapting to disappointments and taking encouragement from the fact of trying.

Imagination – understanding how things are connected and visualising what would make a difference.

Reflectivity – being able to face up to reality, share ideas and feelings honestly and be open to learning from experience.

Relationships have grown through food, drink and music (Miguel Jr. among others is a skilled music-maker) as well as work. Trust has increased through the honest sharing of personal experiences, good and bad. Members have inspired and supported each other's growing confidence and skills. For example, Sonia, who has a severe visual impairment, has made the personal transition from accountancy to teaching; Cecilia has emerged as a strong inclusion advocate in municipal policy-making.

Box III: Working together effectively

Meadian networks are informal associations of more-or-less like-minded people working together in a spirit of equality. There is no 'boss': networks are self-organising and all members may be called on to exercise leadership. They seek to ensure that everyone gets the opportunity to give and seek support, contribute to shaping and acting on their shared purpose and learn from their experiences. Two processes are key to ensuring members work together effectively, concerned respectively with *hosting the network* and *facilitating conversations which matter*.

Good *hosting* involves: choosing pleasant places to meet and making people feel welcome; ensuring that this is a welcome for diversity by making the adjustments required for everyone to participate; shaping the meeting space to foster equal participation (for example, as if 'sitting round a camp fire'); providing orientation by getting agreement on the main purpose of each meeting; and encouraging contributions through attentive listening - all so as to provide a 'safe space' for mutual engagement.

Within this 'space', networks need to conduct their meetings in ways that ensure they are having *conversations which matter*. There are many well-documented methods for this including *The World Café* and *Open Space Technology* which can be adapted to different situations. Both of these methods provide opportunities for small group discussions around important questions; as well as ways of sharing ideas and insights between these small groups and drawing common conclusions.

Together the aim is always to ensure that networks are hosting conversations which matter.

Most important perhaps, the red has found a productive way of 'strategising'. It has come together to clarify a vision of what inclusion and equal citizenship mean in the Colombian context; explore how the current realities measure up to this; look for opportunities to promote constructive change; seek to build wider alliances and infiltrate forums where public policy is made; take action individually and sometimes in small clusters; and use the group to draw lessons from this experience for future action, thus strengthening their strategic capacity.

Box IV (following) describes three main dimensions of network strategizing.

As we have seen, the major focus has been education. Gloria teaches in a large public school and also now leads postgraduate teacher training in inclusion at the autonomous university in Bucaramanga. She has tried to widen inclusion in her own classroom and help her school do likewise; the university provides a vehicle for engaging many more qualified teachers in this mission.



Aldebarán demonstrates inclusive classroom practices and has been generous, especially through Adriana, in sharing this expertise. Sonia has been a powerful advocate through sharing her own experience of surviving public education. And much more. Over time, these contributions have increasingly been organized along three main axes.

Working locally, the red inclusiva has tried to raise community expectations for inclusive education, for example by:

- ✓ Supporting individuals, like Miguel Jr., to advance their claims to be included in the mainstream, in this example, at the University level.
- ✓ Fostering mutual aid and self-confidence among families, e.g. through the work of Fundown with children with Down's Syndrome.
- ✓ Raising public awareness e.g. through the press and T.V. and cultural events like those organised regularly by Aldebarán.

It has invested a lot in the professional development of teachers and school administrations, for example, by:

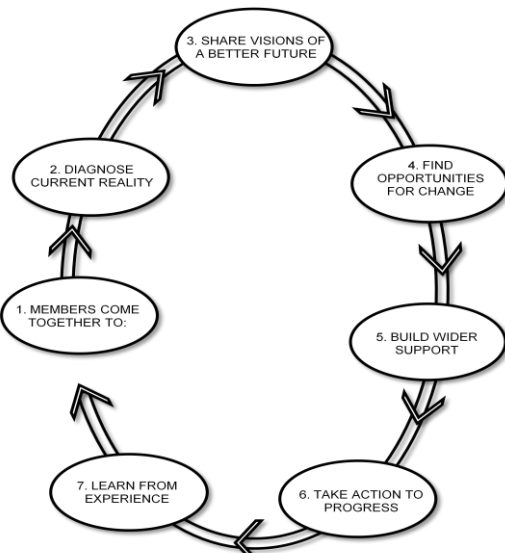
- ✓ Demonstrating more inclusive practice by what teachers like Gloria and Adriana do in their own classrooms and spreading this good practice.
- ✓ Helping schools prepare for the admission of individual students.
- ✓ Leading professional development programmes (e.g. in Floridablanca) designed to equip teachers to lead the process of school transformation.

And it has contributed to policy reform, for example, by:

- ✓ Gaining representative roles in municipal disability reference groups (e.g. in Bucaramanga and Floridablanca).
- ✓ Including Department of Education officials in the district-wide professional development programmes.
- ✓ Joining in wider alliances (like the Red Santander) engaged in public policy advocacy.

