

A national innovation network framework

5 core pillars of a national innovation network

What is a national innovation network?

We understand a national innovation network as a country-based membership network that represents the collective interests of innovation and technology hubs, including business incubators, accelerators, co-working spaces, and other entrepreneur support organizations (ESO).¹

Why form a national innovation network?

The collective innovation capacity and potential impact of hubs together under a national umbrella is greater than their individual strengths. A network gives the innovation community critical mass on a larger scale and enables partners to tap into the best talent, ideas and resources while also offering the innovation ecosystem visibility and a louder voice.

From stakeholder engagement to formal registration, 5 catalysts in the formation of these networks include:

- Need for innovation and technology hubs to have a **collective voice**.
- Need to advocate and **influence legislation** targeting the innovation ecosystem.
- Wish to **exchange** experiences, expertise, and best practices, thus strengthening the sector's specialization efforts and performance.
- Need to **coordinate** efforts and practices in the sector, including the opportunity for improved dialogue with (funding) partners.

"Network structures that bind together individuals, organizations, regions, and nations play an ever more important role nowadays. Well-organized networks and associations can change existing structures and to initiate and drive forward transformation processes. Effective communication and information dissemination are usually the core business of a network/association. In order carry out these functions effectively, a permanent secretariat is necessary."

Meike Pasch, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)²

Adding value to members and national ecosystems at large through:



Thought leadership



QHubs Standard by Community Enterprise Association in Ireland

The Community Enterprise Association in Ireland developed a framework that provides a professional ISO standard for the 350+ enterprise hub, co-working and remote working locations nationwide that play a pivotal role in supporting start-ups, SMEs, multi-nationals and remote workers across the public and private sectors.

Convening power



Hubs Register by Ghana Hubs Network in Ghana

"We develop a hub register that maps out the hubs and the support they offer. It would act as a resource pool that startups can look into, identifying hubs and incubation spaces that offer what they need and when they need it, and creating a value chain of hubs that startups can progress into."

Voice and influence



By organizing the hubs in one umbrella body, the national networks stimulate collective action in the community that generates power to create change.

"One of the main reasons why we formed ASSEK was so that as hubs we could speak in one voice."

Mercy Kimalat, CEO, Association of Startup & SMEs Enablers of Kenya (ASSEK)

¹ "National associations are country-based membership networks whose raison d'être is to represent the collective interests of members and the not-for-profit community more generally." Resource Guide for National Associations: Understanding National Associations https://www.civicus.org/images/Civicus_Resource_Guide_for_Nat_Ass.1.pdf

² <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/adult-education-and-development/editions/aed-792012/networking/support-of-networks-and-associations>

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1 Purpose and Governance

- A clear purpose refers to the main reason why the network exists, what it hopes to achieve and what value it offers to its members and the ecosystem at large, i.e. its vision, mission and value proposition.
- A well-defined governance structure typically includes a board of directors, an elected executive committee, a body of advisors to the board, and a hired secretariat that oversees the day-to-day activities.

Ghana Hubs Network Vision: To lead the development of a cohesive and strengthened tech and business ecosystem in Ghana

Tanzania Startup Association Vision: A conducive legal and regulatory business environment for the growth of the startup ecosystem.

2 Policy and Advocacy

- Functioning as a point of contact or bridge between innovation ecosystem actors and elected authorities and decision-makers, a lobbying strategy is instrumental in advancing the network's agenda.
- Providing a platform to align on needs and co-create legal instruments to foster the development of innovative high-growth firms, e.g. Startup Acts, can lead to true orchestration of efforts.

"We have built relationships with influential people within the Tanzanian government, including having some within our board, which ensures that the association gets a seat at the table in every conversation regarding the innovation ecosystem."

Zahoro Muhaji, CEO, Tanzania Startup Association (TSA)

3 Systems and Structures

- Systems and structures organize how networks go about achieving their central goal. This can be documented in a network's constitution.
- Standard process manuals and operating procedures should follow, including an operations manual and well-defined internal finance management structures within a finance manual.

"In the early days, we leveraged our networks to get funding. Clear processes were not in place and that caused lots of problems, including a lack of trust. Key lesson learned is to always start with processes."

Steve Tchoumba, CEO, [KmerTech](#)

4 Capacities and Networks

- Capacity-building opportunities are a key service networks can offer their members to foster engagement and boost abilities to survive, adapt and thrive.
- Orchestrating and streamlining the services hubs offer within a national innovation ecosystem can in turn lead to greater professionalization and specialization, signs of a more mature ecosystem.

5 Finance and Resources

- To meet the organization's costs, national innovation networks often charge a membership fee, application fees to some of their programs, or fundraise through grants.
- A sustainable business model, a fundraising strategy and monetizing services can all contribute to achieving financial sustainability.

90% of the established and aspiring national networks surveyed indicated low levels of funding and fundraising limitations as a major pain point.