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FACILITATING ONLINE COMMUNITIES:

QUICK REFERENCE

A key part of the Helvetas approach to supporting increased knowledge sharing and learning is its recognition of the potential of Communities of Practice (CoPs). A vibrant CoP has its own momentum that:

- Carries discussions and reflections forward over time
- Ensures that CoP members stay informed of new developments and ideas within relevant fields of work
- Generates new ways of thinking and working



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ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

Even the most successful CoPs can benefit from active facilitation, especially if most CoP interaction is online. Every CoP has a degree of diversity of perspectives and ways of behaving among its members. They also go through periods of high energy and periods of low energy, depending on both events in the external environment and interactions in the internal one.

The Helvetas Knowledge Sharing strategy 2009-2012 suggests two crucial areas for CoP facilitation. One is the creation of a facilitation plan and the other is to create value-added content. What does this mean in practical terms?

ONLINE FACILITATION PLAN

Here we are not talking about a detailed, boring and dust-collecting document that might look good but is only useful as a paperweight! We are rather thinking of a few crucial steps (A-C) which can be followed with only a little effort, but which can have a real impact on the CoP.

With a relatively small amount of effort, you can help to ensure that more participants are able to gain from dialogues which take place in CoP discussion spaces (D-E).

- A. Determining, on an annual basis, what the core topics of current interest are**
- B. Scheduling 2-4 topic discussions, each lasting 3-4 weeks, over the year**
- C. Encouraging shared facilitation**
- D. Consolidated responses to specific questions**
- E. Crisp, multilingual summaries of topic-specific dialogues**



A. CORE TOPICS OF CURRENT INTEREST

How to do this? Perhaps the simplest way is to have a brief discussion within the CoP, sparked by a few key questions. Examples include...

- What do you think are the most important issues in the field of 'xxx' (e.g, Civil Society and the State, Education and Culture, etc.) today?
- Thinking about your current work, what topic or topics would you and your partners benefit most from discussing?
- Over the next year, what specific areas of 'yyy' do you think we should focus on so that we can together reach a deeper understanding?
- Over the next year, what specific areas of 'zzz' do you think we should focus on to improve our work?

B. SCHEDULING TOPIC DISCUSSIONS

As a general guideline, it is useful to hold focused discussions on 2-4 topics per year. The key is to identify which are the 'hot' topics at a given time and then to create space for facilitated discussion of those topics, with each topic taking up perhaps 3-4 weeks (this makes it easier for people with busy schedules to participate). Additionally, if there is a face-to-face workshop being planned, online discussions can help prepare before the event and reflect after it.

It only takes a couple of energetic and interesting exchanges within a given CoP to create a sense of dynamism and momentum! This is one of the main indicators of a facilitator's success! It is also an excellent way to build up momentum over time to the point where the community takes over much of the responsibility of keeping things 'alive'.

C. SHARED FACILITATION

In order to support more broadly shared ownership of the CoP, and to support greater capacity building within the organisation and between it and partners, it is an excellent idea to try to identify more than one person who can act as a facilitator for the CoP. Key concerns include...

- Whoever is identified, he/she must be interested in playing a facilitation role!
- A good way to start expanding facilitation roles is to solicit interest from individuals in taking on a specific topic discussion. This will be less intimidating and it provides them with a real end point to their role, which will allow them to evaluate whether they like facilitation or not.



Photo: Helvetas

Rotating facilitation exercise in Vietnam

D. CONSOLIDATED RESPONSES

A consolidated response service will help to significantly increase the added value of participating in CoP discussions. It works like this...

- A CoP member might post a question about a specific challenge he/she faces
- Over the coming days/weeks, several people post responses based on their own experiences. These responses include opinions, links to relevant websites, suggestions of who to contact for further information, etc.
- The CoP facilitator reviews the various postings from the original question to all the responses it generated, and creates a 1-2 page summary.

The consolidated response is not only a good way to reward participation of the original question-bearer, but it provides him/her with a concise set of recommendations based on the question. It also is of benefit to other CoP subscribers with an interest in the issue, but who may not have participated in the exchange. Finally, as a set of consolidated responses to specific questions gets built up, it constitutes a valuable and highly accessible learning tool and repository of community knowledge. An interesting example of this is the «consolidated reply» Service of Solution Exchange, a UN-based initiative in India. See www.solution-exchange-un.net.

E. MULTILINGUAL SUMMARIES

Whenever a focused discussion takes place, it is **very** useful to provide occasional summaries of key ideas and exchanges, and to do so in several languages. Although it is quite difficult to provide ongoing translation of every message within a CoP discussion, there will almost always be participants who could benefit from periodic translations. This will not only increase the accessibility of summarized content, but it will help to increase the sense of shared ownership across the CoP. If possible, translation should also be provided for consolidated responses.



Photo: Helvetas

Networking farmers and field advisors in Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

BROADENING COP MEMBERSHIP

As a platform for exchange of knowledge, ideas, reflections, etc., most CoPs will benefit from being more inclusive rather than less inclusive. Inclusiveness will be promoted by proactive facilitation and translation, but it is also important to consider who should be part of a CoP. It should be the exception that a CoP is a purely internal affair because a great deal can be gained by both partners and own staff when partners participate in discussions. Discretion may need to be exercised, but at a minimum, attempts should be made to include – and to welcome – key partners in CoP discussions.

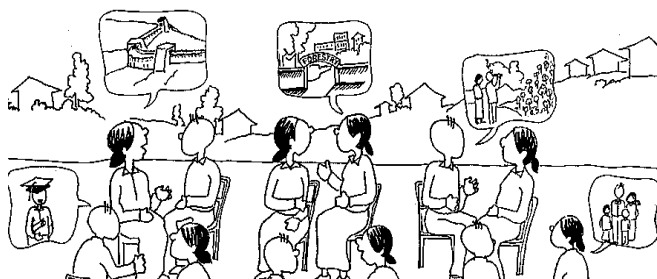


Illustration drawn by [Asha Kaj Thaku](#) and downloaded from [DevelopmentArt](#).

LINKING DIALOGUES TO FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

It is also important to consider how linkages between online discussions and face-to-face events can be strengthened. For example, a great deal of preparation can be done within online discussions in order to collectively prepare for a face-to-face workshop. Similarly, a CoP discussion space can be used to follow up from such a workshop. Finally, even **during** a workshop the discussion space (or other online tools such as wikis, blogs, etc.) can be employed to both report out on the event as it is happening and to solicit input from those who are not able to physically participate in the event.

The degree to which such tools are employed depends upon the perceived benefits and costs of setting up such mechanisms, but in the case of geographically dispersed CoPs, strategic use of ICTs can make strong contributions to the sustainability and dynamism of those CoPs.