

Knowledge management in communities of practice to improve results-driven development in Africa: Some evidence from a multi-faceted and complex community

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Introduction

In their pioneering contribution on craft-based learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of “community of practice” which has attracted much attention from both scholars and practitioners interested in the role of situated practice in the process of learning and knowledge generation (Amin and Roberts 2008). The first studies on communities of practice were aimed at analyzing the concept of “situated learning” that is learning closely related to a situation and context in which a group of individuals share their practical experience in a particular domain (Klein and Connell 2008). At the outset of the concept, thinking was thus mostly focused on the progress of an individual from the peripheral position of a novice to increasingly expert status (Guldborg and Macknesst 2009). Originally, Wenger (1991, 2002) considered “community of practice” as a social learning process consisting of two interrelated activities. The first was practice itself through the process of legitimate peripheral participation. This challenged influential cognitivist assumptions of learning as an individual process of acquisition of knowledge predominantly within formal education contexts. The second was knowledge creation by members of the community. Later, the concept has evolved and integrated three fundamental aspects: ‘mutual engagement’, and not just sharing of interests; ‘joint enterprise’, which allows the acquisition of collective responsibility and learning about each other; and ‘shared repertoire’, the set of shared practices and resources (Morgan 2011).

For these characteristics to work in practice, Wenger et al. (2002) highlighted the key conditions. Firstly, it is important to define and get common agreement on the thematic scope of the community that creates a shared context and sense of identity. Also, the community should promote interactions based on respect and mutual trust. The practice then, must be constituted by ideas, insights, tools, best practices, problem solving possibilities and stories that community members develop, share and maintain. However, the most crucial condition for the success of a community of practice is the active participation of (ideally all) its members (Amin and Roberts 2008, Guldborg and Macknesst 2009). Those conditions will create and sustain the legitimacy and usefulness of the community of practice. Furthermore, the realization that the attributes of communities of practice do not necessarily imply physical proximity opened new perspectives on the concept now viewed as a tool through which geographically dispersed teams and groups can be connected (Guldborg and Macknesst 2009).

The community of practice, as a knowledge management tool, can therefore provide a forum to exchange solutions that might increase evidence-based decision, capacity building and policy making for effective delivery of development results. Among the main reasons why communities of practice are efficient tools for knowledge generation and sharing is the fact that ‘competitive advantage’ and capacity of institutions to deliver results are embedded in the intangible, tacit knowledge of its people, and that competencies do not exist apart from the people who develop them (Dougherty 1995). Howard and Sternberg (1999) further noted that tacit knowledge is captured through stories people tell, and may not be new knowledge but information and best practices that are confined in an individual’s mind who may even be unconscious. Therefore, knowledge and skills are produced and disseminated through conversations and networking activities supported by communities of practice. It is against this background and on the premise that knowledge sharing is essential to results-based management that the African Community of Practice on Managing for Development Results (AfCoP) was created in 2007 as a response of African development stakeholders within and outside the continent to mainstream the result-based management into Africa’s development by sharing best practices and building capacities.

In the context of Africa’s development, AfCoP represents a crucial instrument as it contributes to enhancing the dialogue with decision-makers while facilitating problem-solving among members. Key to the community is the stimulation of learning, the promotion of professional development, and the generation and sharing of knowledge aimed at solving development issues faced by members and African countries. Ten years after its creation, AfCoP has produced a wealth of knowledge and supported the generation and sharing of best practices and lessons learned. Though the community existed for a decade, there is no systematic study on AfCoP showing the approach, challenges and lessons learned. Moreover, there is relatively limited literature on how result-based management can be improved through a community of practice. The review of literature also shows very little discussions on the specific patterns and dynamics of a community of practice in which members use more than one language. It is therefore necessary to document the case of AfCoP with the purpose of sharing the lessons learned in order to improve learning and inform similar communities of practice. Building on AfCoP experience, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:

- What are the major challenges facing practitioners in managing communities of practice on result-based management which covers a wide range of topics and stakeholders?
- How does language influence multilingual communities of practice?
- What are the most important knowledge management factors to consider in replicating or expanding an initiative like AfCoP?

The answers to the research questions have both theoretical and practical implications. The practical implications are related to the key aspects to consider when launching, nurturing or growing communities of practice while the theoretical implications refer to deeper insights into the behaviors of members of communities of practice and greater understanding of challenges brought by multilingual communities of practice.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides information on the history and rationale of AfCoP. The following section presents AfCoP as a community of practice, including thematic coverage, membership and knowledge management practices. Then, we highlight some key achievements of AfCoP and present the challenges and lessons learned. Finally, we share our reflections on how to build upon this experience for future community of practice initiatives.

