

Holding ourselves accountable to inclusion in development through a Community of Practice: one organisation's journey towards change

Margo Greenwood, Tracy Vaughan Gough, Andrea Pregel and Kate Bennell

Introduction

Sightsavers is an international non-governmental organisation (iNGO) that works with partners in developing countries to treat and prevent avoidable blindness and to promote equality as an outcome for people with disabilities.

This paper charts the journey of Sightsavers' Social Inclusion Community of Practice (SICoP) in holding itself accountable to scale up efforts to achieve diversity in the workplace. The paper begins with the authors' understanding of a Community of Practice (CoP), describes the beginnings of SICoP, how it operates, perceived value of SICoP to date, and discusses successes and challenges on the journey towards change and growth.

The four co-authors work in the UK Sightsavers office and focus on social inclusion in their job roles - three working within programmes and one within Sightsavers Research Centre.

Our understanding of Community of Practice

As the term has become imprecise over time (Amin & Roberts 2008), for the purposes of this paper, the authors understand a community of practice to be a group (or groups) of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger 1998). More specifically, SICoP reflects Wenger's (1998: 72) three interrelated aspects of community – 'mutual engagement', 'sense of joint enterprise', and a 'shared repertoire of communal resources'. Through participation in the community, norms and collaborative relationships are being built; through interactions, a shared understanding of what binds the community together has been and continues to be explored and negotiated; and SICoP is producing communal resources for use in the joint enterprise.

The authors recognise that a CoP requires particular characteristics in order to be considered to be a dynamic learning environment (Wenger 1998: 125-6). Those key characteristics are: sustained mutual relationships (not always harmonious); shared ways of engaging in doing things together; a flow of information and innovation; a quick setup of a problem to be discussed; a lack of lengthy introductions (discussions are part of an ongoing process); an ability to assess appropriateness of ways forward; sizeable overlap in how individuals describe who is part of the community; knowing others' strengths; mutual description of identities; related tools; shortcuts to communication; displaying membership; shared stories, laughter and discourse (which reflects some shared perspective of the world). Although an outcome of such a dynamic learning environment can be to transform the social structure in

which a CoP takes place (Wenger 1998: 13), the authors do not see SICoP as a 'management tool' in order to achieve this.

Background

Sightsavers' (2015) Empowerment and Inclusion Strategy framework has a theory of change which identifies an approach to achieving the enjoyment of human rights for all via three interconnected pathways: the implementation of human rights policies, equality of opportunities and removal of stigma and discrimination. The strategy has six objectives relating to Sightsavers' work in the development sphere and one objective which is focused on the functioning of the workplace. This objective – to scale up efforts to achieve diversity in the workplace – inspired staff who are passionate about organisational inclusion to create a working group or learning network from across the organisation to drive that shift.

The nature of the pre-existing environment to SICoP was one of willingness to support the efforts of staff members with a professional or personal interest in implementing diversity and inclusion. The CEO and Director of Policy and Programme Strategy are strong advocates for inclusion in the organisation, and so, although not management inspired, SICoP is management supported and celebrated, giving the group a comfortable start. An important precursor to SICoP was the development of a disability inclusion training module for all Sightsavers staff, led by a small group of employees in early 2016. Each person involved had experience in disability inclusion and training, and recognised the need to build greater inclusion capacity; its work continues within the community of practice as it is now. Due to the ad hoc nature of the small group's process and an increase in the size of the organisation, the individuals felt that a more formal community was required; a committed group of people with a range of expertise could co-create ownership of greater organisational diversity.

One challenge was how to involve all areas of the organisation in the vision of scaling up efforts to achieve diversity in the workplace. The original small group approached the CEO to ask her to generate awareness of the upcoming social inclusion working group, who duly asked team managers to describe the group in their meetings, and actively discuss involvement with clearly willing and motivated team members, who could help their team to actively promote inclusion.

This working group began officially in July 2016 and meets once a month as SICoP.

