

Building *Communities of Practice*: Strategic Alliances for Knowledge and Action in UNICEF

“If you want to go fast, travel alone. If you want to go far, travel together.”
– African proverb

I. Introduction

Knowledge as a Strategic Resource

In our rapidly interconnecting world, public and private sector organizations are continually seeking cost effective ways to leverage know-how for problem solving and competitive advantage.

UNICEF’s on-the-ground presence is far reaching yet complex: as we cover *a lot of ground*; at the same time, we cannot always capture what we do or integrate what we learn from ourselves and our partners. *Communities of Practice* connect practitioners, learners, innovators and solution seekers in a strategic alliance of knowledge sharing, collaboration, and action.

What is a Community of Practice?

Etienne Wenger coined *Community of Practice* as “a group of individuals who together accumulate and share their collective learning. These are people who share a passion for a topic and deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis.”¹ Learning is a social activity, and people learn best in groups.

Communities of Practice explore new possibilities and solve challenging problems. Individuals come together to share knowledge and capture innovative thinking that advances their work on vital issues. *Communities of Practice* foster dialogue, build trust and cohesion, as individuals organize and take action around shared purposes and strategies.

Every *Community of Practice* has its own identity, objectives, and expected results. Its life cycle traverses stages – from creation to creative transformation.

UNICEF’s Potential

UNICEF offers a unique potential: to act as both a broker of expertise and a convener of larger alliances to achieve results for children. First, building *Communities of Practice* within UNICEF means convening partners within our own knowledge network and

¹ Etienne Wenger “[Cultivating Communities of Practice](#)”, 2002

engaging in creative collaborations together with experts and practitioners committed to translating the rights of children into action and results. In mobilizing and uniting our internal and “living” knowledge, we build new partnerships and strategic alliances for children.

Communities of Practice offer a significant cost benefit: investing our existing strengths today, UNICEF reaps rewards in results for children tomorrow.

Linking Global to Local and Local to Global

Joining hands in this global effort, we need to look at what we can do together. Effective collaboration is the gateway to realizing the fullest potential of each of our ideas, experiences and innovations.

Communities of Practice link the global, the national, and the local together. In our increasingly interconnected world, effectiveness depends on the vibrancy of these linkages.

The Business Case for Communities of Practice

Organizations seek sustainable competitive advantage -- in processes as well as in achieving tangible results. There is a body of evidence that ties this advantage to continuous improvement and innovation. Innovation depends on curiosity, insight, ideas and the ability to translate them into concrete actions. It also requires that we collectively apply knowledge in ways that yield new development solutions to old and new issues. *Collectively we achieve what individually we cannot.*

Much of what people do in private sector organizations occurs in the context of *Communities of Practice*. That is where best practices and innovations emerge and where the solutions to common challenges are first identified. For this reason, many organizations encourage, promote, and support *Communities of Practice*, especially in areas, processes and functions where optimizing this edge results in competitive advantage.

Leveraging the Communities of Practice model in the UNICEF context

UNICEF encompasses a broad and rich community of experts and practitioners. We welcome opportunities to share our experiences and learn from each other; yet the challenges we navigate day to day often keep us so engaged with our work, that we often miss opportunities to share with each other and with our partners.

Breaking down Barriers

Communities of Practice foster engagement. When learning is a social act, we encourage the natural sharing of knowledge and experiences.

We then break down many of the barriers that may otherwise impede collaboration. Learning and engaging become interactive, drawing out the unique contribution of each member.

When we feel united by the *passion* we share for our work, we listen better to each other; we engage more dynamically and attract partners into an “expansive” community of ideas and action. When we engage, we also refresh, revitalize, and recreate our organizational culture. Unite For Children starts from within.

UNICEF’s Challenge

UNICEF’s action on the ground throughout the world germinates a wealth of knowledge and experience nearly everywhere. At the same time, its synthesis and communication remain fragmented.

