

# IREX and the Community Solutions Program

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The community of practice (CoP) made up of the alumni Community Solutions Program (CSP)<sup>1</sup> caters to a diverse and globally distributed group of professionals in the peacebuilding, humanitarian and development fields. Facilitating such a community without substantial reliance on communications technology and distanced relationship-building would be impossible. Yet this kind of distanced practice community faces a trust hurdle: members will only contribute quality content if they believe others will do the same. This creates a classic “free-rider” problem that leads to the death of many distanced practice communities. Despite this challenge, the CSP alumni that make up the program’s community of practice contribute enthusiastically. Why?

This case study examines five practices IREX employs to increase trust, overcome the free-rider challenge, and therefore inspire participation and the creation of content that provides value to others in the community. The first four of these practices accord with best practices from a variety of other fields known for hosting practice communities. The last practice, focused on building a “community of care” as opposed to simply creating professional value for members, represents an innovation that is well-suited to peacebuilding practice communities.

1. ***In-person elements:*** The CSP begins with a fellowship period that includes a relatively short but intensive in-person introduction program.<sup>2</sup> IREX also organizes periodic “Solution Summits” to bring alumni together. Both the existence and the timing of these in-person periods are important for the success of the CoP.<sup>3</sup>
2. ***Fostering content creation:*** IREX actively fosters the creation and dissemination of content for the alumni network from alumni themselves.
3. ***Network champions:*** IREX employs an outside contractor, Deidre Combs, who leads a portion of the CSP fellowship but also advocates more broadly for the value of continued interaction in the network among alumni. Network champions come from outside the facilitating institution and argue for the holistic value of the community. Combs enjoys substantial trust from the network members and uses it to highlight the value of IREX’s continued work.
4. ***Nested network structure:*** The CSP’s regional and substantive foci lend themselves well to sub-communities, which can build participation among smaller groups and log-roll the trust upward. IREX engages this principle in some ways but could go further.
5. ***Cultivating care:*** Many CSP alumni downplayed the “practice” element of the practice community in favor of highlighting what many IREX staffers and contractors called a “community of care.”

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1 The Community Solutions Program is funded by the U.S. Department of State and implemented by IREX.

2 We offer a more detailed and global view of the CSP in Section III, below.

3 Uwe Matzat, “Reducing Problems of Sociability in Online Communities: Integrating Online Communication with Offline Interaction,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 8 (2010): 1172.

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The CSP practice community stands out for the trust members place in each other and therefore their high level of engagement. Practice communities thrive when they create a steady stream of valuable content, and members tend to create more content when they trust that others will do the same. Thus, the lessons from IREX’s work with the CSP are applicable across a wide range of fields and a wide variety of communities of practice.

## I. Introduction

Shouts of joy and recognition regularly pierce the low murmur of conversation. Over and over, pairs of colleagues spot each other across the wood-paneled ballroom and rush together. They hug, then squint at phones an arm’s length away, tilting and ducking to find the perfect selfie angle. The portraits make their way around the world, one text at a time, to absent friends and mutual connections. The Community Solutions Program (CSP), a leadership development program focused on the peacebuilding, humanitarian and development fields, is funded by the U.S. Department of State and administered by IREX. The scene above unfolded at the 2022 CSP “Solutions Summit” in Bucharest, Romania, one of the flagship alumni events in the CSP.

The CSP, along with the entire peacebuilding community, was upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person gatherings designed to facilitate trust, open communication and mutual understanding suddenly shifted to online spaces. The hasty change to virtual gathering generated substantial frustration and confusion but prompted meaningful questions about inclusion, justice and efficacy regarding the field’s practices. With these questions as a starting point, the FACE Peace Initiative<sup>4</sup> at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ) provides evidence-based guidance to peacebuilders about how best to leverage in-person, online and hybrid modalities in the design of their activities.

As part of the FACE Peace Initiative, the Kroc IPJ is examining how peacebuilding organizations themselves responded, and are responding, to the challenges and opportunities posed by COVID and the post-COVID period in the design of their activities. This case study is one in a series that examines this topic. For each case study, we focus on a particular initiative implemented by a FACE Peace partner, asking the following questions in particular:

- What does the research across multiple fields tell us are good practices regarding the implementation of the initiative in question?
- What implementation strategies did the organization use to achieve the goals of the initiative, and are these aligned with good practices identified in the research?
- During the implementation of the initiative, how did organizations use in-person, online and hybrid modalities? What lessons can be learned from those efforts that are applicable to other initiatives?

