Communities of practice and networks: reviewing two perspectives on social learning

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> *Social actors are continuously, either spontaneously or in a more organized way or both, building relationships with each other to create opportunities for joint learning, increasing their understanding and improving upon current practices.* (Engel 1997)
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> *Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities: communities of practice.* (Wenger 1999)

This paper examines two different approaches used to describe and analyse similar phenomena: 'networks for learning' and 'communities of practice'. These approaches are both prevalent in the development discourse but they come from different traditions and strands of thinking. Nonetheless, they both offer a rich and stimulating perspective on how individuals and organisations are working together within the development process. The purpose of this article is mixed. Firstly, we aim to summarise current thinking on of both these approaches with the aim of making them both more accessible to development practitioners. Secondly, we will explore the similarities and differences between the two, aiming to establish linkages between the two. Thirdly, based on these linkages, we hope to be able to reconcile them to some extent as a way of getting the best out of them both. We will also be looking at the similarities and the differences between these approaches. Where is the challenge for development practice related to these concepts of social learning?

The paradigm of communities of practice comes from the knowledge management literature, which has its origin in business. Networks for learning are derived from the development literature and for that reason are ostensibly better suited to the development sector. Although these differences are striking, there are a number of similarities between these paradigms.

The first part of this paper on the development context illustrates that there is an increasing number of online communities and networks in development which are seen as a source of innovation in development and are receiving heavy investments from donors and other development organizations. Despite this optimism that such communities/networks have a role to play in development, they are a fairly new phenomenon and there has been no inventory of these networks/communities, there are few conclusions about their general characteristics and little reflection on how they are growing. Next, the second part will take a closer look at communities of practice: an introduction to the concept; characteristics of successful communities of practice; the theoretical background; and the importance of communities of practice for development. The third part will then provide an introduction to networking for learning; characteristics of successful networks; the theoretical background;

and the importance of networks for development. In the fourth part, a comparison is made of the two paradigms, identifying differences and similarities.

Part I: The development context

Since the 1990s, the role of networks of development organisations has received increasing attention. Such development networks, including so-called 'communities of ideas' (Engel 1997), 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1997), 'formal knowledge networks' and 'virtual teams' (Willard 2001), 'knowledge networks' (Box 1990), 'thematic networks' (IICD website), 'virtual knowledge communities' (Cummings et al 2005), 'international networks for knowledge sharing' (Resource Centre for Development, Skat Foundation 2004) and 'thematic groups' (World Bank website), are widespread within and between development organizations. The substantial variety of different names for what are effectively similar entities is illustrative of substantial creativity. Organizations and groups of development professionals are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new technology to initiate a vast range of communities and networks. Such communities and networks have been used to upgrade the quality of the activities, outputs and impact of development organisations, to facilitate a collective learning process, and to contribute to a 'shifting up' of development activities to an international audience (Engel 1997). A substantial number of development organisations are positively exploiting the potential of these online networks and virtual communities. An example of the growth in the number of communities can be demonstrated with the example of Dgroups (http://www.dgroups.org), a platform of collaborative tools and services established by a group of development organisations. In July 2003, Dgroups supported 360 virtual communities, containing 8125 members. Now, April 2005, there are 1194 groups with 33154 members.

Part II: Communities of practice

> *And what if, in addition, we assumed that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing? What kind of understanding would such a perspective yield on how learning takes place and on what is required to support it?* (Wenger 1997)

> *It has both the eye-opening character of novelty and the forgotten familiarity of obviousness – but perhaps that is the mark of our most useful insights.* (Wenger 1997)

Wenger argues that communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better. They include families developing their own practices, routines and rituals; workers organizing their lives with their immediate colleagues and customers; students at school; bands rehearsing in garages; recovering alcoholics at weekly meetings; and scientists. These communities are not generally computer-mediated although they can be: 'Across the world wide web of computers, people congregate in virtual spaces and developing shared ways of pursuing their common interests' (Wenger 1997). They are very informal and pervasive. Membership of multiple communities is the norm: some of which one is a core member, and some of which membership is more peripheral.

To define a community of practice, Wenger argues that three characteristics are crucial:

The domain
A community of practice has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. Members value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognize their expertise.

The community
Within their domain of interest, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. However, members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis. To illustrate this point, Wenger cites the example of the Impressionist painters who used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.

