EDITORIAL

Communities of Practice in development: a relic of the past or sign of the future?

Adrian Bannister, Charles Dhewa, Nancy White with Riff Fullan, Lucie Lamoureux and Ewen Le Borgne

The topic of Communities of Practice and their use, character and potential in a development context has waxed and waned in prominence in discussions amongst development practitioners since its heyday in the mid-late 1990s. Over the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in interconnectivity and a related wave of social networking tools that have truly transformed the degree and variety of ways individuals, organisations, networks and communities interact, enabled by a continued rapid expansion of computing power and technological innovation.

More recently, the salience of collaboration in global agendas is underlined by the widespread adoption and endorsement of Agenda 2030 and its accompanying Sustainable Development Goals, many of which rely on multi-stakeholder collaboration of various kinds. Closer to home, the KM4Dev community is almost 20 years old and the KM4D Journal (which has its origins in that community) is 12. Many of the early dialogues within the community were around CoPs, evidence of which is the focus of the first KM4D Journal issue in May 2005 on learning in communities.

Reflecting on all of the above, the KM4D Journal Editors felt it was a good time to spend some energy again on CoPs. Our title for this edition of the Journal *'Communities of Practice in development: a relic of the past or sign of the future?'* reflects a felt need to ascertain whether CoPs as vehicles for knowledge sharing and learning are still relevant, whether understanding of CoPs has changed, what purposes CoPs are serving in the development community today, and how we can know. In the call for papers editors highlighted nine strategic issues around which we thought authors could most usefully engage in response. We are happy to present a variety of reflections on the nature and value of CoPs, and on implementational realities in different institutional settings. For those who may not be so familiar with thinking around CoPs, or might like a refresher on the basics, Adithi Sethi offers an introduction to CoPs in the development sector.

Many of the other articles in this issue discuss the links between the conceptual and the operational, such as Beverly Wenger-Trayner's look at an African parliamentary network and its evolution through the use of a value-creation framework for social learning, and Diana Woolis' complementary study of using a sustainable learning framework to both strengthen capacities of teachers of refugees and to do so within very short time horizons. Arwen Bailey provides an account of consciously using CoP theory to nurture the development of a gender network in an international agricultural research for development organisation. On a related note, Margot Greenwood, Tracy Vaughan Gough, Andrea Pregel and Kate Bennell tell the story of an organisational initiative to move towards being fully inclusive using a CoP as a driver in an international non-governmental organisation (INGO). To round out this set of reflections on linkages between theory and practice is the case study by Nima Fallah and

Edward Addai on the creation and support of a multistakeholder community health network facilitated by an international organisation.

In addition to the above articles which follow a more explicit linking of theory and practice, this issue includes several more empirically focused contributions, including studies on: success factors and challenges in an African CoP on Managing for Development Results by Frejus Thoto, Thomas Munthali, Anne François and Barassou Diarawa; the recognition and pursuit of appropriate incentives for engagement in CoPs in an international financial institution by Aaron Buchsbaum, Brendan McNulty, Bruce Summers, Claudia Teixeira, Emilia Galiano, Fatbardha (Barhd) Ajeti, Ivan Butina, and Zarko Palankov, and; a KM assessment of a set of thematic CoPs within a health sector-focused INGO eight years after their establishment by Luis Ortiz-Echevarría, Marlene Mouanga, Sarah Holtz and Karen Frenchu.

We round out this issue of the Journal with a look at the nature and evolution of leadership in the KM4Dev community itself over the years by Melissa Bator and Elizabeth Weatherly, and a think piece on the essential link between CoPs and knowledge sharing by Steve Glovinsky. Contributions in this issue of the KM4D Journal make a positive case for the relevance of CoPs in the development community. What strikes us is the degree of continuity of thinking about CoPs since they first made their way into development discourse in the mid-1990s. There are various insights into CoPs based on a longer experience now than then, but if the articles included in this issue can be considered representative of the role and impact of CoPs in the development sector, then despite massive global changes – particularly as they relate to information, communications and networking technologies – things have not changed as much as one might think. While the value of CoPs remain strong in appropriate applications, there is a need for greater understanding through nuanced M&E frameworks, the diverse applications for CoPs, and a deeper understanding of the impact of changing technologies on CoPs.

In a recent thread in the main KM4Dev community online discussion forum, the most striking observation relates to the 'fragmentation' of attention brought on by the spread of social networking technologies, and the potential threat of this phenomenon to the continued existence of CoPs. These and other issues are fertile ground for further research and application. We look forward to another look in 5-10 years from what will undoubtedly be a substantially different global context.

About the Guest Editors

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