Brief history and rationale of AfCoP-MfDR

The origin of the African Community of Practice on Managing for Development Results (AfCoP) may be traced to the Third International Roundtable on Managing for Development Results in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2007. It emerged as a response to the call by African governments and bilateral and multilateral partners to measure results throughout the development process and demonstrate that they were achieved. Therefore, the World Bank established a multi-donor funding mechanism and AfCoP Secretariat, with the plan that the African Development Bank (AfDB) would take over the management after the initial support period. The original mandate of AfCoP was to provide a platform for the exchange of experience and knowledge among practitioners who seek to develop and expand their capacity to manage for development results.

In 2012, the African Development Bank developed the “Africa for Results” (AfriK4R) project to materialize its support to AfCoP. The project is the flagship intervention of AfCoP to advance MfDR agenda in Africa by partnering on a pilot basis with 18 countriesⁱ and two Regional Economic Communities (RECs) namely the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU).

AfCoP: thematic coverage, membership and knowledge management practices

Thematic coverage

In line with its mandate, AfCoP is focused on the five MfDR pillars which are: leadership, planning and budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, accountability and partnerships, and statistics (OECD 2006). At the national level, there is no pre-determined areas in which AfCoP should operate. However, in supporting regional integration in Africa, AfCoP is focused on three thematic areas namely business environment, public financial management and trade facilitation. Furthermore, AfCoP established three thematic groups on youth, gender and natural resources to mainstream the application of MfDR principles in these specific areas.

Membership

By end of March 2017, AfCoP had 5,201 individual members, of which 24 percent were women. Since 2007, there has been a strong growth of the community (Figure 1) at an annual average of 156 percent.

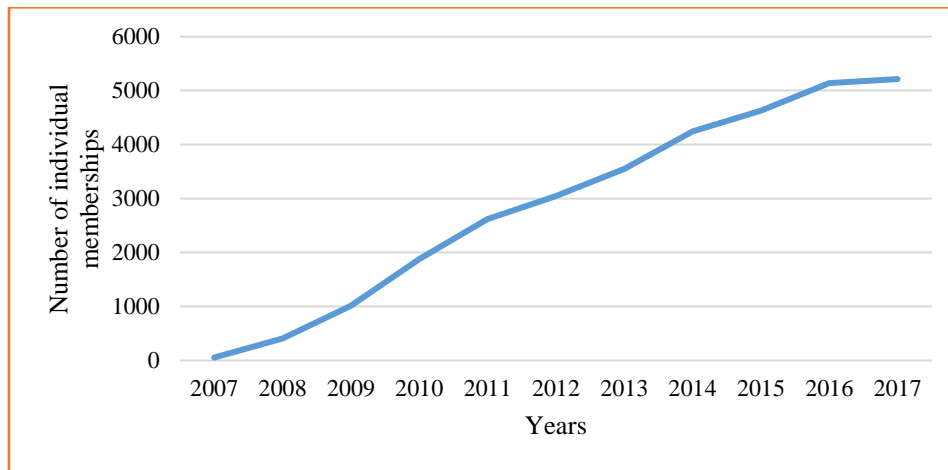


Figure 1: Growth of AfCoP membership (Source: authors)

The growth can be explained by advocacy campaigns undertaken by AfCoP Secretariat but also the increasing interest of practitioners and decision-makers in improving development results, hence the need to access networks and build capacities on results-driven development.

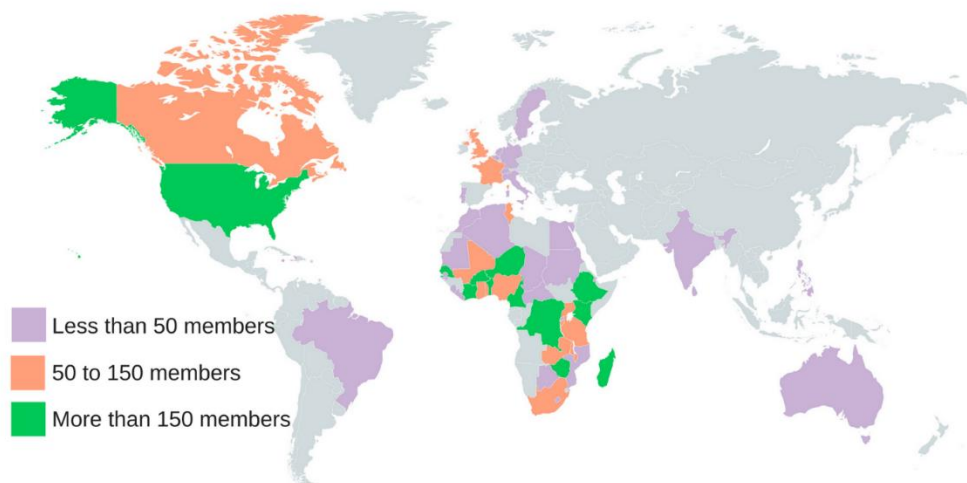


Figure 2: Geographical coverage of AfCoP membership (source: authors)

Geographically, AfCoP members are dispersed throughout the world (Figure 2) with a strong presence in Africa. Notably, 87 percent of the members are located in Africa, 6 percent in America, 5 percent in Europe and 2 percent in Asia. The coverage allows both intra-African knowledge exchange and exchange between Africa and other parts of the world.

