Refugee Welcome
Collective

Facilitator's
Guide

Communities of Practice

Contents

Introduction

What It Is

This facilitator's guide is designed to provide context and guidance around Communities of Practice (CoP) through the context of resettlement agency network-wide co-sponsorship initiatives. Resettlement agency networks are increasingly seeing the value in such groups with all ten national resettlement agencies facilitating groups of a similar nature. According to Refugee Welcome Collective (2022), networks have identified CoPs are "especially helpful to uncover the similarities in experiences, share ideas for addressing key challenges, to provide space to share resources, and perhaps most importantly, to not feel alone." This guide is a result of cross-discipline research on CoPs and application of lessons learned in network-wide CoP facilitation. The guide aims to empower **national resettlement agency staff overseeing local affiliate community sponsorship staff** in facilitating the following:

- Define the components and value of a CoP.

- Take strategic steps during the CoP planning process.

- Utilize best practices for running an engaging and productive CoP.

What It Is Not

This guide is not designed to be a set curriculum. If facilitators need support in developing more instructional training pieces of your CoP, they can contact Refugee Welcome Collective (RWC) at ta@refugeewelcome.org.

Defining a Community of Practice (CoP)

Communities of Practice (CoP) are groups of peers who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Three key elements are required to ensure a Community of Practice exists:

01

Domain

A shared area of interest

02

Community

Members interact and learn together

03

Practice

Members develop a shared repertoire of resources

Research (Wenger-Trayner, 2015) indicates that CoPs are usually established for learning purposes and that social learning or thinking together is a key component in their success. Thinking together refers to people exchanging knowledge and experiences by guiding each other through their understandings of the mutual challenges in their field of interest.

"We have found that staff can feel isolated in what they are doing. They are having to innovate and figure things out. The CoP gives staff an opportunity to connect with others who are doing the same work and to share ideas and resources."

– Joe McCann, World Relief

Comparing Communities of Practice and Working Groups

	Purpose	Membership	Duration
Community of Pratice	Develop member capabilities and share access to expertise and resources.	Members elect to join based on shared domain and interest.	As long as the group members continue to have interest.
Working group or project team	To deliver a specific product or service.	Anyone assigned to the group by a manager or lead.	Until the service or project has been completed and the next begins.

What Can Communities
of Practice Achieve?

In Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge (2002), they lay out the reasons for focusing on a community of practice through the lens of value: short-term and long-term value for participants and organizations. Below is an adaptation of these values from the context of co-sponsorship CoP:

Why Focus on Communities of Practice?
Short-term value

	For participants	For organizations
Short-term value	• **Help with challenges:** through peer sharing and immediate access to headquarters guidance • **Access to expertise:** provided by headquarters and professional outside presenters. • **Confidence:** most co-sponsorship staff have been in their position for less than one year and need regular support to gain confidence. • **Fun with colleagues:** while a commitment, a social learning break in the regular workday can boost morale. • **Meaningful work:** while co-sponsorship staff may attend a variety of trainings and meetings, a co-sponsorship CoP is a space dedicated specifically to their work surrounded by individuals who share that unique perspective.	• **Problem solving and knowledge sharing:** headquarters staff will have direct access to resources, experience, and feedback to gain buy-in from many of their co-sponsorship staff. • **Time saving:** the social learning nature of a CoP allows headquarters staff to provide information and updates and establish personal connections with every co-sponsorship staff person in their networks simultaneously. • **Synergies across sectors:** capitalizing on the live and interactive nature of a CoP, headquarters can create shared momentum and progress towards both the needed progress of co-sponsorship and the areas in which co-sponsorship intersects with other network-wide interests and concerns.

Why Focus on Communities of Practice?

