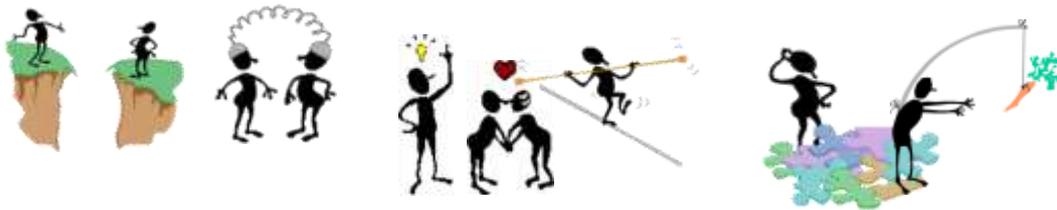


Communities of Practice (CoP)

1. Purpose

The mode of operation in the sub-issues of the PED Network is mainly the one that is usually shaped as *Community of Practice*. Such communities are temporary task groups that involve SDC staff from headquarter, COOF staff and NPOs as well as resource persons from outside, e.g., from universities and other agencies. CoPs are an efficient and effective knowledge platform.



2. Background

The individuals who actually do the work are the best people to ask if we want to find out what has worked well and what is needed to perform a set of tasks more effectively. They see every day what does not run smoothly and how it could best be improved. They are interested to see how other people tackle a similar task and learn quickly from a practical demonstration. Members of a CoP look over one another's shoulders so as to optimise solutions. Many international corporation agencies, including the World Bank, have come to realise that knowledge management within their organisation can be fostered most effectively by establishing a number of parallel CoPs.

Knowledge-based organisations are particularly dependent on their ability to generate knowledge about individual tasks, and to collate and mobilise this knowledge which is dispersed throughout the organisation. This is directly linked to the fact that the individuals involved in a task know much better which structures, processes and rules are genuinely important, and how these can be optimised.

Highly formal organisations with a rigid hierarchy tend to be poorly equipped to undertake this form of optimisation, because they accord greater importance to hierarchical positions and expert analyses than to the practical knowledge of their own staff members. The practical knowledge needed to optimise processes is not, however, tied to specific positions or structures: It is located at various points along the entire length of the value chain.

3. What are the main characteristics of CoPs?

Shape: CoPs are a non-hierarchical, practical form of learning by exchanging experience and knowledge among individuals with shared interests in a defined area of specialisation.

When to use it? The standard form of learning in development cooperation projects and programmes is seminars and workshops. This will continue to be the case in the future. However, it is possible to improve the results of these forms of learning by combining them with others such as CoPs. They are highly suitable for networking individuals on a certain specialised theme; for mobilising implicit knowledge and utilising practical lessons learned for further learning.

Requirements: A sufficient number of individuals that conform a coordinating core group is prerequisite. It is crucial that the members define clear objectives, and where required secure the support of the management. The tool can be applied on an intra- or inter-organisational basis, i.e., forming a network, thus bringing together members from different organisations with the same tasks.

The power of innovation of CoPs as a whole is crucially determined by two factors: the learning capacity of the individuals, and the learning-oriented interplay between them.

Facilities and materials: Interaction through virtual platforms which requires connectivity, and meetings where standard workshop materials, flip chart, pin boards are useful.

