

# Strengthening engagement capacity of partners through community conversations and communities of practice

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## Key messages

- Community conversations and communities of practice are complementary practice methods to foster interaction among community groups and service providers.
- Community issues and actions from community conversations inform the activities of communities of practice.
- Communities of practice are vehicles for partners to share, learn and collaborate to solve challenges.
- Communities of practice are action and change oriented. They foster innovation and promote problem solving and collaborative partnerships among partners.
- Organizational culture supportive of collaborative action, as well as learning and partnering capacity, are key to successful communities of practice.
- Strong ownership with a dedicated and skillful leadership gives high value for engagement time of partners in communities of practice.
- Problem solving, knowledge sharing and innovation form an organizing framework for communities of practice.

# Introduction

The CGIAR Research Program on Livestock used an inclusive community engagement approach called ‘community conversations’ in Ethiopia to facilitate behaviour change; mobilize community members and partners for joint analysis, learning and action; and address underlying social norms and values that create differences in gender relations among women and men in communities (Lemma et al. 2021a). Different mandated partners and community organizations have been engaged in the planning, delivery and monitoring of community conversations on different livestock management topics, including animal feeds, health management and collective marketing.

The local partners received experiential training and coaching on the community conversation process. Review and reflection have been key parts of the learning process, with partners reflecting on their learning experience and exploring ways of integrating the approach in extension activities and follow-up on community actions. In addition, the CGIAR research program team conducted monitoring and coaching visits to provide problem-solving support and document implementation of community conversations by partners (Lemma et al. 2021b).

It was necessary to bring the local partners together as a community of practice (CoP) to strengthen coordination, peer learning and joint action among the partners and to address implementation issues.

This practice brief aims to share experiences and lessons from the complementary application of community conversations and CoPs as practice methods to develop the partnering and engagement capacity of partners and improve service delivery.

# Complementary application of community conversations and communities of practice

## Community conversations

Participatory epidemiology and gender analysis in CGIAR research program sites in Ethiopia showed gendered perceptions about men's and women's knowledge and roles in livestock management (Wieland et al. 2016). Community values and norms that define gender relations influence women's abilities to access livestock information, make decisions in animal health management and participate in livestock marketing. Women face gender-based constraints to access and control over animal health inputs and services (Lemma et al. 2020).

Animal health management requires community-based actions beyond the individual farmer's action. Community-based approaches such as community conversations are attractive given their strength in building on grassroots stakeholders to develop informed animal health interventions based on the local context (Mulema et al. 2020).

Community conversations are an inclusive community-based approach that engage community members, community organizations and local partners in joint analysis, collaborative learning and action (Lemma et al. 2021a).

Engaging different mandated partners in the design, delivery, monitoring and documentation of community conversation processes and outcomes has been a core principle for developing partnering and engagement capacity of the partners. Depending on the discussion issues, different partners have participated in the community conversation process. Alignment and reflection meetings before and after community conversations facilitated co-learning and sharing among the facilitation team and the partners. In addition, partners were engaged in the monitoring of community actions by integrating this activity as part of their institutional work.

The local partners were brought together in CoPs to facilitate collaborative learning, action and innovation that would sustain community conversation outcomes (Lemma et al. 2021c).

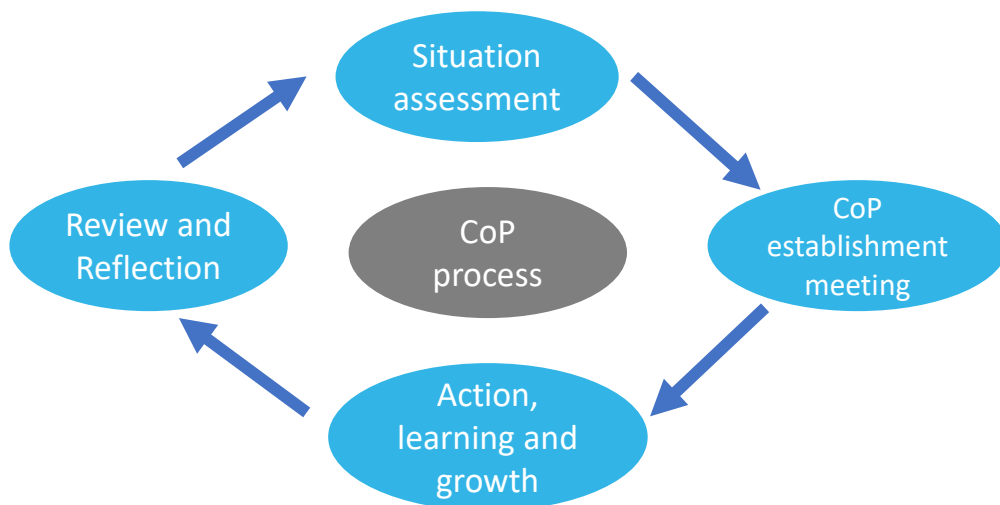
## Communities of practice

CoPs have been used for promoting best practices in learning and teaching and fostering interdisciplinary networks (Jimenez-Silva and Olsen 2012). In Ethiopia, the CGIAR Research Program on Livestock adapted the concept and practice of CoPs in a livestock development context to foster coordination, collective learning and action among partners.

In this context, a CoP is a mechanism for strengthening coordination, collaborative action and learning among key partners for problem solving, planning and delivering integrated solutions (Figure 1). It brings together a group of key partners engaged in a community conversation process addressing different livestock management issues to share, learn and work together with a clear purpose and focus. The partners are held together by a shared context and interest in the

coordination of livestock management interventions and are driven by a desire to solve coordination and implementation challenges together and contribute to enhanced development outcomes that benefit all the actors.

Figure 1. The community of practice (CoP) process.



Observations during the community conversation process and monitoring and coaching visits (Lemma et al. 2021b) indicated the need to bring partners together in peer learning and action groups and strengthen integrated implementation and scaling capacity. Accordingly, a CoP establishment meeting brought key partners together in consultation about the needs, scope and focus of the CoP initiative.

## Experiences and lessons learned

In both community conversations and CoPs, an action research approach was employed to innovate and learn from experience in the implementation of the methods. Research and learning questions guided a reflective documentation process that generated evidence on the value of the approaches.

Community conversations are a form of community-based capacity development intervention where community members discuss solutions that solve not only community level problems, but also household-level issues, so they take away things they can apply individually and, through that, contribute to the benefit of the community.

CoPs bring together partners who have engaged in community conversations, as a collaborative learning and action group, to support and monitor implementation of community actions.

CoPs discuss institutional issues such as access to inputs and services, disease surveillance, regulatory issues and coordination of interventions by different partners.

In conclusion, community conversations and CoPs are complementary interventions to improve service delivery by strengthening both the demand and response capacity of the service system. The community conversations empowered and capacitated both men and women in the community to identify and analyse problems and generate solutions. In the process, the community conversation events identified issues and actions that local service providers should take in their intervention processes.

The community conversation process improved the service demand capacity of community members, who identified options for group actions to better access services.

As an integrating “tool” across different sectors and partners, community conversations and CoPs facilitate coordinated and integrated service delivery.

The community conversation and CoP interventions are promising ways to improve service delivery at the local level through facilitating collaborative learning and coordinated actions among community members and service providers and strengthening capacity for integrated intervention planning and implementation.



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