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Communities of Practice:

Lessons from Latin America

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Introduction

Knowledge and organisational learning are already recognised themes in the private sector. The debate focuses on 'intelligent organisations', which learn from their internal and external environments. It identifies knowledge as a distinct part of an organisation's resources, which can be managed and increased. This, in turn, has created the concept of 'management of knowledge and learning' through communities of practice¹.

In recent years these ideas have started to become adopted and adapted by civil society organisations, including development agencies. The main reasons for this include:

- Competition between organisations
- Acknowledgement that knowledge can also be derived from our own practise, as well as that of other organisations and individuals
- Pressure not to repeat previous mistakes
- Efforts to strengthen our own and other organisations as quickly, effectively, and economically as possible
- Improved access to communications technology

Communities of practice are thus becoming a new means of strengthening interchange and learning between individuals and organisations. It is not surprising that increasing resources are being allocated to establishing new communities of practices, which are seen as a low-cost option for promoting continual learning.

However, there are still many questions to be answered. What do we really mean by communities of practices? What are their main characteristics? When do they work most effectively? And how do we evaluate their results and impact? These questions and many others were discussed at a workshop held in Mexico City at the beginning of 2005. Participants included SNV Bolivia, Pact Inc., and Pact Peru.² It was hosted by the Mexican Conservation Learning Initiative – IMAC2 – as part of a self-evaluation held by IMAC three years into the project. The workshop was supported by the Impact Alliance and Fortaleza.³ The organisations involved all used

¹ Also known as communities of practice and knowledge and learning networks.

² For more information about the participating organisations visit their websites: <http://www.snv.nl/>; <http://www.pactworld.org/>; <http://www.pactperu.org/>; and <http://www.imacmexico.org/>.

³ For more information about the supporters visit their websites: <http://www.impactalliance.org/>; <http://www.fortalezaonline.org/>.

communities of practice as a key part of their strategies.

This paper presents a number of reflections drawn from the workshop, which serve as an introduction to the theme of communities of practice. Also presented are a series of criteria for analysing when they are appropriate and how they should be initiated. Five case studies presented at the workshop are included as appendices.

Conceptual guidelines

Based on reflection on actual experiences, the workshop defined a community of practice as a group with ‘a common learning interest’. Within this broad definition, objectives and specific interests will differ according to the particular community. All communities of practice should also share certain key characteristics, which are: a basis in trust, ‘recognition of diversity’, and ‘a willingness to share experiences and knowledge’.

A community of practice aims to establish long-term learning processes that support innovation, the building of capacity, the improvement of practice, and the strengthening of relationships between members. A community of practice need not necessarily have a separate institutional identity. However, it does require a minimum input of resources (including financial and time commitments and investment in communication systems).

The workshop identified two essential roles key to ensuring that a community of practice functions well: those of facilitator and participant. It is important to realise that participants will vary in terms of their involvement and commitment. This means that the life of a community of practice is not a linear process. Indeed, some communities may be ‘resuscitated’ more than once after

they have been pronounced ‘dead’. Moreover, communities of practice may attach themselves to other organisational forms, such as networks, institutions, or movements, without these secondary affiliations taking over the original body.

Organisation and implementation

For the most part, the success of a community of practice depends upon a series of elements and strategies that are present at each stage of its development cycle. These are:

1. Planning and getting started
2. Relationships and communication between members
3. Leadership and co-ordination
4. Creating learning processes
5. Incentives to create a culture of participation

There now follow some ideas related to good practice and the key elements to be included in each of these stages.

Planning and getting started

Interests. Most communities of practice will encompass diverse interests, both organisational and individual. The challenge is to be able to align these interests, as this facilitates the input of time and resources, and increases members’ motivation to participate.