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4 The Future of Activities, Convenings and Events in Peacebuilding.

This case study examines how IREX facilitates the CSP alumni network. The alumni network can be seen as a community of practice (CoP) that focuses on leadership, best practices and emotional health among its members.<sup>5</sup> Through a mix of in-person and online engagement, the CSP alumni community achieves a high level of participation from its membership. This is the case despite the challenges posed by the distributed, diverse nature of the network, which includes 750 CSP alumni from more than 80 countries. Achieving this level of participation requires trust of a certain type: the trust that others in the community will return the favor.<sup>6</sup> How do practice community facilitators encourage this kind of trust? Below, we assess CSP practices by comparing the strategies used by IREX with the most accepted and well-evidenced methods for building successful practice communities.<sup>7</sup> We look at five CSP practices in particular:

1. ***In-person elements:*** The CSP begins with a fellowship period that includes a relatively short but intensive in-person introduction program.<sup>8</sup> IREX also organizes periodic “Solution Summits” to bring alumni together. Both the existence and the timing of these in-person periods are important for the success of the CoP.<sup>9</sup>
2. ***Fostering content creation:*** IREX actively fosters the creation and dissemination of content for the alumni network from alumni themselves.
3. ***Network champions:*** IREX employs an outside contractor, Deidre Combs, who leads a portion of the CSP fellowship but also advocates more broadly for the value of continued interaction in the network among alumni. Network champions come from outside the facilitating institution and argue for the holistic value of the community. Combs enjoys substantial trust from the network members and uses it to highlight the value of IREX’s continued work.
4. ***Nested network structure:*** The CSP’s regional and substantive foci lend themselves well to sub-communities, which can build participation among smaller groups and log-roll the trust upward. IREX engages this principle in some ways but could go further.
5. ***Cultivating care:*** Many CSP alumni downplayed the “practice” element of the practice community in favor of highlighting what many IREX staffers and contractors called a “community of care.”

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5 Research for this report came from a desk review of literature on practice communities in a wide variety of other fields (which is distilled in FACE Peace’s design brief on communities of practice), from 10 interviews with IREX staff and CSP participants, and from a long period of observation of the CSP. The observation period included attending four months of planning sessions for the Solutions Summit, along with the Solutions Summit itself.

6 Matzat, “Reducing Problems of Sociability,” 1172 (see fn 3).

7 Desk research for this case considered practice communities in a wide variety of fields but found that those with the most advanced understanding of this kind of networking were medicine and primary education. For more on these, please see John Porten, FACE Peace Design Brief #1: Communities of Practice On/Offline (San Diego, CA: Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, 2023), <https://digital.sandiego.edu/ipj-research/59/>.

8 We offer a more detailed and global view of the CSP in Section III, below.

9 Matzat, “Reducing Problems of Sociability,” 1172 (see fn 3).

The CSP practice community stands out for the trust members place in each other and therefore their high level of engagement. Practice communities thrive when they create a steady stream of valuable content, and members tend to create more content when they trust that others will do the same.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the lessons from IREX’s work with the CSP are applicable across a wide range of fields and a wide variety of communities of practice.

## II. The Initiative: The Community Solutions Program

In general, communities of practice across various fields have a broadly similar theory of change. Ultimately, they seek to improve outcomes in a field by facilitating the engagement of practitioners with each other in order to share ideas, foster learning of technical skills and approaches, and support each other’s career and personal development. As one peacebuilder who participated in a FACE Peace event remarked, “I see people refer to all kinds of networks as ‘practice communities,’ but to me it’s not a practice community unless the point is to improve your practice.” The graphic below presents a simple theory of change for CoPs.<sup>11</sup>



The facilitators of a community of practice hope to design and implement a space for exchange that draws in field members with the experience and motivation necessary to generate these benefits for each other. For a community of practice to be successful, therefore, it must generate both engagement by its participants and content that participants can use to improve practice and outcomes.

