

Communities of practice: linking knowledge, policy and practice

By Simon Hearn and Nancy White

The knowledge gained by research is often trapped at the point of origin, caught in the language of research, or simply isolated from those who actually apply that knowledge – the practitioners in the field. Likewise, tacit knowledge from the field rarely reaches the researchers or those making decisions. More effective bridges between knowledge, policy and practice are needed, with communities of practice (CoPs) well positioned to do just that.

This paper describes the basic characteristics of CoPs and provides a rationale for their growing importance in international development. It also suggests some ways in which CoPs can be supported by development agencies, research institutes and donors to strengthen the linkages between knowledge, policy and practice.

Communities of Practice (CoPs)

The term ‘community of practice’ was coined by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave in the early 1990s to describe ‘a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger et al., 2002). CoPs are characterised by mutual learning, shared practice and joint exploration of ideas. They are distinct from other types of groups, such as project teams, working groups and social networks in that they are self-selecting, often voluntary and have fluid goals around learning rather than management objectives. They take on and spread new knowledge with a focus on implementation, rather than just theory, and can embrace an ongoing cycle of learning and doing. Because CoPs are characterised by a community, a bound group of people, they can create trusted relationships for the exchange and practice of ideas. At their best, CoPs are naturally self-incentivising. Members tend to stay

involved and invested in CoPs because of the inherent rewards of social learning and collaboration. This also means that many CoPs emerge naturally from existing relationships and allegiances. CoPs can look, from the outside, very different to each other but what defines a group as a CoP is not what it looks like but what it does, with the emphasis on practice.

CoPs in the web 2.0 era

Before the internet, CoPs were close-knit groups restricted to a defined geographic area. Membership boundaries were clear and the influence of the community reached as far as the terrain it covered. Today, CoPs can span a variety of contexts and geographies. New web-based applications mean more possibilities for collaboration and community engagement. Traditional barriers are breaking down; people in different locations, from different cultures, disciplines and backgrounds are able to interact much more easily. Colleagues can work with each other across the village and across the globe, converse with counterparts from other organisations and learn from the experts in the field, all from the comfort of their desks; or in fact from anywhere with mobile or internet coverage. Technology has changed, literally, what it means to be together in a CoP (Wenger, White and Smith, 2009). Size and membership is no longer constrained by geography, but by the amount of time people can devote to their communities. And this leads to the negative consequences of online participation: the cost of entry in online communities is now so low that people can join more than one, and it is common to find people who are members of four or five online communities. But because the cost of actual participation is still high – to gain value, members must contribute value – the commitment and energy invested in each CoP drops and members drift to the periphery.

One size does not fit all

CoPs come in a variety of shapes and sizes for different purposes and functions. Some of the differences include membership composition (homogenous vs diverse), formality (structured and formal vs unstructured and informal), dispersion (distributed vs centralised), location (within organisations/networks or across organisation/networks) and focus (broad and far-reaching vs closely defined). But despite the different shapes, all CoPs carry out the same ‘learning and doing’ functions.

The size of the community is an important factor and can have various impacts. Smaller communities can build high levels of trust. In a small circle, initial feedback and informal peer review on scientific work and data, or application in local communities, can happen with less fear of failure in front of a larger group. Small, focused communities are crucibles for experimentation and innovation; enabling safe cultivation of ideas or a body of knowledge while protecting themselves from external influences.

Members of larger communities can use their broader reputation as experts in their field, carrying valuable knowledge beyond the boundaries of the community. Large communities are suited for the dissemination and wider validation of knowledge, as well as encouraging the adoption of new ideas and practices. They have enough ‘clout’ to provide feedback and influence decisions. Globe-spanning communities can bring together diversity of thought, enabling a critical review of knowledge from many perspectives. In a sense they become networks of practice and are structured to take advantage of the benefits of a small core group and a far reaching loose network, enabling greater dissemination of good practice.

The value of CoPs

CoPs can provide a social container for linking and learning between practitioners, knowledge producers and policy processes to analyse, address and explore solutions to problems. They can bring together a range of perspectives on a problem, and ensure that relevant knowledge is accessible to those who need it. This is far more than the exchange of knowledge. It is about the making sense of and the interpretation of knowledge within the members’ specific contexts. It is about their ability to use knowledge, reject it or improve upon it. It is this function that makes CoPs such powerful tools for evidence-informed policy-making. Policy, in this case, refers to more than just public policy to mean ‘a purposive course of action followed by an actor or a set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern’ (Anderson, 1975). This definition includes the policies of international institutions, bilateral agencies and NGOs.