Long-term value

	For participants	For organizations
Long-term value	• **Personal and professional development:** co-sponsorship and refugee resettlement is fast-paced and time-consuming, CoPs allow staff distraction-free, dedicated time to focus. • **Enhanced reputation and identity:** CoPs progress the professionalization of the field of co-sponsorship and provide opportunities for affiliate staff to increase their profile in the field. • **Networking:** CoPs are one of the only spaces staff dedicated to co-sponsorship can connect and build relationships with other staff dedicated to co-sponsorship.	• **Strategic standardization:** headquarters can use collaborative CoP spaces to carve out and garner buy-in for shared network policies and identities. • **Keeping up to date:** CoPs are an opportunity for headquarters staff to identify and respond to timely trends across their affiliates and in the field. • **Innovation and new strategies:** CoPs bring together a group of individuals with a shared interest, but a variety of experiences and skills resulting in new approaches and strategies.

"I think CoPs offer support, networking, guidance and connectivity which are all vital in resettlement and in community sponsorship."

– Rhonda Fitzsimmons, Bethany Christian Services

How Do Communities of Practice Operate?

Communities of Practice, being social learning spaces, can focus on a variety of activities through several different prompts. Below are some common activities and prompts:

Activity	Prompt
Problem solving	• What are some of the reasons behind. . . ? • What are approaches others have taken and why were they successful/unsuccessful. . . ? • What are some of the anticipated risks/challenges of. . . ? • How will we know if we are successful with. . . ?
Requests for information	• Where can we find . . . ? • What other fields or departments might have the information we are seeking?
Seeking experiences	• What experience(s) have participants had with. . . ? • What have we learned as a network/field from previous eras? • Who can we connect with to share a different perspective than us in this area?
Reusing assets	• What previous resources and training can we modify or build on to accomplish this goal?
Coordination and synergy	• What are our shared goals this year? • How can we work together to accomplish these goals?
Discussing developments and establishing buy-in	• What do you think of. . . ? • How can we support you in applying or using. . . ?
Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps	• Who knows or knows how to find. . . ? • What do we need to accomplish. . . ? • Where can we store sharable resources?

Adapted from Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002)

Preparation and Planning

Measuring Success

When convening a CoP, facilitators should first consider defining what success would look like for their network. Facilitators may set different kinds of goals and metrics to address success on multiple levels.

In the context of whole network success, facilitators may consider:

- Increase in sponsor groups

- Increase in newcomers paired with sponsor groups

- Increase in average number of core services provided by co-sponsor groups

- Increase in affiliates offering co-sponsorship

- Increase in or addition of specific co-sponsorship resources

In the context of CoP success, facilitators may consider:

- Increase in affiliates participating in the CoP (by annual incremental number or percentage increase)

- Decrease in attrition rates

- Increase in participants serving in leadership and/or facilitator roles

- Positive feedback via survey

Facilitators should determine both the metrics for success and how to measure them prior to the development of the CoP. These should be relayed to participants and participants should be encouraged to also define what success for the CoP would look like for them (see **Creating Purpose and Buy-in**).

Identifying Participants

Ideally, all affiliates with a co-sponsorship program should participate in the network's CoP. In FY23, the average network community sponsorship CoP size was 14 participants (ranging from five to 26).

Networks should consider setting the following minimum participant requirements:

- Any participating affiliate should have projected at least one co-sponsorship group in the R&P abstract for the current fiscal year.

- Participants should be the staff person directly responsible for overseeing their affiliate's co-sponsorship program.

- Participants anticipate the capacity to attend at least 80% of the CoP sessions for the upcoming fiscal year.

It is essential to morale that all participants are committed to the success of the CoP (see **Creating Purpose and Buy-in** section for further details on the subject).

Depending on the size and composition of the network's co-sponsorship program, facilitators should consider a separate CoP for affiliates still in the development process. In FY23, two networks (based on experience level) offered more than one CoP. If capacity does not allow for a separate CoP, facilitators should consider the following anticipated challenges:

- Affiliates still in the development process may have difficulty engaging in the discussion and shared work of the CoP.

- Affiliates still in the development process may need additional instructional support best delivered outside of the CoP.

- If experienced affiliates play too heavy of a support role to new affiliates, those affiliates may feel the benefits of the CoP do not exceed the effort (see **Creating Purpose and Buy-in**).