The Community Solutions Program, in particular the alumni network of the program, fits this model. IREX argues that the CSP “amplifies the impact” of existing humanitarian and peacebuilding workers by identifying potential leaders from a diverse set of communities and then providing them with professional/leadership development and networking opportunities.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, in partnership with IREX, began the CSP in 2010. To date, the program has supported over 800 fellows from more than 80 countries. The program is divided into two phases, the fellowship phase and the alumni phase. The alumni phase refers to all interaction and outreach after the fellowship ends.

<sup>10</sup> Trust is not the only element required for a successful practice community. Obviously, facilitators need to identify and attract a membership with sufficient experience and interest in professional development. Facilitators also need to structure opportunities to participate that are accessible to members and to curate content so that the most valuable content is readily visible to the membership. Readers can learn more about these elements of success by reading Porten, FACE Peace Design Brief #1, supra fn 7.

<sup>11</sup> Practice communities vary, and a full theory of change for any individual community will be rich and complex.

<sup>12</sup> Essence Lee, “How Dynamic Leadership Development Increases Impact Worldwide,” IREX, July 31, 2020, <https://www.irex.org/insight/how-dynamic-leadership-development-increases-impact-worldwide>.

## **The Fellowship Phase**

**Application process:** According to IREX, the CSP receives roughly 7,500 applications each cycle for between 70 and 80 annual spots in the program. Participants are selected through a multi-state application process and must eventually receive the approval of the U.S. Embassy in their home country to participate. Fellows are 25-38 years old, are competent if not fluent in English, and must be eligible for a U.S. J-1 exchange visa.

**Community Leadership Institute:** The fellowship itself begins with the Community Leadership Institute (CLI). Fellows undertake an introduction module prior to coming to Washington, DC, and then continue with two weeks of an in-person course in Washington, DC, which combines leadership development and preparation for a four-month period of work with a nonprofit in the United States. After the in-person orientation, fellows complete the remainder of the course in a distanced, asynchronous manner while they are working with their respective nonprofits. Lectures and reading materials are hosted on Canvas, an online learning management platform. Over the course of the CLI, fellows also produce a personal leadership plan that details how they intend to lead in the organizations they serve in their home countries. At the close of their U.S. residency, fellows return to Washington, DC, and present these plans to each other.

To lead the CLI, IREX employs a leadership consultant named Deidre Combs. Combs stands out from trainers in similar roles for her investment in the community outside of the CLI. She stays in touch with many fellowship alumni, who frequently cite her as something of a CSP den mother. Combs also contracts to create content for other CSP events, including the Solutions Summit, and her emphasis on the well-being of participants is consistent and self-evidently genuine.

**Professional practicum:** After the initial in-person portion of the CLI, the fellows complete a four-month practicum on-site with a U.S.-based nonprofit organization. IREX matches fellows with partner hosts that provide substantive projects within the fellow's area of interest. For instance, one participant who worked on indigenous outreach and empowerment in South America worked during their fellowship with Native American communities in Northern California.

**Community action project:** Following the U.S. residency, fellows return home to implement a "community action project" (CAP). Fellows continue to meet in synchronous but distanced seminars for the six-month term of the CAP. Each month, fellows meet with an IREX advisor, attend a peer-led workshop to develop support and crowdsource ideas among the cohort, and participate in skill-building workshops. At the close of the CAP period, fellows meet online again to share their experiences and results, and are then invited to participate in the network as alumni.

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## The Alumni Phase

The CSP alumni phase occurs mostly online, as groups of alumni have returned to jobs and families around the world. To maintain contact, IREX maintains an alumni mailing list and sends out regular newsletters in collaboration with the CSP alumni board that include articles on alumni achievements, relevant or interesting changes in policy or practice, and continuing opportunities for CSP alumni. IREX also uses the mailing list to periodically survey alumni to assess the CSP's impact and to better understand how to serve alumni interests with continued programming. Beyond receiving communications, there are several ways — both formal and informal — for alumni to continue to engage with the CSP and with each other.

**Continuing CSP service:** IREX offers several opportunities to contribute to the CSP itself. For example, CSP alumni can serve as application readers for upcoming classes or as mentors to incoming fellows. Alumni can also serve on the alumni board. The board is made up of 10 alumni (one from each of the CSP's six global regions and one each from its four thematic areas). Outside of planning for in-person CSP gatherings, alumni service takes place over email and teleconferencing software, including the monthly meetings of the alumni board.