If we succeed in integrating this knowledge internally, in our own immediate communities of expertise, we capture knowledge that can be shared, fueling a dynamic learning curve, promoting a culture of continuous improvement.

UNICEF’s Opportunity

"Knowledge is like the bird of the forest: one person alone can never catch it."
–African Proverb

UNICEF’s *partners* are increasingly seeking our ideas, expertise, and development solutions. Offering our response, we stand at the threshold of opportunity to broker knowledge, ideas, and experience. Building vibrant *Communities of Practice* will multiply our influence and harness the opportunity to convene a *Global Knowledge Network for Children*.

“Many hands make light work”
– English proverb

A key assumption behind the *Communities of Practice* at UNICEF is that engagement and enthusiasm lead to organic and vibrant action toward greater results for children. As each individual member brings hands and heart to the community, together we build a space where we listen to and learn from each other. In this community of trust we nurture the spirit of wonder and possibility that strengthens cohesion of purpose and coherence of action.

Metaphor
The metaphor of the hands evokes the playfulness of the child which awakens creativity, energy, curiosity and discovery. (Visual concept of children’s hands playing to follow)
Empowering **child’s play** is UNICEF’s work, in the sense of ensuring a quality of life for children that awakens, frees and protects this unique identity in each individual child.

Four key benefits of fostering Communities of Practice in UNICEF?

- *To attract community members who share passion, knowledge, expertise*
- *To nourish and strengthen individual and collective learning and practice*
- *To convene groups who interact in the “living” experience of anchoring ideas and knowledge in our practices.*
- *To channel good practices into innovative solutions for children.*

Communities both thrive and drive results

It takes time for *Communities of Practice* to emerge, to flourish and to become productive; they are an investment in UNICEF’s future, *not a quick fix to be applied for the sake of short-term gain*. It is key to invest in building the culture where Communities both thrive and drive results.

**Change the way we think, change the way we work
---Positively influencing organizational culture---**

Questions

- How do we attract vibrant contributors to our communities?
- What are the conditions we need to create to facilitate this? How are we going to do it?
- What are the existing barriers and how can we turn them as our allies?
- What are the supportive or impeding factors that may impact our efforts?

Issues we need to address

- Communities of Practice are much more self-governing and wide-ranging than our typical working groups or task teams.
- Strengthening “ownership” of people’s ideas, rewarding people’s contribution
- Learning as a social act has profound implications for the way we view and support our organizational culture.

2. What makes Communities of Practice different?

“Talking doesn't fill the basket in the farm”
–African proverb

Transforming knowledge into “living” action

The *Communities of Practice* are vectors to immediately share ideas, experiences, including experimental thinking. The immediacy—the sharing the know how- foster the creation of an evolving pool of “living” knowledge. The community cultivates, nourishes and shapes this knowledge by providing a space for comparison, synthesis and review. The result is the transformation of this knowledge into “living action”, living development solution and living evolving results for children.

What Communities of Practice are not

In this interconnected world where information is so easily available, to simply have or create another source of information is not itself unique. *Communities of Practice* are not just networking events and/or directories. Also, *Communities of Practice* should not be confused with task forces or teams.

A task force ties to a specific assignment. Once that assignment is completed, the task force dissolves. A team ties to some specific process or function. A team is structured to deal with different roles in that function or process. In a team, roles and tasks often vary; in a *Communities of Practice* they tend to remain the same. Team groups are formed by management, membership in a community of practice is voluntary.

One size does not fit all

Every community is unique, with distinctive goals, member needs, supporting processes, and different methods should be used to stimulate members participation. It is key that the members themselves identify their own learning needs and design activities that engage them actively and constructively. *One way is no way at all.*

3. What are the Goals and Objectives of the Communities of Practice?

Goal

To develop the capacity of *group(s) around a shared practice* by nurturing collaboration, building alliances, providing models, mechanisms and process for sharing lessons and best practices to achieve results for children.