"Separating cohorts by level of experience has been helpful. At CWS, we separated based on affiliate launching co-sponsorship and expanding. This allowed space for new offices/staff to get a comprehensive 'training' and to dive deeper into co-sponsorship topics amongst those with experience."

– Ted Blessing, Church World Service (CWS)

Some suggested strategies for addressing the challenges of a CoP whose participants have **different levels of experience**:

- Set aside time for breakout discussion groups determined by participant experience level.

- Host brief, complementary sessions for participants still in the program development stage to provide a level set of information prior to engaging in the main CoP.

- Engage more experienced participants as facilitators.

Networks with an expected larger (greater than the average of fourteen participants) CoP should consider solutions to the following anticipated changes:

- Participants may find it difficult to connect with other participants.

- CoPs may find it more difficult to engage all participants.

- Participants may lose a sense of accountability.

- CoPs may find it difficult to accomplish shared goals.

Some potential strategies for addressing the **challenges of a large CoP**:

- Structure sessions with ample time for smaller breakout discussion.

- Consider implementing outcome-specific practice groups.

- Develop mentorship pairings between experienced and less experienced participants.

- Hold participants accountable to group expectations (See **Creating Purpose and Buy-in**).

Consider   >>>   Experience Levels   >>>   Group Size
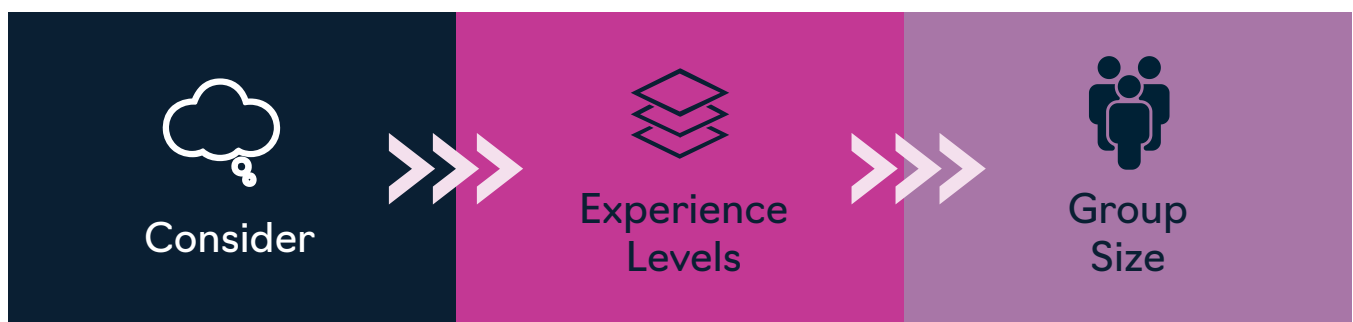
Exploratory Survey

Facilitators should consider disseminating an initial participation survey to potential participants. These surveys can serve three purposes. Firstly, they can help in the collection of baseline data used to measure success. Secondly, they can also serve as a good way to set expectations and gauge the commitment of participants. Finally, if done during the CoP development or renewal period, they can aid in planning some of the logistics of the upcoming CoP cycle.

Surveys should be disseminated prior to the start of a new CoP or CoP cycle. They should also be given to any participants who may join during a CoP cycle.

Planning and logistical information to gather via survey:

- [ ] Participant affiliate and role
- [ ] Affiliate current sponsorship programs
- [ ] Preferred frequency, date, and time (note: in FY 23, the average CoP met monthly)
- [ ] Participants personal and professional goals for participating in the CoP

- [ ] Preferred meeting frequency
- [ ] Level of participant experience
- [ ] Participants preferred topics or focus areas

Baseline data to gather via survey:

- [ ] Self-reported confidence level by program aspect (E.g., recruitment and stewardship)
- [ ] Self-reported confidence level in accessing co-sponsorship resources
- [ ] Number of co-sponsor groups

