Dispatch 4

Occasional Pitfalls 2011
Text by Todd Lester

In a previous post, I mention issue or urgency-based networking vs. casual membership in a network. Speaking from the perspective of starting (or instigating) the freeDimensional network, I can say that it was only through trial and error that I came to understand this dichotomy. At first, I believed that network members would need an incentive in addition to their engagement with the typical issues and actions on which freeDimensional was founded.

Leading with that idea, I pressed forward attempting to engage the growing network with regular programs and thematic campaigns that connected to the social justice aim of the network at the intersection of community engagement.

This phase of network growth witnessed some amazing engagements - e.g.economic migration in Senegal with a manifestation at the Dakar Biennial with Atelier Moustapha Dime; support to the Tadamon Multicultural Council through partnership with the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo; and help creating a year-long livelihood residency training local youth to be citizen journalists at Casa das Caldeiras in Sao Paulo, Brazil. However, and due to our limited administrative capacity, we were unable to maintain both regular programming and the rapid response to urgent situations (hosting culture workers in distress) that is our raison d'etre.

One reason for this is that it was not easy to extract value (get paid) for networking in a way that allowed us to build up our staff capacity. This leads me to a generalization: the labor expended on building trust and confidence - the essential ingredients for a network - is a front-end expenditure while financial grants and program investments usually come after this initial trust-building phase; different from corporate world, civil society and the nonprofit sector do not have the practice of retrospectively compensating or remunerating investments of time and social capital made before financial capital is received.

This means that the network administration may work with the network member to write itself into a programmatic function compensated by the grant; however, this is a new (and different) staff function from the more abstract knowledge work of networking. Therefore, finances gained through such partnerships do not pay for the labor already invested, nor do they cover the cost of continued networking unless it is couched in a programmatic line item.