Negotiation. There are various motivations for creating communities of practice and they embody a range of interests. It is therefore important to be clear about their origins and aims. In some cases, communities of practice come about due to an offer of financing (see the case of the community of practice in the Northeast CANO in the

appendix). In others they are created by the demand and interest of those who will benefit directly from the opportunity for learning and exchange that they provide (see EVALPERU). It is therefore of critical importance to negotiate between the interests of donors and of the members.

Clarity. It is also important that the chosen themes are relevant and well defined, to ensure that the community of practice is equipped to respond to significant challenges faced by members.

Relationships. Experience has shown that success is also dependent on building upon existing relationships or strengthening groups that have already initiated some form of joint action. Otherwise there is no basis on which to build sufficient trust to enable the exchange of knowledge and a lack of awareness of the agendas and ways of working that participants are likely to bring to the exchange.

Mapping. It is important to know who the members are, where their strengths and potential lie, and to identify key cultural attributes such as their preferred means of communication. The experience of the organisations at the workshop showed that, without a sufficiently thorough mapping exercise, it is difficult to attract the interest of new members, identify common themes, and build capacity.

Purpose and identity. The purpose and identity of the community of practice should be focussed on learning and on the themes identified during mapping. These definitions should neither commit the members to participating in joint action, nor commit the group to a formal constitution. Once decided upon, all activities of the community of practice should take place within the agreed definitions. The process of identifying purpose and identity should be internal to

the group. However, external actors can often provide useful inputs and help facilitate the identification of common themes.

Institutional sustainability. Organisations which are themselves sustainable, at least in the short term, will find it easier to participate in a community of practice. If an organisation is sure of its own continuity it is likely to have more opportunity and incentive to participate and commit to group initiatives.

Design. The community of practice should be designed before it is initiated, especially regarding the assumption of key roles. These roles are: facilitator, participants, experts on different themes, internal and/or external communication co-ordinators, and someone responsible for institutional development. There may be additional key positions, depending on the needs of the particular community. It is also necessary to identify potential members.

Motivation. Experience shows that it is also good to consider ways of strengthening the motivation of members to participate in the community of practice. For example, concrete products such as documentation of case-studies, the development of guides based on the contributions of members, and the provision of training, and workshops.

Flexibility. The design of the community of practice should be flexible enough to accommodate change and new conditions that may arise. Many communities of practice adapt as time passes, changing their ways of working, objectives, and roles. For example, the CANO Community has been functioning for three years and during this period has altered its objectives and roles in response to new challenges (see appendices).

A community of practice should always have a learning agenda with which to orientate itself, but also enough flexibility to respond to emerging situations and issues, and to allow the roles that different members take on to evolve and change.

Relationships and communication between members

Strategic relationships. It is extremely important that the community of practice has legitimacy. In order to achieve this aim, efforts should be made to establish relationships with relevant actors who are able to enhance the quality of the proceedings. The participation of experts can be beneficial. For example, CAMAFU identified their own lack of the academic knowledge required to balance the practical knowledge of their member civil society organisations. Once this was recognised, Chapingo University and the Centre for Atmospheric Sciences were invited to become new members. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) has also been supporting the community with relevant information.

Competencies. It should not be assumed that all community of practice members are familiar with the basic methods and tools of communication technology. If the general level of competency is insufficient to enable effective communication, you should think about how to develop abilities in this area. This was the case in CAMAFU, some of whose member organisations were unfamiliar with the Internet.

Types of interaction. Ideally, a community of practice should communicate through both face-to-face interaction and virtual interaction. Although virtual interactions are an economic way of continuing work after

meetings, they can only be used once initial trust and commitment has been created amongst the participants. An appropriate balance allows for the advantages of both kinds of interaction to be utilised.

Personalisation and recognition. The relationships within the community of practice should be as personalised as possible. Strategies such as recognising authors for their contributions to documents can help to generate motivation and a sense of ownership.