AfCoP members are mainly from governments, civil society, private sector and academia (Figure 3) who are more interested in monitoring and evaluation, planning and budgeting and leadership

(Figure 4). This is in line with the core objective of AfCoP to promote knowledge sharing and capacity building on MfDR among key development actors. Government has more members in AfCoP for two reasons. First, because they are at the forefront of the development processes coordination and hence need capacity and knowledge sharing platforms more than any other stakeholder. Second, AfCoP activities are mainly developed towards government institutions as the central stakeholder to mainstream MfDR in development processes.

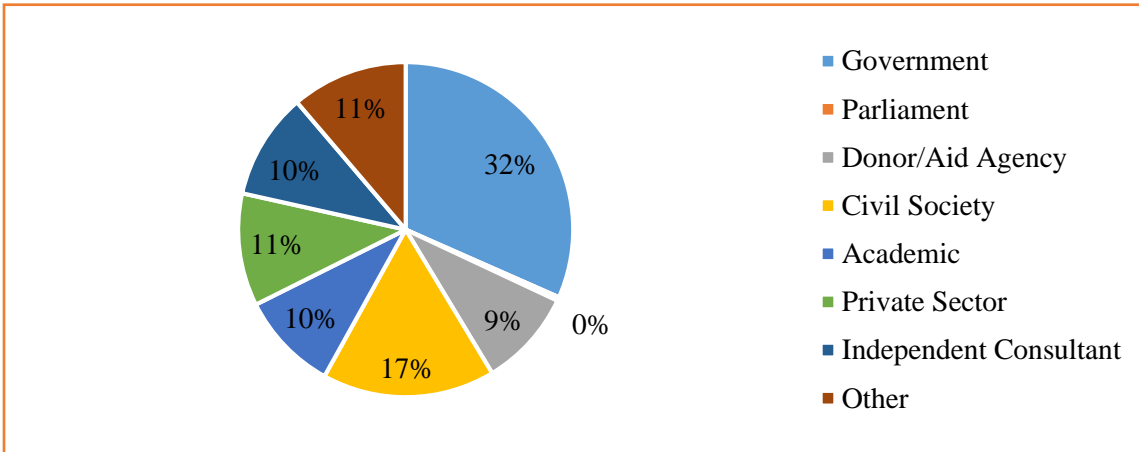


Figure 3: AfCoP membership per stakeholder group (source: authors)

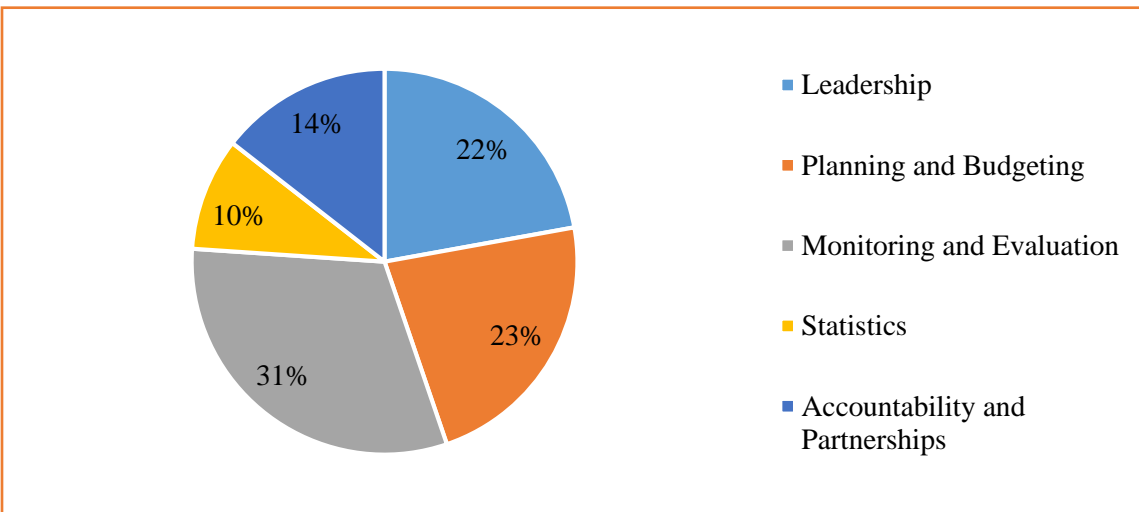


Figure 4: AfCoP membership per MfDR pillar (source: authors)

Analyzing AfCoP membership with regards to languages, we found that 40 percent and 30 percent of members are ‘Anglophone-only’ and ‘Francophone-only’ respectively. The implication is that they can only interact in one language that may limit their benefits from the

community which is bilingual. This issue is further discussed in the section on challenges. The rest (30 percent) is “bilingual” but this figure should be interpreted with caution as many of them may not be able to fully and equally interact in both languages.