Four Key Objectives

- *To learn from one another through dynamic sharing and collaboration around key areas of focus*
- *To leverage lessons and best practices to generate tangible, measurable, action and results for children*
- *To foster cross-fertilization among Communities of Practice in a larger network of Communities*
- *To stimulate UNICEF's role as facilitator and convener of a global Community of Practice for children.*

4. What does it take to build Communities of Practice in UNICEF?

“Having a good discussion is like having riches”
–African Proverb

Successful *Communities of Practice* require a simultaneous focus on key areas: developing the practice and developing the community. Developing the ‘community’ requires a social structure - the sum of the social relationships built up within a community. Four specific roles should be explicitly recognized :

- **Coordinator**– recognized in the organization as the key spokesperson for the community; organizes and co-ordinates community’s interactions and activities.
- **Facilitator** – Facilitates the interactions within the community e.g. face-to-face and online discussions: convenes the discussions, facilitates the contributions, responsible for the conclusions, synthesis and its dissemination.
- **Expert (s)** – provide (s) critical inputs to the shared knowledge base.
- **Knowledge manager**– Researches, filters, organizes and synthesizes inputs and knowledge outcomes. Manages the knowledge base of the community.

What do we mean by “Practice”?

Joint Effort - The members of the *Community of Practice* are working together to jointly evolve the practice

Mutual Engagement -The members of the *Community of Practice* are committed to a common investment in the outcome of the practice. They define why, how, and when it is done and— why, how, and when it is changed.

Shared Practice - The members of the *Community of Practice* share methods, resources, tools, techniques.

Key Steps to get started

I. Planning the Community of Practice

- Identify the scope and knowledge focus of a community and build a case for action: e.g. Social Budgeting, Health and Nutrition - Measles initiative, Child Protection - Children in Armed Conflict? (Others to be defined).
- For each *Community* identify Community Coordinator, Facilitator, Expert (s), Knowledge Manager

Tasks for the Facilitator

- Identify the individuals who will make the connections, build the network linkages, and engage other members of the community
 - Identify who we can invite to participate from outside, including experts
 - Conduct a knowledge and resource inventory (freshness, relevance, usefulness, use); then identify additional content to meet the community's needs
 - Identify technical needs of the community (e.g. the community technology/platform to support the communication)
 - Develop the tools and establish the processes to allow the community to communicate and convene.
 - Develop the branding identity of the *Community of Practice*
 - Undertake social networking analysis to identify connections, linkages and bottlenecks between participants. *Connect community members.*
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- Prepare Terms of Reference for the *Community of Practice*.
 - What are the key needs or issues of focus and the activities? What results does the *Community* want to achieve? How do we document the collective learning fruits of the *Community*? How do we measure the returns from the investing in the *Community of Practice*? How will the *Community of Practice* be structured, organized and resourced?

II. Launching the Community of Practice

“If you understand the beginning well, the end will not trouble you”
–African Proverb

Key activities

- Organize a kickoff workshop to convene community members, identify common interests, knowledge needs, and define core issues for focus.
 - Important outcomes for the kickoff include a list of steps to achieve goals, objectives and agreed indicators to measure results. The kickoff

meeting is key to build enthusiasm and momentum and set the *rhythm for the Community*.

- Develop a *Community of Practice Charter*: articulation of the mission, vision, goals, and member rules and agreements.
- Build connections between core group members and invite new members.
- Launch communication channels: news, community announcements, online discussions, newsletters, integration with face- to-face meetings, etc.
- Plan and organize regular community events and spaces to foster community building.
 - These activities should stimulate trust building, and allow members to discover what aspects of the practice are most crucial to identify the real value of the community.

III. Activating the Community of Practice

“When Spider Webs Unite They Can Tie Up a Lion”
–African Proverb

Key activities

For Community Members

- Produce and distribute a *Communities of Practice* publication once or twice a year.
- Write and publish brief articles or results descriptions.
- Organize workshops/seminars where *Communities of Practice* members share their knowledge and experiences.
- Publish articles in external journals or magazines and promote them internally.