Network of relationships. The experience of CANO shows that it is better to have more than one member from each organisation. Otherwise, the relationship with an organisation can be jeopardised when key contacts are lost, for example due to sickness, changing jobs, or going on field-work. In addition, whoever participates in the community of practice should have decision-making power in their organisation and the ability to pass on information and insights gained from the community of practice to other staff in an ad hoc manner.

Leadership and co-ordination of the community of practice

Facilitation and co-ordination. A community of practice is redundant without contact and relationships between the members. For this reason, facilitation is crucial to ensure a minimum level of interaction is maintained. This interaction should be fluid, recognising that there will be different levels of participation amongst members. Those individuals who take on a facilitating role should be clearly identified, and if possible their efforts should be rewarded, financially or by another means. The facilitators are responsible for co-ordinating the different projects in which the community of practice is involved and overseeing the general direction of activities. In the communities set up by

the IMAC project there are experts within the permanent staff who take on the role of facilitation of the communities of practice. In SNV, this role has been taken on by various professionals within the institution, who receive support in the form of guides to facilitating knowledge networks.

Thematic leaders. In addition to facilitators, recruiting individuals to take the lead on particular themes of which they have expert knowledge can be beneficial. These leaders can support the facilitator, adding depth to discussion and exchange related to this theme. The amount of work and time that the thematic leaders will need to commit should be clearly defined, as should incentives (not necessarily economic) to take on this role. This process should be transparent.

Technical support. Some communities of practice also require technical support, for example, to produce a newsletter or web-page. The provider of technical support should work together with the co-ordinator of the community of practice.

Mission and strategy. The consolidation of the communities of practice of IMAC, SNV, and EVALPERU has been based on the development of key documents, such as a mission statement, rules of participation, and models of participation. These kinds of documents have proved most effective when developed by the members themselves.

Monitoring. Like any intervention, the progress of a community of practice should be monitored with reference to its initial planning, objectives and expected results within a given time-frame. However, this does not mean that whatever was originally planned should be incapable of adjusting to new circumstances as they occur. Those

responsible for the co-ordination should be attentive to the development of the community of practice, and propose and incorporate adjustments when necessary. For example, CANO members became interested in developing discussion related to a particular theme that was not originally identified. To accommodate this, efforts were made to identify events not actually programmed by the community of practice, but which provided an opportunity for interested members to meet and develop their common interests.

Stimulating the learning process

Learning plan. A learning plan consists of the identification and grouping of themes and issues that are central to a group or organisation. Having a plan for a community of practice helps to orientate collective action and to identify the necessary learning outcomes and products. The plan can be grounded in organisational development strategies and organisational and individual needs analyses, which identify and prioritise areas that need to be strengthened. These have been used by SNV and IMAC. Other methods, such as ‘open space’ events, can also be used to identify areas for action.

Thematic groups. In order to cater for specific interests within the community, groups or sub-groups that can go into more depth on a particular topic can be created. These groups should feed their major findings back into the whole community of practice.

Information Systems. In order to generate exchange of knowledge and learning and stimulate debate it is necessary to produce and distribute adequate documentation. Workshop participants found that case-studies and conceptual guidelines have been fundamental in spreading best practice and lessons learnt. Moreover, the recording of experiences that occur

within the community of practice – the extraction of new knowledge from reflections on practice – should be accompanied by an active dissemination of these lessons. The aim is to build intellectual capital within the community of practice, as well as the capacity to influence organisations and individuals who are not members. It is not surprising that new capacity is built over the lifetime of a community of practice. IMAC and Pact both found that the existence of a web-page that recorded the history of the community of practice made it easier to integrate new members. It is also useful to disseminate regular newsletters summarising key reflections that have emerged from any discussions that have taken place using electronic media, and to identify the contributors. This helps to consolidate learning and strengthen the impression that things are moving forward.

Incentives to create a culture of participation

Identity. It is essential to promote the identity of the community of practice in order to gain the approval of the members. There are various resources that can help with this, such as a distinctive logo, name, and an Internet presence. EVALPERU held a competition to choose their logo. Involving all members in choosing the name of a community of practice also helps create a sense of ownership.