Management of the community

AfCoP has a three-prong management structure. The community is led by a Core Management Team (CMT) composed of representatives of the community’s thematic and regional diversity. An Advisory Committee of representatives of AfCoP partners provides guidance on knowledge sharing and capacity building activities. The AfCoP Secretariat provides technical and administrative support, with teams from the African Development Bank in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire and the African Capacity Building Foundation in Harare, Zimbabwe. AfCoP has a dedicated facilitator for knowledge management within the community. His role is to support members’ participation in the knowledge management activities and ensure focus and relevance for the community. His responsibilities include management of the online platform, organization of physical events, coordination of online discussions (with the support of subject experts), and publication of knowledge products.

A multi-faceted knowledge management approach

AfCoP develops a set of activities that support its knowledge management approach. These activities can be grouped in two interrelated categories: knowledge generation and knowledge sharing (Figure 5).

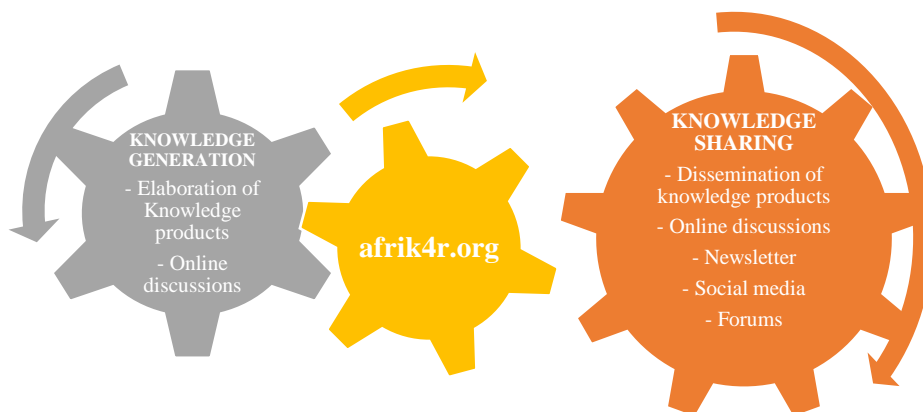


Figure 5: Knowledge generation and sharing at AfCoP (source: authors)

Both physical and virtual knowledge sharing activities are implemented. Knowledge generation within AfCoP is performed notably through elaboration of knowledge products which include case studies, guides, tools, and briefs on various topics at the nexus of MfDR pillars and development issues. Knowledge sharing encompasses online discussions, organization of knowledge forums, broadcasting from official AfCoP social media channels and dissemination of newsletters.

The knowledge management approach of AfCoP is more human-oriented than system-oriented as it promotes acquisition and sharing of tacit and explicit knowledge through interpersonal interaction. Therefore, the approach (Figure 6) emphasizes the need to develop and implement strategies that ensure the conversion of members from a peripheral position of a novice to increasingly mature expert status (Lave and Wenger 1991, Guldberg and Macknesst 2009).

