Summary

Communities of Practice (CoPs) refer to a network of people who come together to share, learn and collaborate on a shared interest or objective. CoPs play a particular important role in connecting and building the capacity of professionals working in the water sector. This Tool introduces the organisational characteristics of CoPs and how to set up a CoP charter. This Tool additionally highlights some of the key recognised principles used to enhance the effectiveness of CoPs.

What are Communities of Practice?

Communities of Practice (CoPs) can be defined as a group of people sharing a common concern, passion or interest in a topic and who decide to come together in order to fulfil individual and collective goals. The particular purpose of CoP lies in knowledge; and community activities focus on developing this knowledge on the addressed topic, the exchange of it among all the members and beyond, implement capacity building processes as well as advocacy programs. They stand out from other forms of networks by intensifying the personal relationships between professionals working on a specific domain, with different background, countries of origin or types of organisations, which allows the connection of actors for projects and initiatives on a very efficient way. What also makes them unique is a sense of community, a feeling of belonging to a privileged circle of collaboration, in which trust relationships are ensured, as well as a common use of information sharing and expertise.

As such, CoPs propose a new model of connecting people, with knowledge at the core. They bring together people who might not have met in a different context, and make dialogue possible by exploring new opportunities and ideas. This creates a virtuous circle where collaborative processes are initiated, learning is stimulated, new knowledge is generated and members are helped to organise
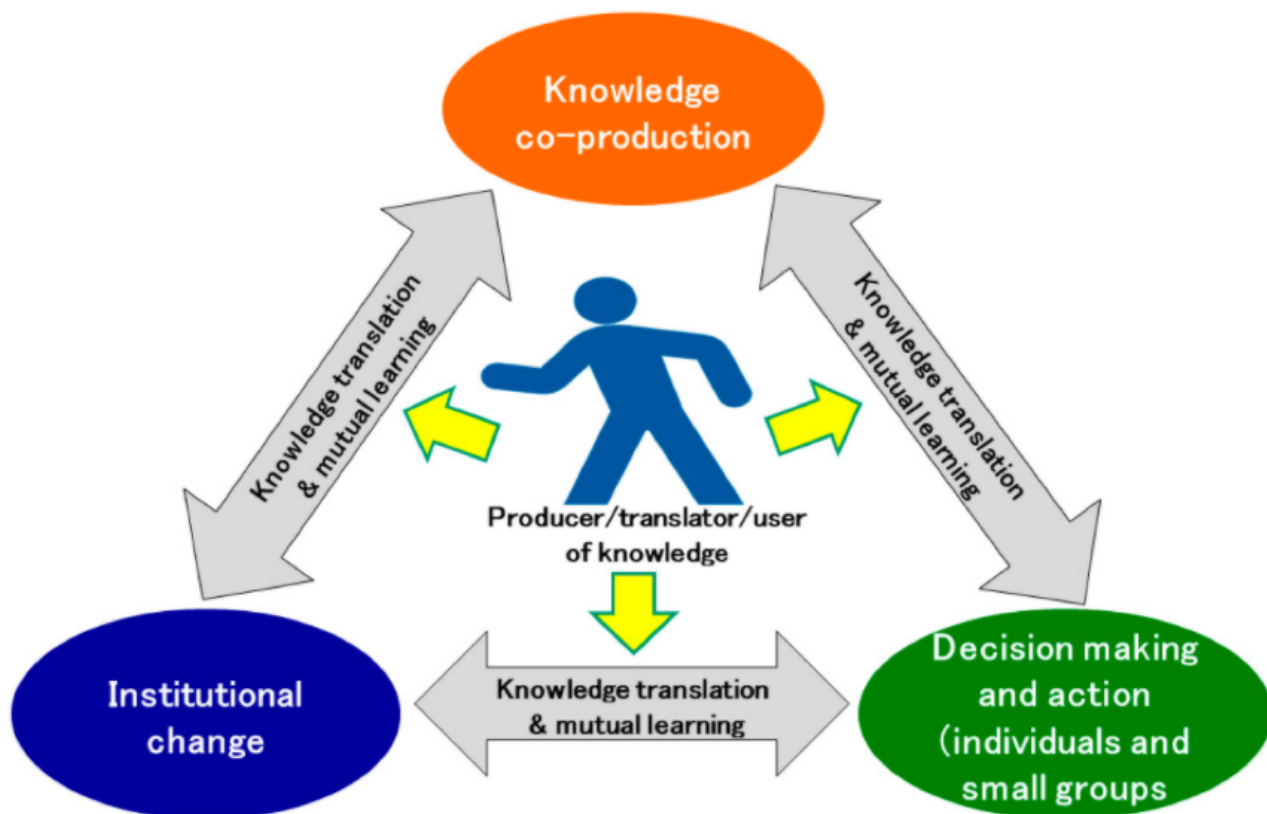
themselves better (Fig. 1).