Integration. A community of practice needs to find ways to encourage participation and a voice from those individuals who are not used to being heard, and to ensure that diversity and difference are respected. For example, interviews could be held with those individuals or organisations who do not participate very actively in the community of practice and who might hold divergent opinions about a given topic. You could also prepare case-studies on the work of a particular person or organisation.

Transparency. It is good practice to ensure transparency regarding information, financial accounts and decision-making processes. This helps to create a climate of trust.

Communication. Communities of practice should look for interactive ways of communication. You need to take into account different styles of communication, cultural issues, access to appropriate technology, and other factors. It is also useful to combine various communication tools, such as emails with links to a web-page, or telephone calls with events. In this way, it is easier to encompass the different communication styles likely to exist within a diverse community.

Monitoring and evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation of learning communications is an issue that is still being developed. Reflection that emerged from the workshop in Mexico City identified three different levels at which progress can be measured.

The first level relates to the implementation of objectives. How are the activities that were planned being carried out? This level can be regarded as **monitoring**.⁴ Indicators that can be used at this level include:

- Number of participants
- Different levels of participation
- Flow of information exchanged between participants
- Number of documents generated that contain new knowledge
- Number of cases recorded
- To what extent people have fulfilled the responsibilities they assumed

⁴ Adapted from the classification suggested by INTRAC in Praxis Paper 2: Rising to the Challenge: Assessing the Impacts of Organisational Capacity Building.

The second level focuses on the results obtained from the activities that have been carried out, and the effects on the members of using the different products generated by the community of practice. It also looks at what benefits the members bring to the community of practice. This level can be regarded as **evaluation**. Indicators that can be used include:

- Levels of satisfaction and a sense of ownership amongst members
- To what extent relationships between members have been strengthened
- Levels of increased capacity and improvements in practice amongst members
- Generation of knowledge

The third level attempts to identify the degree of change that has occurred in the situation that the community of practice original aimed to influence. This transcends the individual members and is known as **impact assessment**. The kinds of indicators used refer to changes that have taken place within the organisations that send participants to the community of practice. These include:

- Improved achievement of institutional objectives
- Institutionalisation of best practices
- Strengthening of organisations
- Increased levels of professionalism amongst staff

This level should also examine any changes that have taken place regarding the problem that the community of practice aimed to solve. For example, if the community of practice's aim was to improve the conservation of natural resources, there should be some evidence that such an improvement has taken place.

Conclusions

1. Communities of practice are very interesting ways of promoting learning within and between organisations on a larger scale. They require certain conditions in order to be viable, which should be identified, analysed, and planned for in advance.
2. Communities of practice sometimes produce very high expectations, as they can be confused with other organisational forms. It is not always recognised that a community of practice can simply be incorporated into existing organisational systems or ways of working. The aim of the community should remain focused on the learning that is desired, and not become forced to take on other objectives.
3. A community of practice needs to be planned before it is initiated. However, this planning should not compromise the flexibility necessary in order to modify the topics covered and means of interaction when necessary.
4. The life of a community of practice depends upon the exchange of knowledge and the achievement of learning objectives. In order to achieve a continual exchange, the individuals and organisations involved need to gain ownership of the objectives and issues. The challenge is to constantly analyse and criticise in order to provide the catalyst to strengthen the participation of members.
5. Communities of practice need sufficient resources to hold events and/or reward those who occupy key roles (such as co-

ordinator) and are responsible for ensuring participation and achieving objectives.

6. More efforts need to be made to continue work on the issue of monitoring and evaluation. We need to robustly test the effectiveness that different users of communities of practice relate within their own organisations.