The practice
A community of practice is not merely a community of interest, for example people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Key to the paradigm is the fact that members of a community of practice are *practitioners* [our emphasis]. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems, namely a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

It is the combination of these three elements (domain, community, practice) that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community. Wenger argues that communities of practice are not called that in all organizations. They are often known as learning networks, thematic groups, or tech clubs, a similar phenomenon to that outlined in development above. He is also not prescriptive about this term and using no others: ‘The kind of social theory of learning I propose is not a replacement for other theories of learning that address different aspects of the problem’ (Wenger 1997). Wenger here is pointing out that he does not see that his approach should be exclusive, something we should bear in mind.

In development, a typical community of practice comprises a group of practitioners focusing on a specific subject field, facilitating sharing of information and skills. They can be members of the same organization. However, the great strength of such communities is that, enabled by new ICTs in the form of groupware, they are able to facilitate contact between practitioners working in different organizations in different parts of the world. Boxes 1 and 2 provide two examples of communities of practice.

Characteristics of successful communities of practice
The characteristics of successful communities of practice have been identified by Wenger (1997), Carpio Tam (2003), the World Bank (www.worldbank.org), and the US Agency for International Development (www.usaid.org). Rather than listing these characteristics individually, they are summarized in Table 1. Here, knowledge sharing within communities of practice is tabulated in terms of different components of communities: information, knowledge, and social and organizational aspects.

Box 1

HIF-Net
http://www.dgroups.org/groups/hif-net

Facilitated by INASP, HIF-net is an e-discussion list with approximately 1250 members from 130 different countries. It is community of practice which provides a neutral focal point for discussion of issues relating to the practice of access and use of information by healthcare professionals. The objectives are to:

1: Facilitate contact and sharing of skills and experience among those who produce and use health information. HIF-Net seeks to generate debate and facilitate partnerships, leading to the development of new approaches, involving printed and/or electronic resources, to meet the needs of different audiences.

2: Promote greater understanding of the needs of health information users. HIF-net aims to improve the knowledge and understanding of participants about the needs of health information users in developing countries and the most cost-effective ways to meet those needs.

3: Advocating to decision makers for effective communication strategies to promote the best use of health information. HIF-net facilitates advocacy to policy makers, publishers and other interested parties with regard to health information.

Box 2

LEAP IMPACT
www.dgroups.org/groups/leap/impact

LEAP IMPACT is a community of practice for development-related information professionals. The 'practice' concerned is the evaluation of information projects, products and services. Coordinated by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development (CTA), the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) and IICD, it has been involved in developing the 'smart tools' for evaluation to be published in 2005. LEAP IMPACT currently has 154 members from a range of geographically dispersed development institutions.

Table 1: Knowledge sharing within communities of practice

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Different components of the community</th><th rowspan="2">What is being shared</th><th rowspan="2">The role of what is being shared</th><th colspan="3">The result of knowledge sharing through communities of practice</th></tr>
<tr><th>Short-term</th><th>Medium-term</th><th>Long-term</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Information component</td><td>Documentation of projects, articles and links</td><td rowspan="2">Improved access to information</td><td rowspan="5">Better informed dialogue

Better informed decision-making</td><td rowspan="7">Improved approaches

Improved programmes

Improved projects</td><td rowspan="7">Better development outcomes</td></tr>
<tr><td>Re-use of assets</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Knowledge sharing component</td><td>Facilitating quick response for questions and answers</td><td>Enhances formal training</td></tr>
<tr><td>Access to pool of expert knowledge</td><td>Facilitates progress from ‘novice’ to ‘expert’</td></tr>
<tr><td>Discussion of current issues</td><td>Mapping of knowledge</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Social component</td><td>Personal contacts</td><td rowspan="2">Increased satisfaction

Sense of belonging</td><td rowspan="2">Increased commitment

Increased engagement</td></tr>
<tr><td>Increased social interaction</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Organizational component</td><td colspan="3">Increased synergy</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Increased coordination</td></tr>
</table>

The theoretical background

> *I am trying to understand the connection between knowledge, community, learning and identity. The basic idea is that human knowing is fundamentally a social act. This simple observation has profound implications for the way we think of and attempt to support learning.* (Wenger 1997)

Social scientists have used versions of the concept of community of practice for a variety of analytical purposes, but the origin and primary use of the concept has been in learning theory. Anthropologist Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. People usually think of apprenticeship as a relationship between a student and a master, but studies of apprenticeship reveal a more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place mostly with journeymen and more advanced apprentices. The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Once the concept was articulated, Lave and Wenger started to see these communities everywhere, even when no formal apprenticeship system existed.