How SICoP works

SICoP comprises 27 members from teams covering programming, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, policy and advocacy, research, IT, media and communications, corporate services and human resources, with a range of seniority levels. Members include a country office representative from each region in Asia, and East and West Africa, as well as a representative from Sightsavers Ireland office. Members who are not present in the UK office are invited to dial in to participate using teleconferencing facilities, a common process in the everyday running of the organisation. Over time, this group of people has become a community of practice (CoP) as defined in a previous section.

ToR/objectives and action plan

A Terms of Reference (ToR) for SICoP was developed through an iterative approach. Members suggested key objectives and responsibilities; a smaller group then drafted a document which was revised together and submitted for comment to the Management Team, made up of the organisation's senior management. Through the ToR, SICoP defines itself as a collaboration of cross-departmental staff that champions positive change to make Sightsavers a leading organisation that promotes and embodies diversity. It aims to facilitate through a coherent approach a fully inclusive organisation. Specific objectives are to:

- promote staff commitment to inclusion through organising awareness raising activities and supporting capacity-building;
- monitor inclusion efforts to understand where we are now and which organisational gaps we need to address;
- encourage adherence to Sightsavers' Empowerment and Inclusion Strategy Framework and its three pathways to mainstreaming inclusion
- steer Sightsavers towards becoming an employer of choice for people with disabilities

To reach its aims and objectives, the ToR lists specific ways forward that include: growing as 'champions' of social inclusion in the organisation whilst emphasising that inclusion is everyone's responsibility; building capacity within the community; recognising success and build on it; learning from best practice elsewhere; ensuring regular dialogue with senior management; developing a monitoring mechanism to assess progress; channel issues and information both ways at team meetings; and ensuring SICoP documentation is clear and accessible.

An action plan has been developed to guide the work and hold SICoP to self-account. This comprises activities designed to contribute to achieving each of the ToR's objectives. Examples include: lunch time seminars from external people with disabilities or other organisations committed to work on inclusion; attendance and presentations at external conferences; disability training for the organisation; a global induction process to include module on accessibility; sign language training; ensuring software development is accessible; contributing to Sightsavers' annual inclusion report; an inclusive communication plan for SICoP; and becoming part of a disability confident scheme – designed to help recruit and retain disabled people and people with health conditions for their skills and talent.

SICoP co-ordination and sub-groups

A long-term staff member whose professional functions were being revised was appointed as inclusion coordinator and serves as SICoP's coordinator and secretariat. Her own visual impairment was a motivator for her taking on the new role; she expressed that inclusion is particularly important to her as she has experienced exclusion and discrimination in her life. It felt natural to her to invest in making Sightsavers as diverse and inclusive for everyone as it can be. During SICoP discussions, a voice recorder is used to ensure that minutes can be taken by the coordinator later (though software can also create transcripts), all visual material is in an accessible format for a screen reader and it is made clear who is speaking at any time. Subtitles are activated during visual presentations (e.g. within PowerPoint).

Sub-groups have been formed to deliver on specific, mostly time-bound, tasks. Six sub-groups were created by March 2017, to draft a CoP budget, finalise a training module on disability inclusion, work on gender mainstreaming activities, provide support for the annual inclusion report, develop SICoP's communication strategy, and support the organisation's alignment with the national equality standard. The aim of this approach is to be effective and time-efficient in managing tasks whilst also benefiting from particular motivations and strengths of community members. It has also promoted active engagement and ownership.

Management reporting

While SICoP can take leadership on initiatives that fall within the realm of members' day to day roles and responsibilities, such as organising speakers' events and delivering training, more strategic and resource-related decision-making involves the Management Group which comprises Directors of each department and the CEO. Therefore, SICoP reports at each Management Group meeting and shares recommendations and requests. This set-up promotes greater visibility around inclusion amongst senior managers, who are critical to promoting and driving organisational change. It also validates SICoP's efforts to support that change. The Management Group's explicit support of SICoP, the commitment of funds and the recognition of the group's successes has contributed to an organisational sense of value in SICoP's efforts and achievements. This reporting also keeps SICoP work accountable to the Management Group.