**Funding opportunities:** IREX offers CSP alumni two programmatic sources of funding. The first grants CSP alumni who have been invited to present at conferences up to \$1,000 to cover the cost of travel. The second offers alumni "cooperation grants" that intend to deepen connections within the CSP network. Cooperation grants fund some of the initial start-up costs of new projects situated in alumni's home communities. In the case of cooperation grants, alumni and partner hosts may meet in person but only after the grant is awarded.

**Professional development:** IREX also offers resources to continue the professional development of alumni and to deepen their network. For example, IREX offers a variety of catalogued courses through the Canvas portal used to administer the CLI.<sup>13</sup>

**Solutions Summit:** The Solutions Summit offers an opportunity to mix professional development and socialization. Held in person, the Solutions Summit is, on its face, a three-day conference relating to a central concern faced in the CSP alumni's practice. In order to facilitate the Solutions Summit, IREX takes applications from the CSP community, chooses a city with a high concentration of alumni, fully plans the event, and pays for the travel and accommodation of the alumni chosen to attend.

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<sup>13</sup> In an interview, Les Miles noted that the courses did not see much use in past years, when they were archived and available to view at any time. Recently, IREX began offering a series of courses with a "start date." Alumni view most of the videos asynchronously but also attend a few live lectures with other alumni who began at the same start date. This improved the use of the courses substantially.



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## *The Success of the CSP Community of Practice*

There is no industry standard by which to judge a practice community successful and no single way to measure engagement in communities that offer multiple ways to participate at varying levels of intensity. As one of the leading scholars of practice community development notes, “At the end of the day, facilitators use their intuition to decide if members are exchanging enough or passionate enough to justify the effort.”<sup>14</sup> One simple way to assess this intuition is the survival of the practice community. There is a free-rider problem at the center of any CoP, and free-rider problems end in one of two ways: either the community builds enough trust that participation becomes self-sustaining or the lack of trust reduces participation, which in turn reduces trust, in a spiral that ends with the death of the community.

Practice community failure is very common in peacebuilding and across other fields. Maztat argues that “the failure rate of practice communities ... is extremely high.”<sup>15</sup> FACE Peace heard about many such failures. One CoP facilitator at a FACE Peace event noted, “We started this group with good intentions ... have a meeting online every month to trade ideas or get advice on projects ... after a year I didn’t think anyone was opening the emails, much less exchanging anything.”

Through looking at a variety of measures, one can conclude that the CSP alumni network is closer to self-sustaining participation than to failure. The Solutions Summit, for instance, featured more than 60 alumni, nearly 10 percent of the total, and more than half presented findings or facilitated discussion sessions. More than half of the CSP’s Romanian alumni participated in planning and hosting the event. Both Combs and Eric Ziegelman, the IREX staffer who managed the majority of the Solutions Summit planning, mentioned that at least twice as many alumni applied to attend and contribute.

This high level of participation extends to online opportunities. An online alumni reunion had over 100 attendees. When discussing the CSP application review process, Les Miles, director of the CSP at IREX, noted that “we give most of the files to at least two alumni... we have way more alumni volunteers to review applications than staff members.” A Ugandan alum at the Solutions Summit guessed that 80 percent of former CSP fellows in Uganda participate in email and WhatsApp groups for regional alumni. Finally, the average quarterly alumni newsletter includes eight pages of practice tips, program summaries and personal updates, all written by the alumni themselves.

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14 Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

15 Matzat, “Reducing Problems of Sociability,” 1171 (see fn 3).

### III. Good Practices and the Community Solutions Program

The alumni phase of the CSP represents a mostly online community of practice that has maintained high levels of involvement from a distributed and diverse membership. How? As noted above, practice communities require trust: members only want to participate if they trust that others will share their knowledge as well. In this section, we consider five elements of the CSP that appear to drive participation through the development of strong, trusting relationships. Four of these elements align well with the research on practice communities from other fields. One represents a potential innovation in the practice community field.

#### *In-Person Elements*

Practice communities that exist primarily online can build trust by creating in-person bonds.<sup>16</sup> A number of studies show that distanced practice communities whose memberships know each other from in-person events generate more content and have members that rate the community as more important than comparable communities that only know each other through online interactions.<sup>17</sup>

While larger practice communities can hardly expect that all members will interact with each other offline, community facilitators can foster offline relationships in smaller groups that encourage both accountability to the community and enthusiasm for it.<sup>18</sup> For example, facilitators might strategically select potential community leaders to meet periodically in person, allowing for the accountability this generates to serve as an example to other members.