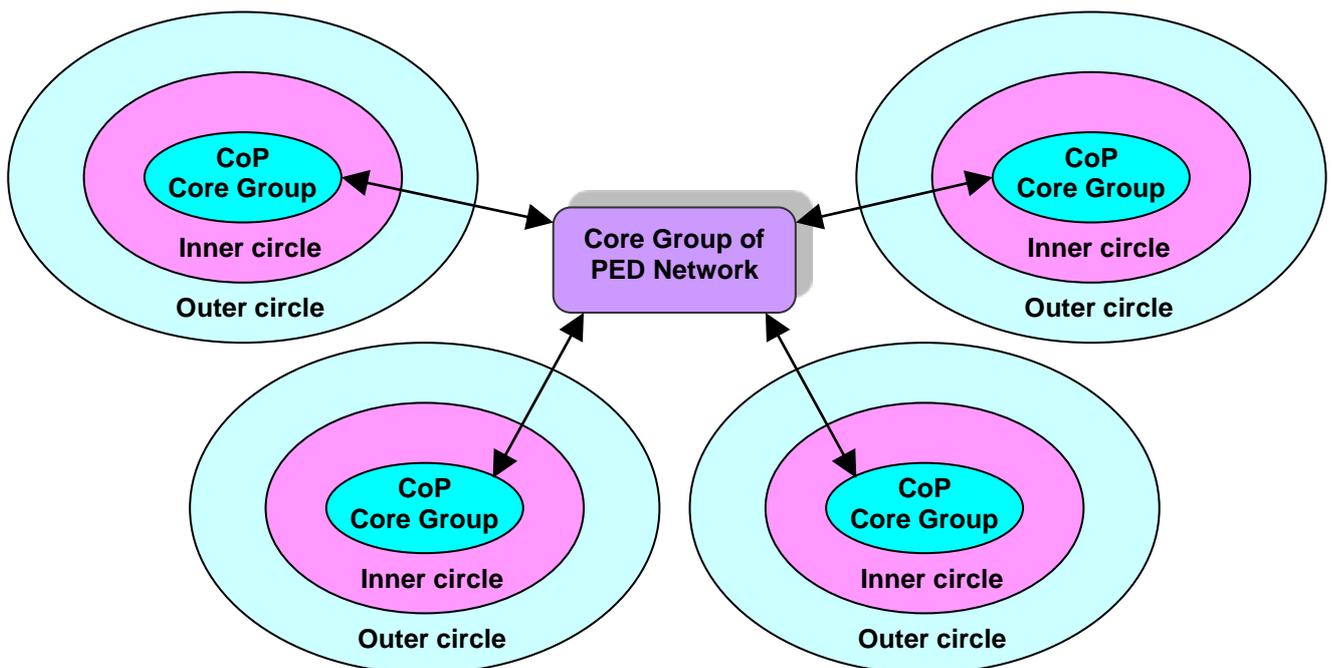
4. How to proceed?

Step 1: Define the community's objectives

A CoP is a group of individuals who share an interest in a common field and aim to share practical knowledge. The group should have a degree of permanency. Although CoPs are shaped by voluntary membership, the openness of topics tackled and different life cycles in terms of their existence and strength, they are extremely effective when it comes to improving aspects of developing new competencies and improve organisational management. A first step is to define the goals of the community. It is essential to be aware of several basic features of CoPs:

- **Needs orientation:** They come into being and continue to exist because of the shared needs of members.
- **Practical orientation:** They value practical solutions highly.
- **Learning orientation:** Members are interested in the experience of others, because they assume that the latter find themselves in a similar situation.
- **Future orientation:** Topics and issues are examined that will provide practical assistance in the near future.
- **Culture of negotiation:** Methods, commitments and products of the CoP are negotiated among the members.
- **Structured informality:** Participation is voluntary and the form and intensity of collaboration is not specified.

Step 2: Form the CoP's core group and inner circle



Most CoPs have three sub-groups that perform the various functions within it:

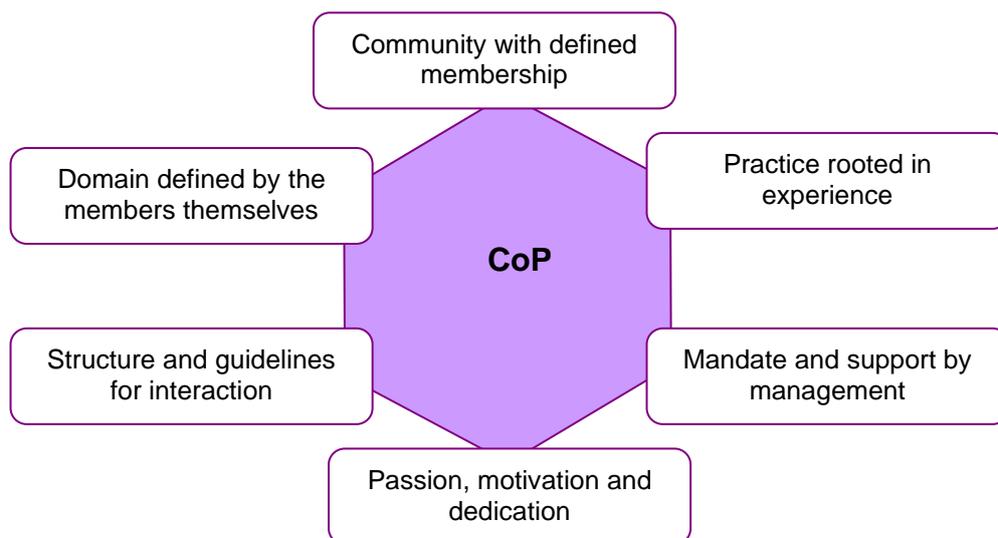
- **Core group:** A coordination team, which is responsible for networking members and if required for performing the necessary administrative work.
- **Inner circle:** This first circle around the core group consists of highly active members who might form a steering committee and who meet regularly.
- **Outer circle:** This sub-group consists of interested members who take part occasionally. They produce technical inputs or are interested in specific products of the CoP.

For different reasons (e.g., interest, time constraints) a member of the PED Network may be an active member of the Core Group of a sub-issue and at the same time a member of the outer circle of a different sub-issue CoP.

Step 3: Establish the CoP and define roles

When initiating a CoP, several critical aspects need to be taken into account. This helps ensure that the CoP is established smoothly and that everyone is clear in their minds as to who will perform which role:

The checklist below, which has been compiled from a variety of sources, can help support the development of CoPs.



The community: A CoP is based on the feeling of togetherness that links participants. Members must appreciate the community and see it as something special and worth making an effort for.

The domain: A CoP needs a clear thematic focus. The members must be able to focus on a specific area that is important to them.

The practice: Every member should have a practical link to the topic area of the CoP and should be informed about the practical experience of other members. They compare their own experience with that of others.

The passion: CoPs exist only because of the motivation of their initiators. The dedication with which members commit themselves to a CoP is thus a key factor in the successful operation of informal knowledge platforms of this sort.

The mandate: The management of the organisation can give a CoP an open mandate. It must, however, provide resources (time, financial resources).

The (informal) structure: A CoP does not have a formal organisational structure in the conventional sense. CoPs are not based on a hierarchy but consist of horizontal and diagonal links inside SDC and also embrace members from other organisations.

Step 4: Steer and continuously develop the CoP

The checklist below, which has been compiled from a variety of working CoPs, can help support the development and monitoring of a PED CoP.

Criteria	Questions
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is the topic strategically relevant for the organisation? ▪ Are the members genuinely interested in the topic? Do all members have a practical link to the topic area?
Composition of the CoP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are key actors involved? • Is the heterogeneity of members guaranteed? (representatives of various fields of activities and schools of thought)
Regulations and standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have responsibilities been regulated and common guidelines and objectives negotiated? • Are the communication structures in line with the different needs of members? • Is information shared via a variety of channels? (face to face meetings, email, conferences, workshops, etc.) • Is the cost-benefit ratio acceptable for members?
Structure and process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the CoP have informal horizontal structures, without any classical hierarchy? • Have the key roles in the inner circle been defined (manager, facilitator, etc.)
Passion and energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it more than just a routine exercise? • Are members genuinely dedicated and do they have confidence in one another? • Are regular face-to-face meetings held and are key results emphasised and communicated? • Is the “history” of the CoP passed on to new members so as to retain its unique nature?
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we have a shared concern which can be taken as a basis for concrete results? • Have we identified useful products that are visible to outsiders? • Do outsiders have access to our knowledge products? • Are our results recognised by the relevant decision-makers?



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