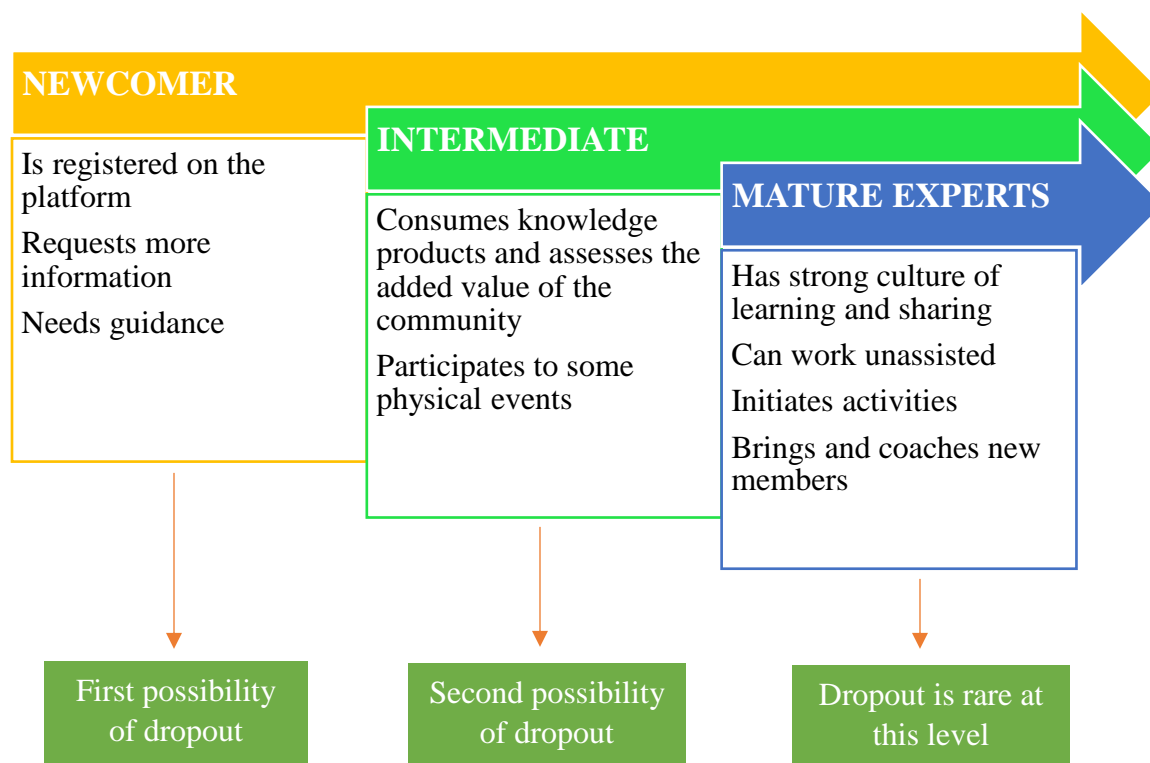


Figure 6: Legitimate peripheral participation cycle applied to AfCoP (source: authors)

Knowledge management within AfCoP: highlights of some achievements

Increased body of practical knowledge

During the period 2012-2017, AfCoP members produced more than 100 knowledge products which include knowledge briefs (based on online discussions), case studies, and training tools covering a wide range of MfDR issues targeting different stakeholders. In particular, the tools have been very popular and in demand, requested by universities to serve as course materials

and/or reference for research and lecture. Figure 7 shows that ‘briefs and case studies’ have been the fourth most visited page. This suggests that most practitioners are interested in lessons from real life experiences and the ‘how’ to do things provided by the case studies. The first three most visited pages are generic pages that provide background information on AfCoP, hence members and visitors are likely to visit them the most.

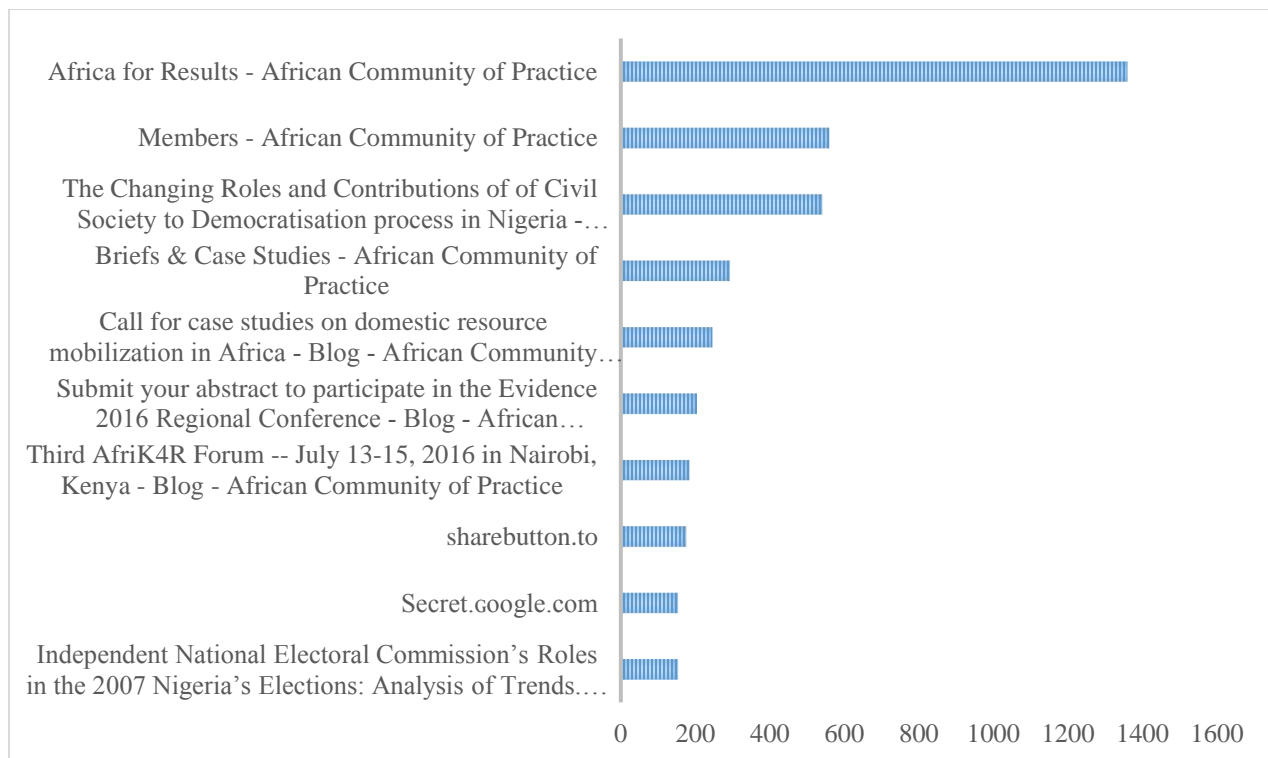


Figure 7: Top 10 most visited pages (source: Google Analytics data (April 2016 to March 2017))