- [ ] Number of refugees paired with co-sponsors in previous fiscal year
- [ ] Average number of core services delegated to co-sponsor group per case in previous fiscal year

Commitment and expectation setting through a survey:

- [ ] Confirming a commitment to regularly attend live
- [ ] Confirming a commitment to engage respectfully with other participants

- [ ] Confirming a commitment to complete any follow-up activities
- [ ] Confirming a commitment to be accountable to providing the information and effort necessary to achieve personal and professional goals

Creating Purpose and Buy-in

Benefits Outweigh the Effort

The benefits of what participants take out of a CoP, personally and/or professionally, must be greater than the effort they put into it (Brose, 2021).
Some potential incentives could include:

- Access to resources, speakers, and opportunities exclusive to the CoP

- Collective bargaining power for the creation of needed resources, training, and opportunities

- Opportunities to be cited in the creation of resources and training

- Eligibility for grants or opportunities with financial requirements

"From the very first session, we are clear that the CoP is a space that belongs to the members. They are regularly reminded of their role in driving its direction and purpose."

– Lisa Lungren, USCCB

Shared Goals

As mentioned in **Measuring Success** section, facilitators should openly share the pre-established CoP goals with participants. They should know the commitment they are making in providing related effort, data, and general feedback. Shared goals create shared identity and purpose. Facilitators should also encourage participants to set personal goals. This can be done in the initial participation survey as well as an in-session activity. As with facilitator goals, participants should identify how they will measure success. As a form of accountability and investment, facilitators should consider asking participants to share these goals as well as provide updates to the group on a regular basis. This can also serve as an opportunity for participants to ask other participants for feedback and support.

"Make sure to always have local office representation in every presentation. The CoP should not be us, HQ staff, talking to affiliated but our offices showcasing their work."

– Una Bilic, IRC

Shared Expectations

To create both a productive CoP and a sense of buy-in for the CoP process, facilitators should guide the group in setting some shared expectations. As with any set of expectations, it is important to express them early in the CoP process and repeat them often throughout the process. Each CoP session should start with a reiteration of shared expectations and the opportunity for participants to suggest new expectations. Some potential expectations could include:

- **Everyone is encouraged to participate**. Everyone should be available with their cameras and chat function on and stay present by putting aside other work and distractions.

- **Respect others and their unique perspectives**. When differences arise, facilitators should try and remember it is an opportunity for discussion and not debate. One way you can do this is by seeking first to understand before seeking to be understood.

- **Only one person should speak at a time and no one person should dominate the discussion.** Once you have contributed to the discussion, pause for others to answer at future opportunities.

- **Remember sometimes there is no one immediate solution.** Participants should be comfortable in difficult silences and not rush to provide solutions. Participants should remember the CoP itself may collectively generate solutions over time.

"The affiliates are really the ones that provide the content for and input at the meetings. As CE staff, we just facilitate."

– Elisabeth Benfield, ECDC

Participant buy-in is increased when facilitators demonstrate an understanding of adult learning. Adult learning is centered around four principles (Meszaros, 2021):

1 Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.

Tip: participants should be given regular opportunities to nominate topics for the CoP to ensure that discussion is timely, relevant, and engaging.

2 Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.

Tip: in addition to nominating topics, participants should be given opportunities to lead discussions and activities as well as provide feedback on the CoP experience.

"Each participant in our COP takes a turn 'hosting.' We provide discussion questions, but we empower the participant asking the questions to add one or two of their own questions that they have for the group."

– Emily Griffith, HIAS

3 Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.

Tip: participants should be given ample time to share their personal and professional experiences through discussion. Facilitators should promote the sharing of lessons learned from mistakes as much as best practices.

4 Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented. Problem-centered learning refers to learning about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem.

Tip: in setting the balance of time in agendas, facilitators should consider emphasizing time for participant discussion around challenges and scenarios over a heavier content delivery approach.

"Encourage participants to reach out to each other beyond the scheduled meetings."

– Selamawit Woldemichael, USCRI

General Facilitation Considerations

✔ Be clear about the group expectations and session goals at the start of each session.