Wenger's approach is situated in four premises:

- We are social beings and this is a central aspect of learning;
- Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises;
- Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, namely active engagement in the world; and
- Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce.

The intellectual heritage from which these premises are derived is highly diverse. The main tradition to which this work belongs is the social theory of leaning which is located at the intersection of intellectual traditions along two main axes: the vertical axis provided by the clash between theories of social structure and theories of situated experience; and a horizontal axis between theories of social practice and theories of identity. Diagonal axes are provided by theories of collectivity; theories of subjectivity; theories of power; and theories of meaning.

The importance of communities of practice for development

Saunders (2000) argues that it is possible to conceptualise development-related evaluation as a series of 'knowledge-based practices'. In his case, knowledge-based practices form the resources of communities of practice: a group of practising evaluators. One part of this is the idea of 'apprenticeship' with novices being 'inducted' or 'socialized' into a group of practicing evaluators. Based on this example, communities of practice are very relevant to development because development is a series of knowledge-based practices.

Although we mention above that communities and networks are identified in different ways throughout the development context, it is probably useful to look at the approach of two organizations that do use the terminology of communities of practice.

The US Agency of International Development (USAID) defines communities of practice as:

> *Informal groups (organized around specific Agency functions, roles or topics such as Programme Planning and Strategic Planning, Contracting Officers, Gender) of USAID practitioners able to share the knowledge and expertise needed to more effectively perform their jobs.*

Communities of practice are seen as 'organizational techniques' that speed up the application of innovative ideas for Agency decision-making, learning, and partnering to achieve USAID objectives and goals. Communities of practice facilitate improved access to development and operational knowledge; improved mentoring; improved knowledge sharing; more rapid problem resolution; better introduction of new employees to the Agency via their support from communities of practice; broadening of personal networks to Agency-wide communities; improved employee morale and retention; and enhanced social capital (USAID 2004)

Within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), internal communities of practice exist at the regional and global level. In regional networks, staff shares region-specific information such as Bureau policies and directives, and regional and local sources of expertise and information, including those in region specific languages (Arabic, Russian, Spanish, and French). In global networks, staff shares information of relevance across regions. Global networks are established and guided by facilitators working in the respective substantive thematic areas at Headquarters. Regional networks are managed by the SURF offices. http://www.undp.org/policy/networking.htm

Part III: Networks for learning

> *The network paradigm is a seductive vision to solve all the above ills in one go: why not connect the North with the South and cross-connect all the involved actors with networks? With such linkages, activities could be coordinated, knowledge could be shared between North and South as well as within and among the countries of the South, best practices could be exchanged, and common standards and procedures developed. Many have succumbed to this alluring vision and countless networks exist in the development sector.*
> (Resource Centre for Development, Skat Foundation 2004)

Theoretical background

The concept of *networking for learning* can be rooted in the tradition of agricultural knowledge systems (Engel (1997) and soft-system analysis (Checkland and Scholes). According to Engel (1997) one of the main problems constraining the development of sustainable solutions is the one-sidedness of many social and institutional learning processes. Many theories and practices promote linear and exclusive ways of thinking and one-dimensional 'rationalisation' rather than empowering people to apply multiple rationalities, so that they can adapt themselves effectively to rapid changing circumstances. Innovation however has to be approached as a process of interplay among social actors from relevant social practices. This interplay is a diffuse social process which leads to new or modified problem definitions and practical solutions. It can be qualified as networking in-and-between relevant social practices. Over time, this process of networking may lead to the gradual development of a pattern of more or less durable relationships among a number of social actors who perceive each other as relevant. Therefore, we need to introduce the concept of

networking (Engel, 1993). Advantages of this are that the concept of networking entails explicit recognition of ourselves as social beings, and it is connected to our concern for sustainability, since this can only be achieved where people have worked out a way of interacting with each other.