Evidence from the CSP supports the idea that in-person interactions contribute to the success of practice communities that primarily operate online. The CSP's fellowship phase creates these in-person opportunities during both the initial week together and the final week together after their practicum experience. In the first two weeks, aside from participating in sessions together, fellows collaborate and commiserate in preparation for their experiences embedded with U.S. host organizations. One CSP alum told FACE Peace, "I remember going to shop for my first real coat... it was going to be colder where I was working than I'd ever experienced, and I went with some other fellows who were equally clueless about winter jackets!" This type of bonding over unfamiliar circumstances creates an instant sense of shared vulnerability that can underpin lasting trust.

The final week of the fellowship takes place after the fellows have all been in similarly awkward and vulnerable situations for the previous four months. Several CSP alumni told FACE Peace about how their relationships with others in their cohorts deepened as they shared victories and concerns over WhatsApp and during monthly cohort meetings online. For most, the final week of the fellowship, spent together again sharing their experiences, felt like a joyous reunion.

16 To get the most out of the in-person elements of your community of practice, see the following: Claxus, "Building a Professional Community," Claxus, October 12, 2009, <https://claxus.com/articles/building-a-professional-community/>; Constance Elise Porter, Naveen Donthu, William H. MacElroy, and Donna Wydra, "How to Foster and Sustain Engagement in Virtual Communities," *California Management Review* 53, no. 4 (2011): 80-110; Thomas W. Gruen, John O. Summers, and Frank Acito, "Relationship Marketing Activities, Commitment, and Membership Behaviors in Professional Associations," *Journal of Marketing* 64, no. 3 (2000): 34-49.

17 Matzat, "Reducing Problems of Sociability," 1170-1193 (see fn 3).

18 Porter et al., "How to Foster," (see fn 16).

The CSP continues this commitment to regular in-person interactions through the Solutions Summits. The Summits also broaden the bonds by connecting members from the different cohorts who attend. FACE Peace witnessed several introductions among alumni attendees that moved quickly into discussions of opportunities to collaborate, or even contribute to the CSP. These moments illustrate the virtuous circle that is formed by combining in-person interactions with distanced practice communities. The online network creates the foundation for fruitful in-person interactions, which then can be continued online.

The CSP experience shows that, when peacebuilders are facilitating distributed and highly diverse communities of practice, strategically including face-to-face sessions can generate strong relationships and networks of trust within practice communities. There is likely added benefit to organizing in-person interactions at the beginning of an initiative, to strengthen social capital and trust at the outset, as well as at the end of activities when participants can jointly process shared experience. Additional, brief in-person sessions, such as the Solution Summits, can be used to maintain the relationships and trust that have already developed.

### **Fostering Content Creation**

Practice communities are defined by peer-to-peer sharing (otherwise, the “community” is simply a repository of information that members can access).<sup>19</sup> Peer-to-peer sharing is crucial for creating grounded, diverse content, but it is also at the crux of the trust issue in practice communities. While facilitators cannot solve the trust problem by creating content themselves, they can increase members’ confidence in others’ participation by actively fostering content creation. Facilitators might create well-defined opportunities for members to make low-cost contributions, offer professional rewards to members who contribute high-quality content to the community, or provide other forms of recognition and prestige for content creators.<sup>20</sup>

IREX encourages content creation in its management of the CSP practice community in several ways:

- The CSP facilitates spaces and platforms that make it easy for alumni to contribute their own content easier. The alumni newsletter provides one example of this. Each issue follows a similar format and style with features, updates and profiles of alumni, making it relatively simple for community members to slot in content when they have it.
- The Solutions Summit provides another example. The Summit was divided into several different styles of talks and discussions. IREX provides guidance in terms of time limits, audience and subject matter for each style of talk. Alumni apply to fill presentation or facilitation spaces with summaries of their ideas and get feedback from IREX staff. Alumni trust benefits both from the feedback they receive to help in creating a quality presentation and from the confidence that IREX’s solicitation for content will inspire other alumni.

<sup>19</sup> The standard guide for active facilitation in practice communities remains: Wenger et al., *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (see fn 14).