To strengthen global participation further, the inclusion coordinator participates in quarterly regional management team meetings to brief on and engage country directors in the work of SICoP and channel recommendations. Each member is also encouraged to share the work of SICoP with their teams and to channel recommendations and feedback.

Gathering together

There is a chairperson for each monthly whole-group gathering. In advance, the chairperson meets with the coordinator to prepare the agenda. Initially, the Global Technical Lead for Social Inclusion assumed the role of chair until March 2017; now members of SICoP volunteer to take this responsibility in order to foster ownership, membership voice, and promote diversity in agenda content. All members are invited to contribute agenda items. A participatory approach is core to the development of SICoP's functioning, and a key strategy has been to develop a workshop approach to problem-solving and tasks. This further enables mutual engagement, and a sense of joint enterprise and communal resources. During each two-hour long discussion and workshop, SICoP's coordinator takes minutes and later circulates them.

Perceived value of SICoP within the organisation

Methods

As the first anniversary of SICoP was approaching, the community chose to gather its perceived value from its members and senior management. An informal interview in the form of an email was sent out to all 27 members, who were asked the following questions:

1. What do you get out of being a member of SICoP and why do you continue to be part of the community?
2. What impact (if any), in your opinion, has SICoP had so far?

3. Is there anything you would change about any aspect of SICoP?

Four members of the senior management team were also asked:

1. What do you perceive is the value of SICoP for Sightsavers?
2. What do you perceive as the impact, if any, for the organisation thus far?
3. What do you think needs to happen in order to sustain the impact of SICoP?

An option of a paper version, or recording answers with a voice recorder was also offered. Members chose not to give their answers anonymously so that further discussion with that individual could be followed up. Eighteen responses were received from community members and two from senior management. Responses were analysed and emerging key themes identified and reflected upon.

Findings

Member responses for question 1 on why they are part of the community of practice fell under categories of contribution, collaboration, collectivity, passion, challenge and influence: contribution to making Sightsavers a better employer; the reward of working collaboratively to improve inclusion; expression of ideas and concerns through one collective voice; being passionate as a group about championing positive change; challenging inaccessible processes and structures; and influencing at senior management level in terms of resources and recommendations.

In terms of perceived impact so far, members felt that the following was happening:

- disability as an everyday consideration through awareness raising
- accessibility testing in the initial phases of project development rather than as an add-on (via a member of staff dedicated to accessibility testing)
- use of internally accessible templates for producing documents and presentations
- greater inclusion visibility in the organisation
- improvements to the functionality of offices via hearing loops and other measures
- improved recruitment and HR policies, and Disability Confident Level 2 accreditation
- increased employee confidence in disclosing health conditions and disabilities
- promotion of improvements in Sightsavers' ability to attract and retain talented people with disabilities
- implementation of an internal disability training session to increase awareness among staff

Suggested changes from SICoP members were:

- to work to maintain the motivation and attendance of SICoP
- expand its remit to ensure all programmes are supported and accessible to all people
- shorter meetings, more regular meetings
- to encourage more people with disabilities to be part of SICoP
- focus on doing less but doing things well
- develop the community to include better representation from overseas offices
- have broader diversity goals to explicitly include UK ethnic minorities and the LGBT community, as well as more debate around gender
- to carve out more time outside one's daily role to focus on inclusion priorities

Senior management responses on the perceived value of SICoP for Sightsavers were similar in believing that people will take inclusion more seriously if they are part of discussions about what it means. They felt it was valuable that SICoP looks at a wide variety of aspects, and that the diversity of the community and its cross-organisational membership helps to bring the issues of social inclusion to life. Perceived impact so far was that SICoP is helping to move the organisation from integrated to inclusive practice in all areas. There was perceived impact in relation to the large number of staff choosing to join the community of practice, tangibly demonstrating that Sightsavers is taking inclusion seriously and that it is not simply a top-down initiative. In terms of sustaining the impact of the SICoP, senior management responded that the community needs to be clearly embedded in the organisation and not become a separate initiative. It was felt that the annual inclusion report will help to hold Sightsavers accountable and make its efforts visible externally. One response was that SICoP will need to influence policy as well as practice, and that the balance between being challenging and forward thinking whilst being realistic will be crucial.