Networking: a buzzword in international development

The interest in networking for learning has been growing during recent years. The term 'network' is now a buzzword in the field of international development (Perkin and Court). Creech & Willard (2001) recognise four fundamental drivers behind this interest:

- The *emergence of ICTs* in the 1980s and 1990s has made (global) networking much easier. Global information exchange and learning with people from different parts of the world has become accessible for large parts of the world.
- A *sense of urgency*: the growing complexity and inter-relatedness of major social, economic and environmental problems and the failure of some of the former approaches to solve issues like HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and poverty alleviation makes multi-stakeholder and widespread learning unavoidable and highly needed.
- A *sense of frustration*: among public and academic actors because of the lack of impact that relevant research has had on public policy recently.
- Due to the *private sector experiments* with knowledge management and the impact on the private sector, the public sector and civil society organisations have also become interested in it.

From the perspective of civil society, Engel (1993) mentions three fundamental drivers to networking, partly overlapping with the ones Creech & Willard propose:

- Firstly, civil society actors want to *upgrade* their performance through collective action, when they perceive a lack of access to relevant knowledge to be a critical factor hampering their work. Networks are strong because they fortify creativity and critical thinking through dialogue and exchange (see also: Nunez & Wilson-Grau (2003)).
- Secondly they want to *upstream* in terms of analysis and activities, to join forces and to search jointly for new ways of understanding and intervening in circumstances that are complex and defy simple analysis. Sharing strategies and deepening understanding by addressing global problems through knowledge of their local, national and regional contexts is possible (see also: Nunez & Wilson-Grau (2003)).
- Thirdly they want to *upshift* their impact, to take the focus of their activities to a higher policy level, enabling them to participate in the public and/or government debate about development and to effectively influence policymaking.

What do we mean by networking for learning?

Networking is a common phenomenon, not only in development practice. What is clear is that networking is about organisations, institutions and individual actors joining forces around a common concern. It is about building relationships with other independent actors to (often) share knowledge, goods and experiences and to learn from each other with a common goal in mind (Padron (1991), Plucknett (1990), Engel (1993)). According to Pinzás & Ranaboldo (2003) the core business of many network practices in development cooperation has proven to be joint learning and advocacy. Their evidence suggests that all the rest is instrumental to these two spheres of joint action in networks. That is why we constantly speak about networking for learning.

Characteristics of successful networking

Networking often goes through a process of institutionalisation. Of primary importance in this process is to save the essence of networking, its *vitality* (Wielinga, 2001). Each network develops structure as a complex of agreements, procedures, culture and material circumstances. It is important for a networking process not to lose its flexibility – which can happen when procedures and controls are becoming predominant and vitality, enthusiasm and satisfaction flow away (see Wielinga, 2001). To keep networking for joint learning vital and striving one can find in the literature certain elements of networking need to be taken into account. We will mention some of them here, derived from the article written by Engel and van Zee (2004):

Maintain pertinence

This relates to the adequacy and relevance of what the network does within a particular socio-political context. The conclusion of Pinzás and Ranaboldo (2003) is not to aim for a single shared meaning. Rather a lively debate on the pertinence of a network is important. According to them, the more networks understand and effectively develop themselves as spaces for innovation, experimentation and learning, and demonstrate their capability for advocacy, the more successful they are in continually renovating and revitalising themselves within an ever changing development context, and hence, ensure their pertinence.

Ensure added value

From the research of again Pinzás and Ranaboldo (2003), it becomes clear that those networks that focus, whether concentrating on a limited number of well-specified themes or limiting themselves to a well-defined sphere of social and political interaction, have generally achieved much more visible results, both internally and externally and have been able to obtain a higher degree of commitment from their membership.

Daring to share – atmosphere of openness

Although this sounds rather obvious, in practice this means that participants must have confidence in their work and 'dare to share' with others (Padron, 1991). A network must be characterised by an atmosphere of openness among participants which allow them to admit mistakes and to learn from them (LEISA, 1992). Networks cannot flourish without this trust.

Skills, access and time/money

A presupposition of networking is that participants have the capacities to contribute: skills, access and time/money (see Plucknett (1990), Creech & Willard (2001) and Nelson & Farrington (1994)). If projects have little or none in-built space for reflection and learning, of course one can not be expected to engage effectively in a learning network.

Commitment – motivated by self-interest

Participants must consider the priorities of the network as their own ones. They must be motivated by self-interest because networking is a potential added-value to their daily work. According to Padron (1991), the golden rule for success is letting a network start from its own resources. Initial self-reliance guarantees continuity, independent of whether funding in a later stadium is needed.