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7. Interviews

Appendices

Peruvian Evaluation Network – EVALPERU

Background and objectives

- The development field goes back more than 20 years in Peru, and for the last 10 years there has been a greater demand for practices of monitoring and evaluation (M&E).
- There was previously no network or association of professional evaluators, and no specialised academic programmes.
- Friendly relations and professional exchange existed between some evaluators.
- A meeting of the International Organisation for Co-operation on Evaluation was held in 2003 in Lima.
- EVALPERU was founded in 2002 as the initiative of a group of professionals working on M&E, without external funding.
- The network aims to 1) promote a culture of evaluation; 2) create professionalism among experts in M&E; 3) place evaluation on the development agenda within the country.

Results

- The founders of EVALPERU agreed upon a strategic plan, an operational plan, criteria for membership, internal rules, and so on.
- There is an elected management committee and membership has increased.
- It participates in international events and has representation at regional and international networks.
- Members pay a subscription to cover running costs.

Lessons learnt

- It is easier to build on pre-existing relationships.
- It is helpful to have basic documents beforehand, such as a strategic plan, criteria for membership and so on.
- Commitment and motivation is higher when the initiative responds to an identified and relevant need.
- It is not indispensable to have external funding. Non-financial personal and institutional resources can be used to support the network.
- It is better to start with what is actually achievable, without losing sight of the overall aim.

KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS IN SNV

Background and objectives

- The Dutch Co-operation Service – SNV – is an international organisation based in The Hague that provides capacity building support and advice to organisations in order to make them sustainable in the short term. It works in 26 countries and was started 40 years ago.
- Since 2003 SNV has been using knowledge networks as a strategy alongside its process of internal restructuring, and in order to focus on priority areas that were identified by a consensual process.
- SNV promotes knowledge networks amongst its staff and across different sectors, regions, and levels.

Results

- Various knowledge networks have been established in different areas.
- Participation in the networks is recorded formally through a system that records the time spent on different areas of work. It usually implies around 20-30% of an individual's work time and some time outside the workplace.
- The performance of the networks is analysed once they have been running for a few months.

Lessons learnt

- In two-thirds of networks there is a team working to promote them, which is key to the level of success.
- Sometimes work programmes can be very ambitious. It is better to concentrate on two or three points that are key to the area of work and the organisation.
- It is first necessary to ensure there is a good focus for the network and that it deals with issues that are relevant to day-to-day work. This should come before thinking about increasing membership.
- The investment of resources in the networks should be based on the added value that they bring to the work of the organisation.
- It is important to define the amount of time that is to be invested in the network in order to avoid unrealistic expectations.

IMAC PROJECT – CAMAFU

Background and objectives

- The Initiative for Learning on Conservation (IMAC) brings together the Mexican Fund for Nature Conservation A.C., the Nature Conservancy, and Pact. All organisations work to strengthen civil society working on conservation in Mexico.
- The community of practice on Fire Management (CAMAFU) was formed in April 2002 through PPIRA⁵, in order to strengthen member organisations working on fire management.
- The objective of CAMAFU is ‘to promote membership amongst individuals and organisations in order to promote the exchange of knowledge and experiences, with the aim of strengthening ourselves institutionally and contributing to the continual learning regarding nature conservation and fire management’.
- The membership is diverse, but most members are civil society organisations.

Results

- Internet portal, used as a tool to exchange knowledge and promote membership.
- Workshop on tool building, which also served as an invitation to various actors to join the initiative.
- Evaluation of organisational capacities plans for improvement and strategy building.
- Collective workshop on ‘Planning for Improvement’, and the formation of groups on organisational and conservation issues.
- Stronger relationships with the organisations that have invested in the project.
- Relationships and exchange of knowledge between the diverse actors.
- Technical assistance.
- Community meetings.
- Participating organisations have invested resources in the activities of CAMAFU.

Lessons learnt

- It is indispensable that someone is contracted specifically to promote the exchange and learning between members, support them, connect them and be responsible for follow-up.
- A web-page is a necessary and useful tool, but there are difficulties around cultural issues and technological barriers. Much work needs to be done if it is to be used to its optimum potential.
- The exchange of knowledge and organisational strengthening are beneficial and motivating, but should be undertaken in order to achieve a higher objective. It is ideal if funding can be found for specific issues and for training regional facilitators.
- Thematic networks benefit from the formation of regional groups which often exert more pressure, and through which the members can work together to influence state policies.