<sup>20</sup> Uwe Matzat, “The Embeddedness of Academic Online Groups in Offline Social Networks: Reputation Gain as a Stimulus for Online Discussion Participation?” *International Sociology* 24, no. 1 (2009): 63-92; Claxus, “Building a Professional Community,” (see fn 16).

- The CSP assigns content creation tasks to members of the practice community along with the responsibility to report the results to other members of the community. In this way, IREX fosters the content, but community members receive that content from their peers.
- The CSP incentivizes member contributions.<sup>21</sup> One facilitator noted her organization hosts a roundtable each year with high-level thinkers in the field: “We invite some of our most active members for a half-an-hour Q&A after the roundtable is over to reward them for contributing to the community.”<sup>22</sup>

CSP alumni also help select and mentor new CSP fellows. Content creation is a specific component of the mentorship process. This both makes new fellows more confident that they can create content and reinforces the norm that content creation is expected. For instance, the substantive sessions on practice problems at the Solutions Summit were designed and facilitated by CSP alumni (both mentors and mentees). This aligns with research that shows that CoP members contribute more when they are asked to work together.<sup>23</sup>

Taken together, this set of content creation strategies demonstrates that IREX is more active and intentional in their facilitation of content creation than many CoP organizers. The success of IREX in fostering engagement compared to many other similar alumni networks suggests that this active approach may be important when managing a large and diverse distributed practice community.

## Network Champions

A network champion is “someone well respected within a field, often holding a leadership position, and responsible for spreading the word about the group, recruiting members, and providing resources for group activities.”<sup>24</sup> Champions come from outside the facilitating organization, and extol the virtue of the community and/or hold themselves out as creators of community content. Community members often prize time with the network champion or their network. In some cases, such network champions are paid; in others, they receive a title or professional status.<sup>25</sup> Network champions can also highlight shared values in the community and promote shared terminology that can help the community feel more coherent and trusting. The existence of enthusiastic network champions is associated with higher feelings of belonging within CoPs, especially in groups that meet primarily online.<sup>26</sup>

21 IREX’s strategy aligns with good practice identified in the research on practice communities. See, for example: Wenger et al., *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, (see fn 14); Matzat, “The Embeddedness of Academic Online Groups,” (see fn 20, 63-92); Claxus, “Building a Professional Community,” (see fn 16).

22 When using incentives, it is important to note that participation is fostered when the process of doling out rewards is seen to be transparent and fair. Yu-Hui Fang and Chao-Min Chiu, “In Justice We Trust: Exploring Knowledge-Sharing Continuance Intentions in Virtual Communities of Practice,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 26, no. 2 (2010): 235-246.

23 Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa and D. Sandy Staples, “The Use of Collaborative Electronic Media for Information Sharing: An Exploratory Study of Determinants,” *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 9, no. 2-3 (2000): 129-154; and Atreyi Kankanhalli, Bernard C. Y. Tan, and Kwok-Kee Wei, “Contributing Knowledge to Electronic Knowledge Repositories: An Empirical Investigation,” *MIS Quarterly* (2005): 113-143.

24 See, for example: Linda C. Li, Jeremy M. Grimshaw, Camilla Nielsen, Maria Judd, Peter C. Coyte, and Ian D. Graham, “Evolution of Wenger’s Concept of Community of Practice,” *Implementation Science* 4, no. 1 (2009): 6; and Joon Koh, Young-Gul Kim, and Young-Gul Kim, “Sense of Virtual Community: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Validation,” *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* 8, no. 2 (2003): 75-94.

25 Ibid.

26 Koh et. al., “Sense of Virtual Community,” (see fn 24).

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One example of such a network champion is Deidre Combs. Combs, a leadership coach who facilitates the in-person portion of the CLI and the Solutions Summit, also participates in many other in-person and online alumni events. While Combs is contracted by IREX, and therefore not a network champion who emerged organically from within the community, her efforts in support of the network include those most integral to the work of a network champion.

Over the course of the Solutions Summit and numerous interviews with alumni, it became clear the extent to which CSP alumni trust that Combs's involvement ensures robust engagement in the community on the part of their fellow alumni. Combs maintains personal relationships with as many CSP alumni as possible. She often contacts these alumni, cajoling them to make presentations and lead discussion groups at events like the Solutions Summit. Alumni themselves stated repeatedly that they agree to undertake the extra work to contribute to the community because, in their words, "I know that Deidre cares about us."