Image

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of integrated local environmental knowledge (ILEK) (Source: Adapted from Sato and al.)

Their presence in the water industry is essential since water resources management sector is characterised by a great diversity of areas of expertise, types of actors, etc.. Some of the largest and most active communities of water professionals include the International Water Association the International Association of Hydrogeologists, the American Water Works Association, the Sustainable Sanitation Alliance, and GWP's IWRM Action Hub Communities.

Organisational Characteristics of CoPs

The organisational characteristics of CoPs can be schematised as a bulb according to the level of investment and participation of the members (Fig. 1). The coordinator/facilitator(s) along with the most engaged actors are at the core of the community. They are responsible for defining the topic(s) around which the collaboration between all the actors is based and the objectives of the CoP. They are also responsible for ensuring satisfactory relations and for settling disputes between members. Around them, as a support is the 'active' circle of experts and leaders which have a high-level position and are specialised in the given domain (or working in the field, for instance). Occasional members participate in this CoP on the occasion of a specific project or on a specific issue in the field. They are experts whose expertise is interesting but not in all activities or on all subjects. Then there is the peripheral circle with participants who have lasting relationships to build with the community, or newcomers in the domain. Their participation is rarer but valuable because they will also participate in transmitting the knowledge developed to other types of actors. The transactional space brings together outsider professionals with very occasional links to the CoP. They are not members, but benefit from the information and data produced by the CoP in the course of their activities, through publications, newsletters etc.
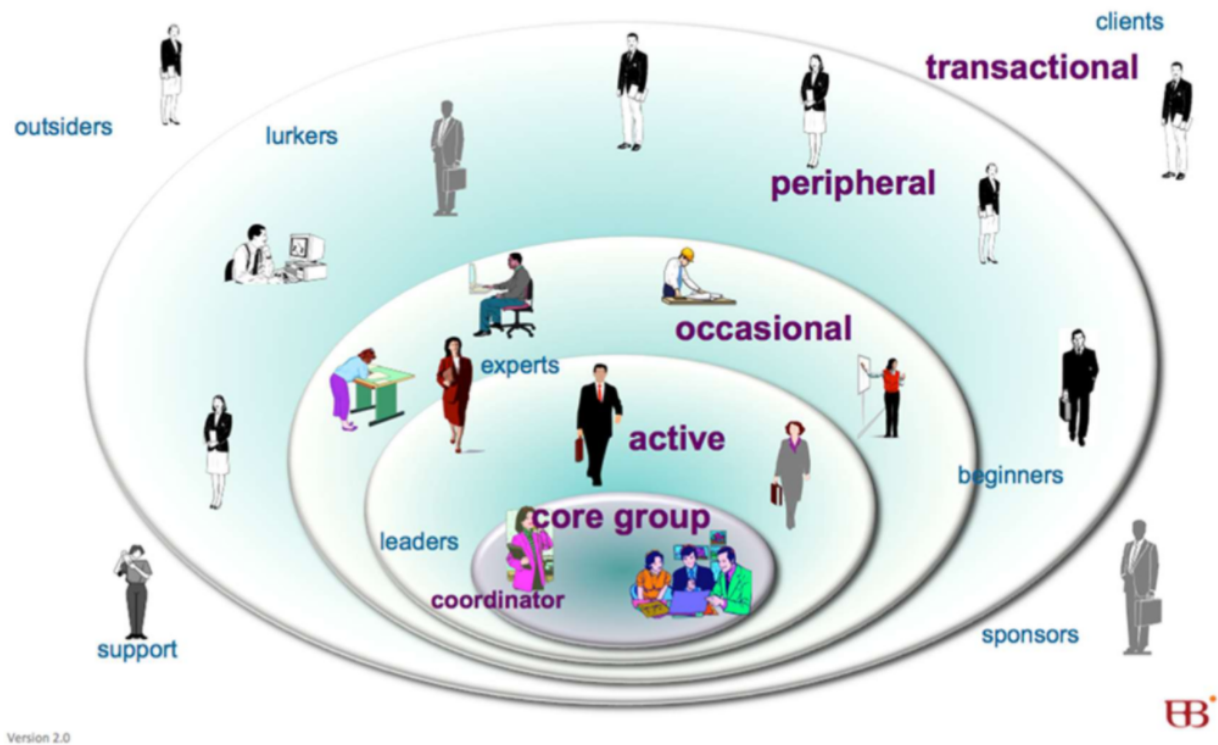
Image