How methods, practices and approaches have been evolving

In the early stages, the community was establishing its aims and objectives, and so in terms of actions, members tended to share opportunities and practices found outside of the organisation with each other. However, once the terms of reference were agreed and an action plan put in place, members became increasingly proactive in tapping into greater possibilities. As a result, SICoP members' expression of approaches, methods and practice has been evolving over the last year. For example, a deaf awareness and sign language training day was organised for the programme staff and hosted by Sightsavers, and a session on how to guide visually impaired and blind people is upcoming. We also tapped into internal capacity: staff members were invited to SICoP meetings to deliver presentations on accessible PDFs and a new platform used to analyse gender data in our programmes. A special session on neurodiversity was organised by a member of SICoP in collaboration with a dyslexic staff member, now a member of SICoP. It was decided together that lunchtime seminars with external guest speakers presenting on inclusion and diversity, would be a good way to inspire the organisation; they have been well attended so far. Several members have shared resources and opportunities using our community email, and themed sub-groups have been small enough that everyone in them contributes, which helps create a sense of belonging for new members of staff. This exploration of approaches seems to have contributed to increased participation and engagement, within the community of practice and beyond.

Discussion

An ongoing question for discussion is what it means to be a CoP in an organisation deploying a specific inclusiveness agenda for particular groups. While SICoP must be aligned to organisational priorities – with a clear focus on disability and gender – it also needs to be truly inclusive, explicitly refusing to ignore feedback, feelings and proposals from its members. SICoP has a role in challenging the organisation to be forward thinking, holding itself accountable through a critical and realistic eye. This must be reflected within the SICoP itself, as a system of relationships. The organisation is developing increasingly strong programmes promoting the rights of women and men with disabilities, growing expertise in political participation and innovative inclusive health approaches. Research projects and pilots are providing evidence, testing new methodologies, and informing inclusion discourse,

and our policy work is a driving force for social change, that contributes to shaping the international agenda. Within this work, it is vital that Sightsavers practises internally what it promotes externally. SICoP is a powerful engine for ensuring this happens.

Gathering perceptions of SICoP value and impact so far has been a helpful process in Sightsavers' journey towards change. The suggestion to have broader diversity goals that include UK ethnic minorities and the LGBT community explicitly, as well as have more debate around gender, has struck a chord in the group. As an organisation with a focus on promoting equality as an outcome for people with disabilities, it has made sense to focus on inclusion accountability in that area first. Through SICoP bringing greater awareness to this organisational aim and commitment, the identity of the organisation is subtly shifting towards being an employer of choice for people with disabilities. There have been several changes in a short period, including accessibility testing, accessible templates, disability training, improved recruitment and HR policies, and it is interesting to note that there has been increased employee confidence in disclosing health conditions and disabilities since SICoP was formed. This potentially demonstrates a greater reassurance of respect and consideration in relation to disability. Therefore, it is a good time for SICoP to consider a focus on broader diversity goals.

The suggestion by senior management that SICoP should influence policy beyond that of Sightsavers is an exciting challenge. Discussions have begun around this, particularly about communicating the journey within and beyond the organisation, and strategic networking. The offered wisdom on seeking a balance between clear challenge and manageable steps, of being forward thinking and realistic, feels important to the journey ahead, and SICoP appreciates that having a senior management team who can support SICoP in finding that balance is one reason why the CoP has been successful so far. The work of SICoP has allowed Sightsavers to focus further on the 2030 Agenda call for effective, accountable and inclusive institutions that ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (goal 16.7), and the goal of achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities (goal 8.5). SICoP has potential to raise its voice in this area and exchange knowledge with others committed to growth in these goals.