IREX's experience with the CSP aligns with insights from the practice community literature in three key ways:

- Network champions remind members of the value, and values, of the community. Combs relentlessly summarized learning from the Solutions Summit and frequently celebrated with members who appeared to be making new connections, reminding them subtly that their status as active CSP alumni has networking benefits. She referred frequently to the "community of care" concept and to the care she personally felt for members.
- Network champions generate benefits. Many CSP alumni, for instance, view time with Combs as a reward in and of itself. Her attention is both a mark of status and a sign of inclusion. Combs also facilitates introductions that alumni describe as profitable and raises the profile of alumni in other ways. For example, Combs has formed a partnership with two CSP alumni to facilitate upcoming CSP events.
- Network champions increase confidence that the network will continue to thrive and generate content and opportunities that are worth the costs of participation. Many CoPs die as the result of a vicious circle where decreasing engagement and activity undermines trust that the community will continue, thereby further disincentivizing engagement. By contrast, both IREX and Combs plan event content for the Solutions Summit and for online events. She can lean on members' loyalty to her to encourage first movers to provide content.

## Nested Network Structure

CoP members are also incentivized to contribute when they feel like connectors within the CoP network.<sup>27</sup> That is, the more central an individual feels within the group, the more likely they are to take responsibility for producing content.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, CoP members contribute more when they are asked to work together because they feel personally accountable.<sup>29</sup>

It is often harder for members to feel central or accountable in larger, and particularly more online, practice communities. Communities can solve this problem by creating sub-communities based on thematic topics, geography or other factors. These structures afford opportunities for newer or less-confident members to work in smaller and more focused networks. It is also easier for smaller groups to manage free-riding problems. And as the smaller groups produce content shared with the larger community, concerns about free-riding in the entire community are reduced.

Within the CSP, a number of alumni mentioned that they feel better networked and more comfortable with their own fellowship cohorts than with members of other cohorts who work in their region or specialty. That said, several alumni mentioned that they participate actively in country-centered WhatsApp groups or email listservs.

While these sub-groups are a start, this area offers IREX the clearest opportunity to deepen its effectiveness in developing participation with the CSP practice community. Currently, most of the sub-groups are informal and ad hoc. The CSP could offer infrastructure to formalize existing sub-groups and encourage their development when they do not already exist. In fact, there was an earlier attempt by IREX to create such sub-groups that met with mixed success. According to IREX staff, a new effort along the same lines will receive more resources.<sup>30</sup> Such an effort will likely be more successful if IREX employs the same types of strategies as for the CoP as a whole — namely, in-person sessions, active fostering of content, network champions and so on.

## Cultivating Care

As noted above, the research on practice communities focuses on their ability to cultivate content-sharing with the overarching goal of improving practice and professional outcomes. This explicit focus on field and profession means efforts to center the mental and emotional well-being of practice community members are largely absent from academic studies of effective practice communities. Yet the majority of CSP alumni FACE Peace spoke with mentioned the “community of care” dimension of the CSP, as described below, as a reason for their continued involvement.

27 Caroline Haythornthwaite, “A Social Network Study of the Growth of Community among Distance Learners,” *Information Research* 4, no. 1 (1998).

28 Irene Y. L. Chen, “The Factors Influencing Members’ Continuance Intentions in Professional Virtual Communities—A Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Information Science* 33, no. 4 (2007): 456; Haythornthwaite, “A Social Network Study,” (see fn 28).

29 Jarvenpaa and Staples, “The Use of Collaborative Electronic Media,” 129-154 (see fn 23); and Kankanhalli et al., “Contributing Knowledge to Electronic Knowledge Repositories,” 113-143 (see fn 23).

30 This effort will involve 10 alumni-led sub-communities. Facilitators have already begun promoting the network on Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

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One can see this focus on care in the programming presented at the Solutions Summit. Fully one-third of the content of the Summit is focused on supporting alumni's mental and emotional needs. When asked about her goals for the Summit, Combs said, "My core objective is that they will feel even more held and supported by this community than they do now." Asked the same question, Eric Ziegelman, an IREX employee leading the planning for the session said, "Our fellows are running uphill in their work; some of them have lost some fire... and I want them to come away from the Summit reinvigorated and re-inspired."