Figure 2. Levels of participation in Communities of Practice.

The format and tools that will be used by a CoP is a pratically strategic choice to be made because it influences the intensity and quality of the relationships between the actors. In the past, CoPs were closely linked to physical gatherings such as conferences, events, and colloquiums as they already constituted privileged knowledge sharing platforms assembling people sharing common interest and area of expertise. Many CoP have however gone virtual, or at least partly so. Online platforms in fact offer many advantages in terms of capacity building, and more intense sharing of data and solutions. They also allow for a greater diversity of participants as physical meetings are not always easily accessible. The combination of the different opportunities offered by these formats, in a balanced way, can encourage the development of common and reliable knowledge among the members.

CoP Charters

CoP charters are strategic governance documents that can be used to clarify the mission scope and objectives set by the group. CoP Charters typically include the following elements:

1. Purpose: what is the CoPs raison d'etre, what is the higher level vision it is trying to achieve.
2. Objectives: what the CoPs specific aims; what will it achieve in concrete terms.
3. Scope: in what areas will the CoP concentrate, e.g., share, collaborate, and/or learn
4. Processes and Practices: what is the envisioned frequency of interaction and depth of engagement. What are some of the community's envision activities and initiatives.
5. Formats and Tools: what are the main modalities and platforms used for engagement.
6. Organisational Structure: what are the targeted groups, who does what, including who is part of the core group.
7. Code of Conduct: what are the values and principles that guide the work of the CoP and interaction between community members.

A CoP Charter template can be found here (CDC, 2008).

Principles to Strengthen an effective CoP

Setting up and running a CoP is an evolutionary iterative process that requires constant adjustment. Here are a few key principles that are important to consider in trying to design and maintain an effective CoP:

- Design for evolution; CoPs are dynamic and often founded on pre-existing networks. Though CoPs should have a guiding vision and purpose, they should also foster growth and provide flexibility as the needs of the community change.
- Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives; while community insiders have a more intimate understanding of the foundational principles and vision of the community, those outside the community can act as agents of change by offering new perspectives or approaches.
- Invite different levels of participation; there typically exists a small core of community members who are highly motivated and involved in steering community values and efforts. The CoP should also accommodate those less involved who also wish to contribute to the mission of the

community.

- Develop both public and private spaces; communities should have sufficient activity and offer opportunities to cultivate professional relationships among its members.
- Focus on value; as members engage in collaboration, networking, and problem-solving, the value of the community at large and individually will form and evolve.
- Combine familiarity and excitement; communities should be places where members feel comfortable to share ideas, free from personal ridicule or judgement. The community must provide for free exchange and novel approaches to encourage member engagement, interest, and excitement.
- Create rhythm for the community; communities should guard against complacency and lethargy by maintaining a consistent level of activity that involves both community insiders and those on the periphery. The community must strike a balance between moving too quickly and becoming stagnant.

Thematic Tagging
Water services

Source URL: *https://dev.toolbox.venthic.com/learn/iwrm-tools/communities-practice*