There have been challenges in how SICoP meets together, which are in discussion. Members based in country offices do not feel as involved as they could, and so SICoP is looking into using mechanisms to ensure everyone can feel connected when gathering. One example of this is that the community is adopting new technologies which provide live translation using artificial intelligence, therefore including colleagues who speak different languages and are less confident in English. However, this can also create more technology glitches at the beginnings of gatherings. Also, members have historically been reticent in volunteering to chair the sessions. However, after taking a break from revolving the chair, reintroducing it recently has resulted in more volunteers – perhaps more time as a community has made the role feel more manageable. SICoP has also realised that it needs more dedicated time together for planning; an away day is now being planned for the autumn to revisit the action plan and terms of reference, and generate new ideas. Additionally, communication between SICoP and the wider organisation is an area the community wants to explore and improve. Different

strategies are being considered and tried, including a newsletter and presenting at Sightsavers Annual Meeting – both have been successful with areas for greater clarity identified. A key moment has been establishing a budget for SICoP. Articulating what was needed, negotiating an amount and creating the documentation in a way that reflects SICoP has helped to not just perceiving SICoP's value from senior management, but also investing in it. There are challenges to be met: SICoP needs to ensure active involvement from all parts of the organisation, maintain a balanced, realistic, but also critical and strategic approach, and to keep momentum. Members need to perceive the value of SICoP and being part of it, and have confidence in a co-created strategic plan with visible milestones.

SICoP has emerged to align closely with the description of a community of practice at the beginning of this paper. One potential way that it does not, is when a member cannot attend a decision-making process. Instead, where possible another member of their team attends. This has the benefit that other staff members experience SICoP, which helps to bring further awareness; however, this approach does not fit with CoP characteristics of a lack of lengthy introductions, knowing others' strengths, shortcuts to communication and shared discourse. Currently, the full representation of all teams has taken preference over a focus on a system of relationships; this may or may not change over time.

Experience from SICoP shows that knowledge sharing in CoPs can lead to capacity development. SICoP members have volunteered and undertaken training, spoken at conferences for the first time, learnt about internal policies, budgets and ToRs. Entering uncharted territory together has strengthened the community and the organisation as a whole. Going forward, some members will help to deliver disability and inclusion training, opening up new roles for them in the organisation. The aim is to increase capacity development across the organisation through SICoP's knowledge sharing.

In terms of points of reflection for other organisations on a similar journey, the following has been put forward by SICoP:

Support but not control from senior management is key

SICoP's smooth start and likely future is in no small part due to the legacy of the work of senior management in the organisation. However, it is not a management tool; there is a pure intention within SICoP that fuels its sustainability. Others may need to build a case for the creation of such a community of practice and identify useful entry points. These might include: the existence of internal policies mentioning inclusion and accessibility, or the absence of such policies; the importance of conforming to external frameworks, such as the CRPD and national laws; the identification of benefits associated to the adherence to certain schemes or networks, such as the Business Disability Forum. Establishing clear procedures to involve senior management from the very beginning ensures transparency and inclusion, builds trust and confidence, and is in itself a mechanism to promote buy-in.

Finding the balance between being forward thinking and realistic is important

In its first year SICoP selected to focus on manageable objectives, alongside trainings, speakers, and tool development, which are quite easy to develop and achieve, especially in its conducive environment. It goes forward in the next year with some evidence that its approach works, with a positive foundation upon which to grow and tackle more challenging issues.

Senior management has been particularly helpful in helping SiCoP to find this balance, hence avoiding major problems.

Adopting participatory approaches helps

SiCoP relies on participation within the CoP, between the CoP and senior management; and between the CoP and the rest of the organisation. It has been key to ensuring there are open doors and clear mechanisms to ensure everyone's voice is heard. Participatory approaches also allow for adaptation to the context and ensure that the approach is one that inspires and drives willing community members.

Broad membership is challenging but rewarding. Having diverse voices in a CoP benefits everyone. Broad membership can pose challenges, such as avoiding bureaucracy, becoming a forum for discussion without clear roles, responsibilities and action plans, and fitting everyone into a space. However, gaining multiple perspectives from staff who care deeply about the way forward is worth navigating the potential pitfalls. Broad membership has further enabled SiCoP to, as Amin and Roberts (2008) describes, explore with creative energy, fuse elements not yet connected, and set a course into uncharted territory.