Box IV: Three windows on strategising

The consider-act-learn cycle

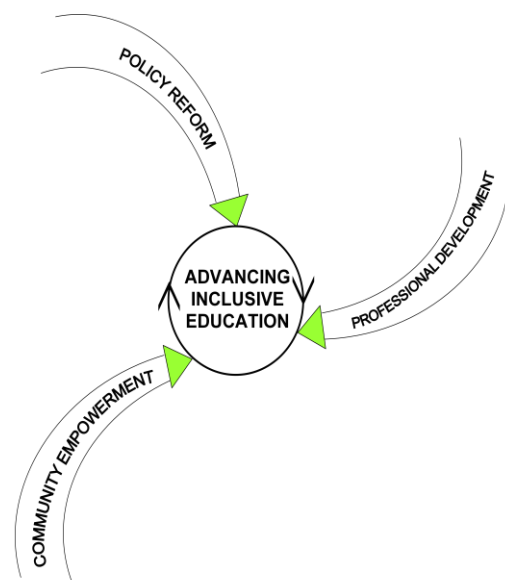


We use the term *strategising* rather than the noun, *strategy*, to convey that this is a creative process within these networks and strategy is always *emerging* as members seek to take and learn from action in the complex world of local communities. The diagram captures the underlying logic of the continuing cycle (or spiral) of considering, acting and learning through which networks engage with each other and the external environment. Through this 'action learning' process, the network also develops its capacity for future strategising.

Linking assets, opportunities and tactics

The action part of this cycle involves networks in identifying external opportunities for change where they have the assets (for example, in member's status, skills and connections) to make a positive difference through intelligent tactics. This process takes inspiration from the biblical story of David and Goliath, where David draws on his skills as a shepherd (i.e. in throwing stones) to rebalance a previously uneven contest. David sometimes wins!

Seeing the bigger picture

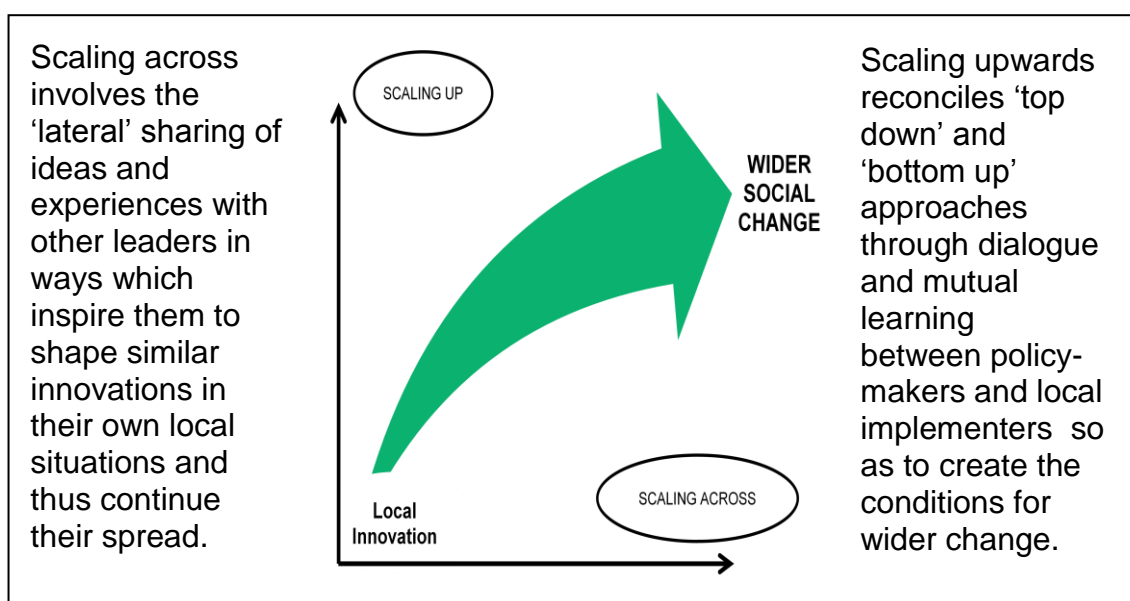


In facing complex challenges (like advancing inclusive education), networks need at least a simple (and always evolving) 'theory of change' to inform and structure their strategising. For example, learning from their experience, the *red inclusiva* recognises the importance of pursuing three different but inter-related pathways to educational change, concerned respectively with raising community expectations, developing professional contributions and reforming wider policies (illustrated in the diagram). As *the story opposite shows*, increasingly the *red inclusiva* shapes its activities according to this evolving theory.



Strategising in this way, the red inclusiva seeks to focus its efforts sufficiently intensively to make a real difference, for example in the life of one individual (e.g. Miguel Jr.) one classroom (e.g. Gloria's) and one school (e.g. Aldebarán). But it also aspires to achieve more extensive local change, without spreading its efforts 'too thinly'. **Box V** shows how small groups can link the intensive to the extensive through the twin processes of 'scaling across' and 'scaling up'.

Box V: Achieving wider change



Of course, the red inclusiva's vision of sustainable and inclusive communities provides an agenda for a lifetime. It is helping its own members get better lives for themselves, demonstrating inclusive practice in their own work and increasingly using this experience to promote wider change in policy and public understanding. After five years, the red inclusiva is still travelling hopefully!

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