



SOCIAL LEARNING IN SITUATIONS OF COMPLEXITY: GUIDELINES FOR FOSTERING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

With examples from the CGIAR Initiatives on NEXUS Gains and on National Policies and Strategies

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INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly interconnected world, we are often confronted with situations experienced as complex systems, characterized by multiple interacting elements, where the behavior of the whole cannot be predicted by the behavior of the parts, and effects of interventions may show up in a completely different part of the system or after a long time lag. Where different people's multiple demands compete for the same resources, for example water for sanitation, irrigation or electric power generation (not to mention cultural needs), an action in one place can have an important, or even devastating, impact in another part of the system.

When problems are entangled in this way, we need solutions also to be entangled, which means bringing together multiple actors who have knowledge and experience about different parts of the system, and at different levels. Not only bringing them together but also determining a shared direction for action together, in a way which acknowledges the different stakes actors have in an issue.

One way that actors can share experiences and knowledge about what works for a collective goal is through engaging in Communities of Practice.

A Community of Practice, or CoP, has been defined as "a gathering of individuals motivated by the desire to cross organizational boundaries, to relate to one another, and to build a body of actionable knowledge through coordination and collaboration" (World Bank Group, 2021). While much has been written about CoPs for the private sector and in sectors such as health, there is a gap in guidance on how to establish and sustain them for sustainable development in agriculture and natural resource management.

The CGIAR NEXUS Gains Initiative intervenes where the nexus of water, energy, food, forests and biodiversity systems are strongly interconnected and are critical to rural livelihoods, food and nutrition security, and gender equality and social inclusion. However, governments, stakeholders and investors struggle to manage complex changes occurring across the water–energy–food–environment (WEFE) nexus and to ensure that systems are robust under climate change and other human-made crises. Good governance across boundaries and sectors requires strong institutions and social learning among actors willing to overcome a siloed approach and adopt nexus approaches as well as the data and tools that support them.

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This document has been developed in the context of the CGIAR NEXUS Gains Initiative, to guide the establishment of CoPs and the 'ownership' and anchoring of these CoPs within key institutions in target geographies to allow the CoPs to be sustained beyond the lifespan of the Initiative. It draws on principles being used by the CGIAR Research Initiative on National Policies and Systems which is developing a Community of Policy Practice.

The guidelines are useful for anyone who wishes to "build a body of actionable knowledge through coordination and collaboration". In what follows, we will outline the theory and how it is being implemented in practice, using examples from NEXUS Gains. These guidelines are not prescriptive but developed based on years of experience and on good practices shared by other practitioners supporting CoPs.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE BASICS

All CoPs can be defined through interactions between three basic building blocks:

Community: These are the **actors** who have a stake in the issue at hand and are motivated to collaborate to improve it

Purpose: The ultimate **goal or vision** that the community wants to achieve

Practice: This is the '**practice**' which the community wants to develop.

STEPS TO FORM A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

STEP
1

Identify relevant **communities**

A CoP is different from a task team or a work group. While all three have an element of coordination towards a goal, where a CoP differs is in the aim of collaborating to improve a certain practice through interactions and social learning.

To identify potential communities, you can:

- Use alumni groups as sites of people already clustered around learning about a key issue.
- Survey people in related organizations to allow them to identify their interests in being involved.
- Notice where people are already clustering around issues, perhaps on social media.



Tip: First identify a core group who are champions for the issue and willing to invest expertise and time. Once these have started a momentum, other people can join in and extend ongoing activities. A slow organic start builds ownership from the beginning.

BOX 1: IDENTIFYING A COMMUNITY OF WEFE ACTORS

Within the context of the NEXUS Gains initiative, there are existing and potential communities of actors who want to collaborate and learn about WEFE nexus approaches, to integrate multiple connected WEFE goals for the long-term viability of all sectors. These communities have been identified as having potential to interact around the learning, development, and implementation of tools or approaches that further nexus approaches:

- Alumni of capacity development courses on the WEFE nexus (e.g., [WEF Nexus Masterclass](#)).
- Alumni of the future WEFE Nexus Leadership Program, to be piloted in Nepal in 2023. These will include leaders in Nepal (at least 60% of whom are women) working within and across WEFE sectors (grassroots leaders as well as government professionals and other practitioners).
- High-level government actors working across WEFE sectors who are alumni of nexus trainings.
- Municipal actors who have a shared goal to improve their nexus approaches, who will participate in the multistakeholder platforms that will be established under NEXUS Gains.

STEP 2

Identify the **Purpose and Practice**

Discuss within the communities their goals and means to achieving those goals

- Convene the group and conduct a needs analysis. In the case of communities formed after training courses, the needs analysis can be part of the course assessment as a next step.
- The needs analysis should cover:
 - What participants ultimately want to achieve (purpose)
 - What practical deliverables they would need to interact on to reach that goal
 - The modalities of the CoP (e.g., desired frequency and modes of interactions).
- Sequence the potential deliverables in a priority list with key 'owners' identified. A matrix mapping impact (low – high) against difficulty (low – high) can be useful to identify low-hanging fruit and high-impact outputs.



Tip: The most successful activities are those suggested and organized by the participants who are passionate about them. Beware of ambitious activities suggested for other people to do.

BOX 2: IDENTIFYING A PURPOSE AND PRACTICE

Example taken from the [WEF Nexus Masterclass](#) alumni needs analysis, summer 2022

Purpose

Integrating multiple WEFE goals to improve rural livelihoods, food and nutrition security, and gender equality and social inclusion.