For Community Facilitators and Knowledge Managers

- Document and share stories of individual and community successes, and capture best practices.
- Identify new and emerging community roles and recruit members to fill them.
- Design activities with recognition and awards attached to encourage community building and participation.
- Conduct focus groups, interviews, and surveys to assess and measure the success of the community.
- Facilitate discussions about the community itself, including the community culture, processes and practices, technology, and individual motivations for participating in the community.

For Senior Managers

To be strong advocates of “Communities of Practice”

- Send a continuing message reinforcing the business value of *Communities of Practice*.
- Encourage colleagues from HQs/ROs/COs to form *Communities of Practice* focused on key strategic organizational priorities.

- Seek out and promote a few exemplar *Communities of Practice* emphasizing tangible results and value added.
- Spend time with a few existing *Communities of Practice* to learn first-hand how they operate.
- To advocate with external partners to leverage their support to *Community of Practice*.

IV. Sustaining the Community of Practice

“Knowledge is like a garden: if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested.”

–African Proverb

Key activities

- Identify opportunities for capturing new knowledge, including establishing new roles related to harvesting and capturing best practices (e.g. “gardeners,” and synthesizers).
- Establish policies and processes for sharing knowledge outside the *Community*.
- Continue to publish about the community and its results.
- Assess member and groups activity reports as well as undertake surveys.
- Review community audience, purpose, goals, and domain; watch for shifts in perception, expectations and needs.

Key questions we need to ask

To what extent is the community serving its intended audience and accomplishing its stated purpose and goals?

How might it do a better job?

How does the Community demonstrate return on investment for UNICEF and its partners?

From the perspectives of each individual community member and of the community as a whole, what is the perceived return on participation?

How should the knowledge and products created by the community be shared beyond the community?

Marketing and Promoting Communities of Practice

All members should take some responsibility for promoting the *Community of Practice*:

- To generate enthusiasm among members and non-members
- To ensure continued resources and support
- To stimulate interest in joining from other members and partners
- To better leverage the knowledge created by the *Communities of Practice*

How to promote effectively

Each *Community of Practice* should address this challenge itself as a topic of discussion, knowledge sharing, and best practices.

V. Measuring Results from Communities of Practice

Measuring results is a critical part of the strategy to build the Community of Practice: if we don't measure, the strategy cannot be fully validated.

Measuring results is two ways communication: it means fully listening to people in rigorous and quantifiable ways. Measuring results begins when the *Communities of Practice* set their goal and objectives.

Measuring results requires incentives and a well conceived rewarding system.

How to measure the effectiveness of the Community of Practice?

Develop metrics to capture how *Communities of Practice* contribute to:

- Improve staff performance with in the practice area
- Decrease in duplication of effort

How to measure the engagement of members in the *Communities of Practice*

- Establish a set of metrics to evaluate online interactions, particularly online discussions
- Create the tools to measure the use of website views, visits and participation
- Establish a set of metrics to measure the impact of the *Communities of Practice* on the organization's ability to engage and innovate to achieve results for children

Communities of Practice succeed when ...

- Community members have developed a strong sense of *identity* tied to a shared practice
- Shared ways of doing things together (e.g. common practices, tools, processes)
- A more rapid flow of information between and among members (e.g. a really effective "grapevine")
- Quick diffusion of innovation among members and rapid transfer of best practices internally and with partners
- A widespread and shared awareness of each others' competencies, strengths, and contributions

VI. Closing Thoughts...

It takes time for *Communities of Practices* to emerge, to flourish and to become productive. *Communities of Practice* are cultivated in the dynamic process of sharing knowledge and experiences. *Communities of Practice* are not a quick fix for short term tasks, but an investment in the organization's long term relationships, forging vital new links in UNICEF's internal communication and network. Open, participative feedback mechanisms, accessible opportunities for sharing, trust, ownership and credit for people's ideas and contribution are essential.

Unite For Children starts from within.

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