There are three obvious applications of CoPs to link

knowledge, policy and practice. The first is about collaboration between researchers and practitioners. By generating and capitalising on knowledge alongside practitioners, researchers can ensure that the problems on which they are working are relevant, applicable and innovative. CoPs create an environment of reflection, interpretation and feedback that enriches the relationship between researchers and practitioners such that the knowledge produced is of greater worth and is, therefore, more influential.

A good example is the Solution Exchange, an initiative from the United Nations (UN) Agencies in India (Ramalingam, 2006). Created to harness the tacit knowledge of practitioners across India, the Solution Exchange is a collection of 11 communities themed around the millennium development goals (MDGs). What makes this distinctive is that these communities are not just about group mailings. They undertake collective action and research in response to issues that are raised by members, and the knowledge that is generated is consolidated and published. One success story from this initiative involves members of one of the community forums, the Information Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) community, informing a government-led project to integrate ICT service delivery with existing infrastructure to make it sustainable, socially and financially.

The second application is when researchers work together to influence policy. *Epistemic communities* or *policy networks* have had a historic role in progressing the thinking and policy influencing around specific issues (Haas, 1992). The Evian Group, for example, which conducts trade-related research and convenes high level dialogue on the future role of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Stone, 2003), brings together some of the world’s foremost thinkers on international trade to influence global institutions and challenge predominant discourses.

The third application is involving policy makers in the process of generating knowledge. The domains of research and policy making are by no means distinct – they are often criss-crossed by complex social networks. In this context, the strategies that will make an impact are those that recognise and build upon these relationships creating *discourse coalitions*. One example is COPLA (Comercio y Pobreza en Latinoamérica), a research programme funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which, from the outset, has generated evidence and influenced trade policy in Latin America by promoting dialogue on the poverty dimensions of trade and strengthening the capacities of key actors.¹

Supporting CoPs

Given the demonstrable value of CoPs, how can they be better supported by organisations and donors?

Like most tools, CoPs are useful only when implemented in the right places for the right purposes. To make the most of their potential, development agencies, research organisations and donors need to consider how best to support CoPs and create the right conditions for their sustained value. There are a number of factors that can help develop, sustain and enhance CoPs.

Foster instead of control

The key is to foster rather than try to control CoPs. Because they are about learning, not about fulfilling mandated tasks, they will thrive only when members find them valuable and are motivated to participate. Objectives and goals, if helpful, should be set by the members and should remain fluid, with the focus on group learning rather than simply the fulfilment of tasks. Controlling CoPs can often stifle and kill them off. What they need is support and resources, such as dedicated time in their schedules, a room in which to meet, technology support and a simple ‘thank you’ for their contributions. It is important to help them move their ideas into wider practice and to give them feedback and challenges that might be stimulating.

Focus on facilitation not technology

When organisations are interested in initiating CoPs, they tend to focus on technical solutions and tools without thinking about the social or contextual factors. This emphasis on information systems can often distract from the learning and knowledge sharing goals, which rely on exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge (Ramalingam, 2005). The investment focus should be on facilitation capacities first, before any substantial investment in technology. The technical solutions should be determined by the emerging needs of the group.

Understand members’ needs and capacities

It is vital, from the beginning and throughout the lifespan of the CoP, to understand what it is the members are looking for; the value they are seeking; the value they contribute; and what is expected of them. This will then determine the most appropriate support, such as the level of central facilitation, the communication structures to put in place and the physical and financial resources needed. Understanding the capacities of key members can also help to identify support strategies. A small investment in facilitation skills, for example, can go a long way.

Recognise the two faces of communities

While CoPs can help to close gaps between knowledge, policy and practice, they can also widen those gaps. Closed communities can reject new ideas and suffer from ‘groupthink,’ paralysing their ability to respond to external input (Nemeth, 1987). Isolated communities without access to the larger network or constel-

lation of communities may be limiting their potential impact by missing out on broader connections. CoPs may also reinforce the prevalent top-down model of research production by excluding key stakeholders and allowing only a one-way flow of knowledge out of the community. To combat this, CoPs should be open to the minority view and actively encourage critical thinking and dissent (Hirt and Markman, 1995).