⁵ Programme for Conservation and sub-programme for the prevention of fire and the restoration of affected areas, from the Mexican Fund for Nature Conservation, A.C.

IMAC PROJECT – CANO

Background and objectives

- The Northeast community of practice (CANO) aims to create a process of institutional development, and promote membership amongst conservation organisations that work in the northeast of Mexico.
- There have been previous attempts to create alliances between organisations in this area, namely ALCOSTA and Coalición.
- There is national and international interest in conserving the Californian Gulf.

Results

- Ten organisations with improved financial sustainability, management of human resources and legal security.
- Fifteen organisations with increased capacity for strategic communication, and for communication between them monitoring the development of tourism in the region.
- ALCOSTA has become the place for interaction between organisations in the northeast.
- Two thematic groups have been formed: on fishing and sustainable tourism. The group on fishing has developed into a forum for analysis and has proposed a new federal fishing law.

Lessons learnt

- Careful analysis of the interaction between people and groups that could form the community of practice is necessary.
- Identify the key themes for exchange and interaction.
- An intense process of negotiation with the organisations should be undergone before starting to work together.
- Regional facilitators or co-ordinators should be selected and trained.
- Regarding interventions aimed at organisational development, it is necessary to develop more systematic ways of assessing need and of monitoring the progress of development plans.
- The choice of regional co-ordinators or facilitators can be a key element in success.
- Those organisations with sufficient resources to cover their own operations are more able to participate in the community of practice.
- Points of contact with individual organisations can be increased using a knowledge map.
- The community of practice should be viewed by members as part of an institutional strategy.

IMAC PROJECT – MAPIMI

Background and objectives

- Workshop on ‘Exchange of experiences regarding Advice Councils’, Pantanos de Centla, Tabasco; November 2003, CONANP.’
- First need identified: a guide for the construction and effective operation of Advice Councils.
- A pilot case for the guide: Community of practise of the Mapimi Biosphere Reserve.
- The objective is to provide IMAC with a forum for exchange in order to improve the guide, and for the Advice Council of the Mapimi reserve to be consolidated as a group that is built on trust, links, and commitment to the exchange of experiences and common learning.

Results

- December 2004: constitution of the Advice Council.
- November 2004: temporary closure of the ‘Silent Zone’ tourist area.
- Communities became involved with and committed to the work of the management team.
- There was public recognition of the social power that has been harnessed, as the only source to generate funding and projects in the field. For example, the adoption of the Natural Protection Area as a common project, including the responsibility for decision-making.

Lessons learnt

Relating to working together with CONANP

- Institutional links between FANP and CONANP (state entities) need to be strengthened.
- Projects should be prioritised in order to facilitate decision-making.
- All aspects of the process should be respected, regardless of the financial considerations.
- Capacity to create and initiative proposals should be increased/ maintained.

Relating to working with the management team and the communities.

- Previous social work with communities is indispensable in order to gain their trust and support.
- The greater the extent to which the facilitating team is keeping track of monitoring and follow-up, the more the management team has room for manoeuvre, including with CONANP.
- The management team should publicly recognise the value drawn from the involvement of IMAC.

Relating to building and running the community of practice.

- It is not necessary for the community of practice to be based on the Internet in order for it to be successful.
- IMAC is able to sustain a complex relationship regarding institutional processes, and maintain these processes to fruitful completion.
- The consistent efforts of IMAC have created the opportunity for new aims and projects.

- A group of people working in an environment of trust and fellowship is able to generate learning and tools according to common needs.
- As the environment of trust increases, so the decision-making becomes stronger and is done jointly.
- Problems should also be identified jointly.