Improved knowledge of MfDR

AfCoP has been critical in facilitating knowledge sharing and has improved knowledge on managing for development results. For instance, the Third Africa for Results Forum organized in 2016 on the theme “Mobilizing Domestic Resources for Africa’s Transformation” was a unique platform to strengthen the knowledge of members on issues related to domestic resource mobilization. The forum brought together practitioners and leaders to discuss and exchange on how the principles of managing for development results can be instrumental in improving domestic resource mobilization and utilization for Africa’s transformation. The positive feedback received from participants and members acknowledged the improved knowledge acquired from the various AfCoP forums and knowledge sharing platforms.

Knowledge management within AfCoP: Challenges and Lessons

Challenges

The challenges described herein are intended to illuminate pervasive difficulties being faced in the knowledge management process within AfCoP and are likely to inform others attempting to cultivate, nurture and grow communities of practice.

Engagement of members

In the core definition of communities of practice both at theoretical and practical levels, ‘participation’ is central (Lave and Wenger 1991, Ardichvili *et al.* 2003). Although the membership forms the entry point and initial acknowledgement of an individual to be part of a community of practice, its participation and engagement are critical to maintaining the core objectives of the community and sustaining its operations. Within AfCoP, this level of engagement could be measured using the participants’ log-on and posting behavior analysis (Guldberg and Macknesst 2009). We found a clear pattern which indicates that a high number of participants logged on, but few were actively engaged through posting in online discussions and/or publishing blogs. During the period April 2016 - March 2017, over 1,070 members logged onto the two platforms but only 74 contributed to online discussions and 31 blog posts were voluntarily published by 22 distinct authors.

Relatedly, it is a particular challenge for the community moderators to ensure a trade-off between the freedom of participation and focus and relevance. This challenge is mostly faced during online discussions and blog post production. For example, some participants in online discussions tend to introduce issues which are off-target and irrelevant for the topic being discussed. In such cases, moderators engage with them to refocus the discussion. To address this issue in publication of blog posts, they are reviewed by the AfCoP facilitator or other members. This is important because the legitimacy and authority of the community are dependent on these factors.

Pervasive language-enabled ‘silo communities’

The main questions here are how to ensure seamless knowledge generation and sharing among a single community with members speaking different languages (English and French in the case of AfCoP) and ensure equal participation. Data from AfCoP show that although the total number of Francophone and Anglophone members are similar (52 percent and 48 percent respectively), the level of contribution does not reflect the same balance (Figure 8).

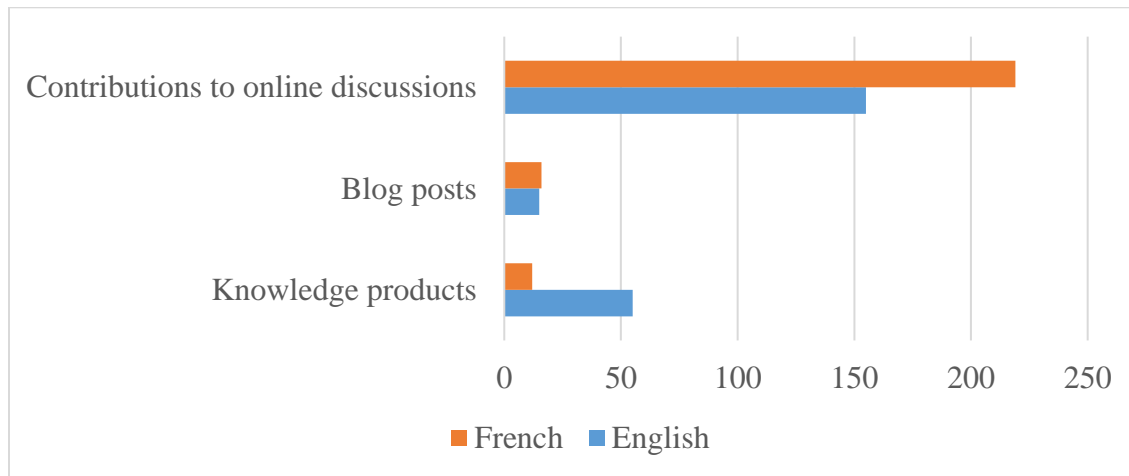


Figure 8: Knowledge sharing activities per language (January – December 2016) (source: authors)

Figure 8 indicates that francophone members have contributed more to online discussions over the period from January to December 2016. This is explained by the fact that in addition to the online discussions launched by the AfCoP team, francophone members have more voluntarily launched online discussions on different topics than anglophone members did during the same period. However, there have been more knowledge products published in English due to the fact that the competitive calls for abstracts for knowledge products yielded more results from the anglophone members. This indicates that going forward, there is a need to ensure language balance in developing knowledge products.