✔ Be intentional and transparent by sharing intentions behind questions and session design and do not be afraid to address group dynamic issues.

✔ Use different participation methods to respect participants' communication styles (polls, chat function, role play, breakout rooms).

✔ Send questions and topics ahead of time to respect participants' processing time.

✔ Hold a neutral and appreciative openness by prioritizing engaging the group's wisdom and thanking them for their contributions over pushing your own agenda (Schmitz, 2022).

✔ Allow space for silence.

✔ Allow space for difficult situations with no "right" answer.

✔ Be mindful when choosing topics or questions that participants may be in different stages of program development.

✔ Create a platform for sharing resources and meeting notes.

✔ Create spaces such as Discord chats for participants to share between sessions.

Addressing Group Dynamic Issues

Participants Who Dominate Discussion Time

- Politely redirect to another person or topic.

- Reframe the participant's response as an additional question for the rest of the group.

- Increase opportunities for small group breakout discussions and alternate participants in different groups in advance.

- Routinely ask members of the group to act as observers and note-takers for alternating sessions. This should allow the participant the opportunity to develop more sensitivity.

Participants Who Do Not Share

- Provide frequent opportunities for paired or small group discussions. Smaller groups may ease anxiety around sharing.

- Establish a shared expectation that while the facilitator or participants may ask directed questions, other participants may say, "pass" at any question. This allows the facilitator to name the participant but also gives them the opportunity to not share when they are feeling uncomfortable.

- Focus on opinion questions (E.g., "How do you feel about X?"). This may encourage participants to share without feeling they may answer incorrectly.

- Utilize virtual tools (E.g. Slido) to allow for answers to be submitted anonymously.

> "I think creating a safe space where everyone feels comfortable sharing is key."
>
> *– Jess Garross, LIRS*

Progressive Loss of Interest In and Momentum of the CoP
(Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002)

- Institutionalize the voice of the CoP

    - *Find ways of legitimizing the CoP in the network and field such as finding a creative name, having participants present to headquarters staff, and featuring CoP outputs in network/public newsletters.*

- Be intentional about rejuvenating the CoP

    - *Introduce topics and speakers from new, and even less common, perspectives*
    - *Introduce new formats and features of the CoP on an annual basis.*

- Hold annual renewal sessions

    - *Encourage members to renew their commitment through annual survey.*
    - *Use sessions to set new annual goals.*

- Develop new leadership

    - *Facilitators should identify and prepare participants to lead sessions and outcome related practice groups.*

- Actively recruit and mentor new members

    - *Set timeframes for recruiting new members.*
    - *Pair new members with established members to both introduce the CoP and help provide extra context and support for a limited amount of time.*

- Seek relationships outside of the CoP

    - *Seek speakers and partnerships with other professions and departments in the field (E.g., invite case managers to participate in special sessions and invite partners with marketing experience to present on best practices).*

Ongoing Support and Other Resources

RWC can provide the following support to facilitators:

- Technical assistance in developing a CoP

- Technical assistance for improving CoPs

- Troubleshooting CoP challenges

- Guest participation of RWC technical assistance providers

"I have been pairing CoPs with RWC trainings, which the network greatly appreciates."

– Isil Alexander, EMM

Contact Refugee Welcome Collective (RWC) at **ta@refugeewelcome.org** to request support.

Facilitators can explore the following additional resources to support their CoP:

- *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge* (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) is considered the most foundational work regarding CoPs. You can find a summary of the principles covered online **here**.

- While not focused on community sponsorship, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a wide range of **online information and resources** including sample agendas and outreach emails for CoPs that can be adapted.

- The European Commission Joint Research Centre has developed an **extensive playbook** to collectively run and develop communities of practice in fields.

- The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) has developed a **CoP guide** with many interactive elements such as a checklist for developing an effective CoP.

- Notre Dame's Learning and Teaching Office has developed a **brief guide** to establishing CoPs.

- See **References** for additional exploration of source material.

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