Practice

Co-development, sharing, and/or co-implementation of WEFE nexus tools and approaches, and reflection and learning from struggles and successes.

Course participants indicated the following activities as the key engagements they would most appreciate having (from most to least popular):

- A space for peer learning where you can share your WEFE challenges and solutions
- Resources and publications on WEFE
- Directory of others working in WEFE, location and interests
- News from others working in WEFE

Other:

- Advocacy and policy briefs on WEFE to inform policymakers for informed and evidence-based decisions
- Conferences and workshops



Tip: Easy activities to get a CoP started, build social capital and start to co-learn are webinars and lightning talks where participants outline their area of work. Semi-structured small meetings where participants can share what they are struggling with can help accelerate trust and learning.

STEP 3

Create the **infrastructure** and **conditions** for **success**

- Set up regular check-in meetings, in which members can discuss progress of deliverables as well as share experiential learning about struggles and successes encountered.
- Identify key roles for the community members:
 - Convenor/s to follow through, keep people on track
 - Resource persons to provide specialized knowledge on certain CoP topics
 - Champions of certain approaches or deliverables
 - Sponsor to provide resources, champion the CoP and link to other groups. This may be the role of the program or project (e.g., NEXUS Gains) organizers at the beginning, but an exit plan is needed if the CoP will be sustained in time.

- Agree on mechanisms for interacting with each other, such as a medium for virtual (online) interactions. It is not necessary to set up a platform or use complicated apps. Communities are most successful if they use the tools they know and like. For example:
 - For interacting with each other: Email, LinkedIn group, WhatsApp, Telegram, Teams
 - Repository for shared materials: DropBox, Google Drive, SharePoint.
- Agree on a rhythm for meetings and schedule these in advance.
- Agree on some measures of success and monitor them periodically. See [here](#) for an example.



Tip: A charter can be useful to see at a glance the community, purpose, and practice of the CoP and share with outsiders and new members. See [here](#) for one example. Creating a charter is also a useful exercise for team building and for having a first output produced by the Community.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF FORMING A COP

- 1 Build upon what already exists** – Identify what is already there before starting a new group and explore ways of strengthening and supporting existing communities.
- 2 Coalition of the willing** – Members should ideally be self-selected and motivated to participate, sharing common understandings and ways of working.
- 3 Lead from behind** – Support from the back of the room and allow members of participant organizations, at the appropriate level (e.g., regional, national, local), to lead the CoP for buy in.
- 4 Start with minimal structure and organization (but strong purpose)** – Ensure you have clear organizational engagement among actors with a stake in improving the situation at hand. The CoP should be allowed to evolve organically rather than following a pre-established trajectory.
- 5 Leadership and facilitation** – CoPs need to be actively nurtured, and leaders need to be creative, inspired and trusted.
- 6 Ensure there are resources for the CoP** – Funding for meetings and host partner institution can provide important support for carrying out activities, producing reports, etc.
- 7 Seek to build a sustainability mechanism from the start** – Sustainability can be supported through being genuinely needs-driven, establishing a regular rhythm for engagement, identifying local champions who understand the value of working as a CoP, and distributing leadership so that if one person leaves, the momentum is maintained.
- 8 Inclusivity** – Ensure membership is diverse and gender-inclusive, and that facilitation processes are inclusive.
- 9 Pay attention to size** – Although you want to reach many members, beyond a certain sized group it is difficult to foster the trust and personal relationships needed for social learning. Consider having subgroups on specific subjects, or local chapters, in a ‘landscape’ of intersecting smaller communities.
- 10 Use both public and private spaces** – Listservs, webinars, and public fora are useful spaces for curated knowledge sharing. Also encourage direct engagement among members through email or other private channels for messy or sensitive problem solving. Once resolved, private learnings can be shared in public channels.

RESOURCES

Templates, tools, examples and tips from the World Bank's extensive experience fostering CoPs:

- Communities Reinvented. 22 March 2021. "WBG Community of Practice Toolkit." Communities4Dev. Collaboration for Development, World Bank. collaboration. Available at: https://collaboration.worldbank.org/content/sites/collaboration-for-development/en/groups/communities4Dev/documents.entry.html/2021/03/22/community_of_practicetoolkit-Pzoy.html (accessed on December 16, 2022).

CoP expert practitioners Etienne Wenger-Traynor and Bev Wenger-Traynor resources, plus training courses in cultivating Communities of Practice:

- Wenger-Traynor E, Wenger-Traynor B. June 2015. "Introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses." Available at: <https://www.wenger-traynor.com/communities-of-practice> (accessed on December 16, 2022).

Practical insights into transforming individual into social learning and the design considerations that would support this:

- Bailey A. 2014. "Once the Capacity Development Initiative is Over: Using Communities of Practice Theory to Transform Individual into Social Learning." *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 20:4, 429-448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1389224X.2013.846871>

Help and resources for more inclusive facilitation:

- Bailey A, Staiger-Rivas S, Victor M, Alvarez S, Ballantyne P, Stapleton J. 2021 March 29. "How to facilitate for inclusion: 14 tips from knowledge sharing experts." Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT. Available at: <https://alliancebioiversityciat.org/stories/how-facilitate-inclusion-14-tips-knowledge-sharing-experts> (accessed on December 16, 2022).
- Zaremba H, Elias M, Devi JT, Priyadarshini P. 2021. *Inclusive participatory approaches: A facilitator's guide*. Rome (Italy): Bioversity International. 24 p. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/117461>

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