Conclusion

This paper has charted the progress of SiCoP within Sightsavers, in its goal to facilitate through a coherent approach a fully inclusive organisation. It has described a key turning point in the organisation's journey: from inclusion being confined to an expert niche, to inclusion becoming a shared responsibility in the organisation. Specifically, it has shared the background of Sightsavers' journey, how the community of practice works and discussed its perceived value to date. SiCoP is still at an early stage of development and the community is learning through doing and reading other examples. The community is also interested in hearing from others on similar journeys or who can advise this one. Success and challenges have been highlighted; notably empowering staff members whose job is not necessarily focused on inclusion to become advocates and change-makers within the organisation, and gaining active involvement from all parts of the organisation. A key goal going forward is to stay motivated and focused, by setting realistic, tangible and meaningful milestones. Through participation in SiCoP, collaborative relationships are being built, a shared understanding of what binds the community together has been and continues to be explored and negotiated, and communal resources fuel the joint enterprise of upholding the organisation's Empowerment and Inclusion Strategy. In its loyalty to inclusion and acknowledging that there is much to learn, SiCoP is already emerging as a dynamic learning environment. As Sightsavers actively works towards Goal 16.7 to be an effective, accountable and inclusive institution that ensures responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels, SiCoP intends to be a potent force on the journey.

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Abstract

In 2015, international NGO Sightsavers created an Empowerment and Inclusion Strategy with three pathways to mainstreaming disability inclusion within portfolio and operations: implementation of human rights policies, equality of opportunities and removal of stigma and discrimination. This inspired individuals within the organisation to form a Community of Practice (CoP) to scale up efforts to achieve diversity in the workplace.

This paper charts the progress of the CoP in achieving its goal thus far: to facilitate a fully inclusive organisation through a coherent approach. It describes the community's terms of reference, practical set-up and sub-groups, benefits identified for those involved, challenges so far and a discussion of the perceived value to date. Other experiences are raised such as what it means to be a CoP in an organisation deploying a specific inclusiveness agenda for particular groups, maintaining motivation and momentum, relationship with senior management, and establishing a budget. Through sharing Sightsavers' journey towards change, the paper also contributes to ongoing discussions of how CoP knowledge sharing leads to capacity development.

Key words: Community of practice, Sightsavers, diversity, inclusion, disability

About the authors

Margo Greenwood is a senior research associate at Sightsavers Research Centre and a senior research fellow at the Cognitive Education Development Unit at the University of Exeter. Margo designs and undertakes education and social inclusion participatory research in the global South, and is involved in community-based participatory research, training teachers, parents and young people as peer researchers, and participatory implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Before becoming a research fellow, Margo took up a PhD scholarship in Education. She was also a secondary English teacher for several years. E-mail: mgreenwood@sightsavers.org

Tracy Vaughan Gough is Global Technical Lead for Social Inclusion and Disability at Sightsavers, UK. Tracy is responsible for the strategic direction of Sightsavers thematic work on inclusion, both disability inclusion and gender mainstreaming. She has worked in the

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development and humanitarian sector for many years, working with various United Nations agencies and international NGOs. She has a P.G.C.E (Middlesex University) and a Masters Degree in Gender and Development (Institute of Development Studies, Sussex). Email: tvaughangough@sightsavers.org

Andrea Pregel is Programme Advisor for Social Inclusion and Disability at Sightsavers, UK. He is an inclusion professional with experience in disability, development, education, gender and health across Europe, Asia and Africa. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Social Research from the University of Turin (Italy), and an Erasmus Mundus MA/Mgr in Special and Inclusive Education from the University of Roehampton in London (UK), the University of Oslo (Norway) and Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic). E-mail: apregel@sightsavers.org

Kate Bennell is the organisational inclusion coordinator at Sightsavers, UK. Severely sight-impaired herself, Kate has worked at Sightsavers for 17 years and held a variety of positions in the organisation. Her current role is to coordinate SICoP and to champion accessibility, particularly for people with disabilities. E-mail: kbennell@sightsavers.org