This study acknowledges that the level of contribution may be misleading when numbers of inputs (posts in online discussions, blog posts, knowledge products, etc.) are compared. However, the authors emphasize some issues that raise more concern.

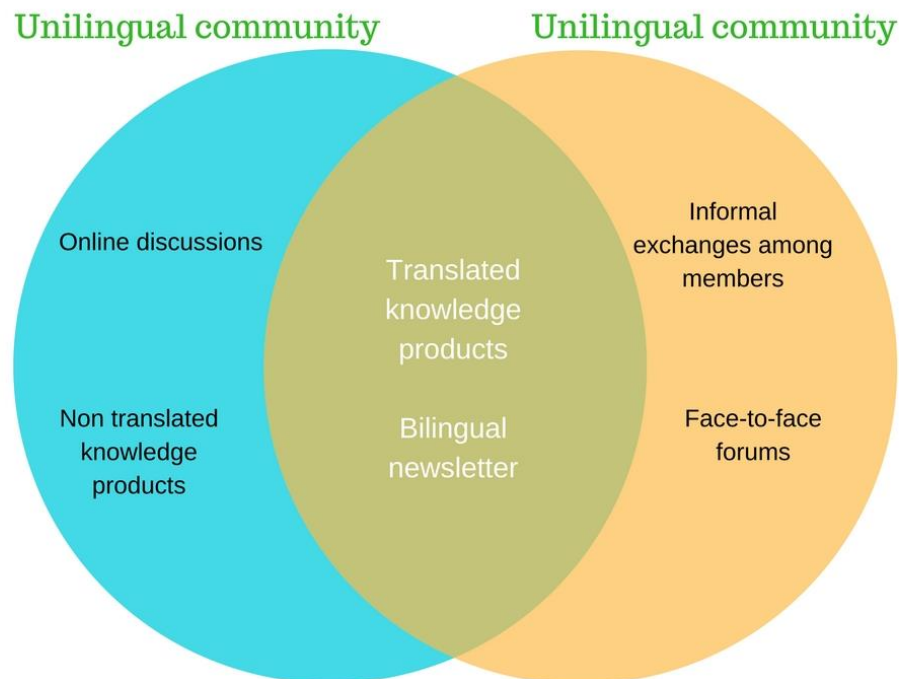


Figure 9: Language-enabled ‘silo communities’ phenomenon (source: authors)

Figure 9 shows that out of six knowledge management elements only two are accessible to both Anglophone and Francophone members; the rest is confined within the boundaries of one language. For example, non-translated knowledge products or online discussions are only accessible to members who understand the language in which they are facilitated/published. Ultimately, there is a formation of two language-enabled ‘silo communities’ within the community which limits knowledge sharing and may compromise the attainment of the core objectives of the community of practice.

Lessons learned

A dedicated facilitator is needed

The knowledge processes in AfCoP are facilitated in two ways. The upper level is at the Secretariat where staff ensures that the common agenda of the community is being implemented and there is overall convergence and quality maintenance of the community. At another level, there are recruited moderators, especially for online discussions, who are subject experts that facilitate and ensure focus and quality of discussions. We found that facilitation/moderation is an essential success factor in AfCoP’s experience. It guides newcomers through the knowledge

generation and sharing processes and ensures balanced participation with quality of contributions by setting the environment for creating relevant knowledge. The experience in facilitating the knowledge processes within AfCoP community revealed that the nature of facilitation, if inappropriate, can hinder participation. To be effective, facilitation/moderation should be used as an incentive rather than as a form of censorship.

Personal engagement with members is essential

Under AfCoP, the knowledge management team runs a simple test to determine the effect of personalized invitation emails on the rate of participation to online discussions. During a nine-month period, the team sent out five invitations to five online discussions starting with ‘Dear AfCoP member’ through the group email of AfCoP members; and sent five other invitations for another batch of five online discussions starting with ‘Dear *Name Surname*’ to the individual email address of each member. The results of the test have shown that the personalization of the invitation emails has increased the engagement rate by 70 percent. Although, other factors may have affected the increased engagement, the experience is indicating that members are sensitive to personalization. This suggests that the construction of online identity ‘recognized’ by fellow members and acknowledged by the knowledge management team may increase and sustain the participation of members especially the newcomers. This finding is consistent with Lave and Wenger (1991) and Fang and Neufeld (2009) who found that sustained participation was not associated with initial conditions (i.e., access and motivation), though these factors were a necessary condition but rather is dependent on two-way interaction occurring between (1) situated learning (“thinking”/advising others, “doing”/revising code); and (2) identity construction (identity-regulation, and identity-work).

Way forward

The following three elements are critical going forward and would inspire other practitioners who are preparing to launch or grow similar initiatives.