Create conditions for two-way learning

For a CoP to be fruitful, it needs to embody two way learning. There may be core members with unique or well-recognised expertise, but even the newest member can bring value. The emphasis on practice means going beyond dissemination to think about the application of knowledge. Researchers may send out their work to farmers but it is important for the farmers to provide feedback on what that knowledge means in practice. Each has something to contribute and something to learn. This requires dialogue between all the actors involved and engagement at every stage of the process, creating feedback loops of research, practice and innovation. Making more effective use of existing communication channels and tools can open up dialogue and collaboration, leading to better links between research, policy and practice.

Balance participation and reification

In learning theory, Etienne Wenger (1998) suggests that there is a back and forth between participation and the production of learning ‘artefacts’, such as publications. Participation and thinking often go through a process of reification – the conversion of abstract concepts into something concrete – to become transformed into publications and projects. Participation in a CoP may mean discussing, practicing, learning, researching and experimenting. If a community focuses too much on participation, it leaves less time to share what they learn with each other and others. If they focus only on the production of artefacts, there may be less opportunity for making sense of and interpreting new knowledge and learning. Both are important and both must be monitored to ensure they are happening.

Be sensitive to the different stages of CoP development

As social structures, CoPs follow a general lifecycle of development: planning; start-up; growth; stewardship; and closure – although this is rarely a smooth process (Wenger et al., 2002). The support they receive should be sensitive to, and reflect, these stages. It is also important to note that, as CoPs involve complex processes, not all will be successful and some will close down sooner than expected. It is important to recognise the natural time to let a CoP close.

Developing communities within organisations

The first step to supporting CoPs in an organisation is to identify existing communities and networks, rather than starting from scratch. If there are no existing communities, it is important to build relationships among co-workers around common themes and interests. This identifies who is part of the community and the interests of that community. Once the domain is defined, then begin to develop the practice, starting by identifying examples of knowledge, how that knowledge has influenced organisational policies, and how those policies have been put into practice. These three essential elements – community, domain and practice – are the three pillars of successful communities and are intricately linked.

Developing communities across organisations

When supporting CoPs that span organisations, it is important to recruit people who are already making connections beyond their own organisations. They should be encouraged to share stories from their home organisations so that common issues can be raised – a great way to develop the practice of a CoP. Clarity is needed on what can be shared and what must remain confidential within any single organisation. This might be the opportunity to talk about the value of openness and global public goods created by development organisations, rather than keeping knowledge private.

When to look beyond communities

Because they focus on relationships, areas of shared interest and how that interest manifests in practice, CoPs are one way to bridge knowledge, policy and practice. But they are not the only way and, in some cases, might not be a good choice. A community that is too closed and inwardly focused can lose a wider perspective. Close relationships can trigger competitive feelings so that people withhold what they know. Other networks should not be overlooked, such as centralised associations where there is a need to codify across a profession, or less structured networks and loose affiliations where more informal sharing of content, regardless of relationship, can occur.

Conclusion

Communities of practice, teams and networks have been around for as long as human beings have banded together. The question for us is can they be leveraged to build better linkages between knowledge, policy and practice? The work of ODI suggests that the answer is yes and that there is an ongoing need to share the ways in which this can be done and learn from them.

Written by Simon Hearn, ODI Research Officer, and Nancy White of Full Circle Associates. If you have an example of a community of practice being used to translate knowledge into policy or practice that has made a difference for the poor, ODI would like to hear from you. Contact: Simon Hearn, s.hearn@odi.org.uk.

References and useful resources

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Additional ODI resources:

- Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) projects: bridging research and policy: <http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/projects/PPA0103/Index.html>
- New Latin American trade and poverty programme launches today. ODI Blog: <http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2007/10/08/5396.aspx>
- Supporting networks: ten principles. ODI Opinion 105: <http://bit.ly/Opinion105>
- Implementing knowledge strategies: lessons from international development agencies. ODI Working Paper 244: <http://bit.ly/WP244knowledge>
- Tools for knowledge and learning: a guide for development and humanitarian organisations. ODI Toolkit: <http://bit.ly/toolkitknowledge>
- Bridges across boundaries: linking research and policy in international development. ODI Opinion, July 2004: <http://bit.ly/Opinionjuly2004>