The alumni members plainly respond to this message. They often cite the emotional support they receive from other alumni as part of their reason for continued engagement. Many also point out that Combs and the IREX staff take a personal and emotional interest in the program and in the alumni individually.

At the 2023 CSP Alumni Reunion, an online event, attendees were treated to workshops that included topics such as sustainable work life and advocacy, discussions on how to mentor and receive mentorship, and a session featuring fun cultural exchange. In the first two cases, we can see that the imprint of the community of care concept plays out in online content as well as in person. Even the alumni newsletters feature inspiring alumni success stories, replete with quotations such as, "Together we can make the world a better place,"<sup>31</sup> and "We can do this because we're together."<sup>32</sup>

It makes intuitive sense that focusing on a community of care can help build strong, trusted relationships. In doing so, the practice community moves beyond a reliance on mutual self-interest and reciprocity to encourage member participation toward a more fundamental emotional investment in the community by its members.

Peacebuilders, civil rights activists and other humanitarians often work with populations suffering from repression or dire need, in places with little infrastructure and few resources. They often come from repressed minorities or are targeted by the government or society for their identity. Given this, the focus on care seems particularly important for communities of peacebuilders. FACE Peace asked Les Miles to reflect on these apparent priorities of his staff, and his response considered the CSP more broadly. He compared and contrasted the context of the CSP community with the context within which many of its members work day-to-day:

*We're doing leadership development, and leadership is so much about being your authentic self. We teach and encourage people to be authentic and then they go back to an environment where they can't. This program deals with people in their middle career, who are prime to get burned out ... having a place where they can still be their authentic selves creates a resiliency in this field.*

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31 CSP Alumni Newsletter, December 2021.

32 CSP Alumni Newsletter, March 2019.

Three themes bear mentioning. First, emphasizing care in practice communities may lead to more durable communities with higher rates of participation. This lesson might plausibly generalize to other fields. While peacebuilding is more dangerous than most careers, fields like primary education and nursing feature practice communities and high rates of burnout due to overwork and underpay. It would be sensible to study self and community care as aspects of practice communities more closely.

Second, communities of care imply a goal separate from the improvement of practice: they hope to extend the life of peacebuilding careers by providing moral and emotional support for professionals in these fields. This benefit of care communities also deserves further study.

Finally, the examination of CSP's community of care illustrates how various strategies employed by IREX are interrelated. It is unlikely that a community of care could be developed without, for instance, in-person sessions, the human connection provided by network champions, or the ability to interact in-person and online in smaller sub-groups where connections are stronger.

## IV. Conclusions: Leveraging In-Person, Online and Hybrid Modalities

Practice communities in the peacebuilding field increasingly rely on communications technology for collaboration and programming. These approaches allow communities to develop where they could not have before, bringing people together from around the world to aid each other in the betterment of their practice. Yet practice communities that rely on distanced and asynchronous programming face more difficult challenges when it comes to building the trust that is required to foster participation.


This case study illuminates a few themes useful for all peacebuilders managing practice communities. First, facilitators should build relationships to maximize connections and trust across their communities. Members cannot all get to know one another, especially where communities are large and distributed. How might facilitators build the relationships that make the most sense for the structure of their networks? One strategy is to purposefully use in-person gatherings to build social capital. Facilitators can also intentionally create and support a nested network structure. By identifying small, organic sub-communities and incentivizing cooperation within them, facilitators can build strong relationships within smaller groups, which can then be leveraged to strengthen relationships throughout the community.

Second, facilitators should develop strategies to actively foster content creation by members for members. This can be done through the development of network champions, templates that make it easier for members to contribute, and/or mentoring relationships where more senior members solicit content from newer members.



Finally, facilitators should consider assigning care a higher priority in their communities. Communities that value and celebrate self-care have an advantage in the peacebuilding field. Grassroots workers in peace and justice have a tendency to burn out, and they intrinsically, almost sub-consciously, value communities that validate and reduce the loneliness inherent in the work. An atmosphere that celebrates success and supports members in the hardest of times might not need to pump out a steady stream of content to offer members a reason to participate.

Crucially, each of these themes can be scaled and implemented in ways that respect the realities of a wide range of communities and facilitators. Here, then, is where the science of building durable networks meets the art. Take a moment to consider the members in your practice community. What do they value and why? Who do they know and how? In what ways can you take this understanding and build networks of trust in a way that keeps valuable ideas flowing?





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