Refining the knowledge generation and dissemination strategy

It would be possible to develop a ‘crowdsourcing’ approach whereby the large community is directly consulted for the selection of the topics. An open (no topic proposed) or semi-open (predefined long list of topics) voting dashboard could be used for this purpose. In the same vein, there is need to make use of consultants as facilitators to work with a pool of members interested in a specific topic to develop knowledge products by essentially sourcing from their experiences and knowledge. This would improve co-creation and collaboration in the community and enable seamless conversion of tacit into explicit knowledge. Additionally, AfCoP could diversify the format of its knowledge products moving from PDF documents to a wider range of formats including print, videos, podcasts, interviews, web applications, web tutorials, e-books, etc.

Addressing the language barrier

By end of 2016, AfCoP had merged its two distinct online platforms, a key motivation being to reduce the language barrier and allow more consistency. While a single platform enables faster translation of the contents and access to the large community in replacement of the “silo

communities”, bilingual moderators should also be increasingly used to serve as bridge between Anglophone and Francophone members and their interaction. Moreover, a quota system (50 percent for each language) may be used in selecting the knowledge products to be developed. Finally, resources should be allocated to translate most materials produced by the community.

Financing and ensuring sustainability

The sustainability of AfCoP as a community may be compromised if it does not have a strong financing model. For example, the knowledge activities of the community were supported from 2012 to 2017 by the African Capacity Building Foundation and the financial contribution of the African Development Bank through a grant. Though such financial support is important for the community, it also bears the risk to diminish the voluntary contributions from members as they lean on the financial incentives in place. Going forward, AfCoP would need to encourage voluntary contributions and find innovative approaches to fund its activities. One such route is having AfCoP as a pan-African fully-fledged stand-alone institution with a legal and institutional framework. Under such status, AfCoP would evolve from an informal community of practice to an institution capable of mobilizing its own resources. Though it is premature to predict if such change would yield more positive impact, there are some advantages associated to a more structured institution (autonomy, focused interventions, sustainability, etc.). However, there is also a risk of losing the ‘community’ aspects as an institution with its different bodies may shift towards organizational functions rather than supporting the community of practice and its members.

Conclusion

Communities of practice can foster knowledge generation and sharing at individual, institutional and societal levels. Knowledge management within communities of practice can bring new challenges but also highlight key lessons that would improve the overall practice of utilizing knowledge to support development processes. In this study, we closely investigate knowledge management practice within the African Community of Practice on Managing for Development Results to share its experience and reflect on the theoretical and practical implications. Since 2007, AfCoP has been offering a unique platform for practitioners and decision makers to share information and knowledge and build their capacities on conducting results-driven development processes.

Using a case study approach, the study elicited information and insights from membership data, Google Analytics data and semi-structured interviews. The paper sheds light on some challenges and lessons learned and shares the authors’ reflections on how similar initiatives could be conducted for greater impact. This study also highlights the challenge for managers of online communities of practice to move members from peripheral participation to mature and active contribution as many hindrances prevail. Amongst the key lessons learned from the AfCoP experience and discussed in the paper, are the need for a dedicated facilitator to support the activities and personal engagement with members. The study also investigates the implications of allowing more than one language in a community of practice and finds that there can be complex and perverse effects that hinder participation and seamless knowledge sharing and

learning. This highlights the need for further empirical studies that explore enablers and strategies for ensuring that the original objectives of communities of practice are still met in multilingual context. Additionally, it would add value to conduct comparative analysis among the different communities of practice created throughout the world on managing for development results.

Acknowledgements: The authors are grateful to the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) for the financial and technical support to the “Africa for Results (AfriK4R)” project which provided the main source of data for this paper.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are personal views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of ACBF or AfDB.

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Thoto, F., Munthali, T. and Diawara, B. 2017. Knowledge management in communities of practice to improve results-driven development in Africa: Some evidence from a multi-faceted and complex community
Communities of Practice in development: a relic of the past or sign of the future?
Knowledge Management for Development Journal 13(3): 100-115
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Abstract

This study draws upon the African Community of Practice on Managing for Development Results (AfCoP-MfDR) to explore the challenges and lessons learned in managing knowledge within multilingual and thematically large communities of practice. The study used a mixed methods approach whereby information and insights were elicited from membership data, Google Analytics data and semi-structured interviews. The study found that within communities, language-enabled ‘silo communities’ could be formed impeding effective knowledge sharing and learning. Also, moving members from peripheral participation to mature and active contribution is a key challenge for managers of communities of practice. The findings highlight two main lessons: the need for dedicated facilitators and personal engagement with members. On the basis of AfCoP experience and review of similar initiatives, the paper argues that 26 years after its introduction, “community of practice” as an approach for knowledge management is still a valid strategy. Future communities of practice initiatives should devise explicit strategies to ensure smooth knowledge sharing in multilingual environment. Going forward, it would also add value to conduct comparative research on the different communities of practice created throughout the world on managing for development results.

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¹ Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Madagascar, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.