Shared problem or goal

Although discussion on pertinence leads to vital networks, it needs to be balanced by a common vision / shared goals among the members of a network. To generate useful

interaction – in particular when individuals are working in different institutional and geographical settings – (an) issue(s) of common interest need to be identified (Nelson & Farrington 1994).

Clarity of focus and planning
To be effective, a network has to focus on a limited number of topics and to prioritise these (Guijt et al. 2003), otherwise participants of the network tend to put their own daily institutional priorities ahead of their network obligations.

Flexible internal management and participation
The success of a network depends more than anything else on the role of the network '*animator'* (Padron, 1991). The role of such an animator is (a) to manage the flow of information across the network; (b) to keep participants engaged; (c) balance consultation with members with pushing forward the delivery on network plans; and (d) to monitor the financial health of the network (Creech and Willard 2001). Important are also participation in decision-making and a non-directive management style. After all: the participants work within a network, not for it.

Network orientation
An excessive attention to learning only from one's own experiences and debates may at certain points lead to isolation and blind network members with respect to relevant experiences elsewhere. Adequate information systems need to be developed to make sure that learning processes and advocacy activities within the network are well endowed with alternative views and options (Engel 2002).

The importance of networking for development
Recent field research by Pinzás and Ranaboldo (2003) points out that networking knowledge for development produces its most significant results if the network develops itself into a space for innovation, experimentation and learning. The sum total of learning-oriented networking initiatives in any particular field or region provides civil society with a critical 'cortex' that enables it to go beyond the intuitive and beyond individual interests. It helps channelling the knowledge and experience gained through local initiatives, into higher levels of shared understanding and improved policy advocacy. In a way, it provides the meshwork of thinkers and doers that permits civil society to learn from experience, to develop its own knowledge base and to transform it into original policy proposals, without having to adhere to 'one-size-fits-all' approaches and solutions. In that sense *learning-oriented networks represent civil society's answer to the challenges of the emerging knowledge society* (see also Engel and van Zee 2004). Donors should recognise this central role of networking initiatives in boosting the knowledge base, learning processes and the civil society actors' capacity to generate and advocate proposals, and relate their funding to the relative importance they attach to it. Capacity development, institution building, advocacy and societal change, to name just a few, are unthinkable without a considerable investment in improving networking and learning among relevant development actors. Donors should invest in learning-oriented networking amongst their partners because they want to enable civil society both globally and locally to play a strong role in shaping the ideas and knowledge that determine our future. Besides, such investments are vital to sustain their own learning; sponsoring learning-oriented networking can not be lacking in donors' global knowledge for development strategies.

Part IV: A comparison of the two paradigms

Although stemming from different traditions and strands of thinking, there are, at the same time, common elements at a fundamental level. These fundamental, common elements demonstrate the close relationship between these approaches, despite the fact that they have been developed independently in different subject areas. Both networks for learning and communities of practice are founded on conceptions of social learning. This fundamental orientation is probably one of the reasons for a large number of related similarities. Engel argues that learning is a complex activity that manifests itself in a relatively stable change in behaviour of a person or a group of persons. For Wenger, mutual engagement within communities is what leads to social learning. The similarities between the two approaches will be explored below.

Firstly both conceptions of networking for learning and communities of practice argue that that the main motivation is wanting to do something better in response to a changing environment. Development networks (Engel, 1993) are used for upgrading, upstreaming and upshifting development initiatives. As Wenger notes:

> *Even in a setting so historically and institutionally determined, communities must tune their practice constantly in their attempt to get the job done.*

Secondly, both approaches are looking squarely at both practice and practitioners. Engel argues that networking for learning considers the ways actors organize themselves to learn, how they network, cooperate and communicate for innovation, what hampers their capacity to learn and what helps them to learn new practices faster. These actors and stakeholders are practitioners. People are at the core of networking for learning: not as passive recipients but as active, knowledgeable participants who can arrive at decisions. In networking for learning, 'actor' refers to an individual person or to a group, organization or network: all interact, taking and implementing decisions on the basis of their own perceptions, interests, agendas, understandings and the opportunities they are able to see. For Wenger, practice is the 'way of talking about shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.'

Thirdly, both approaches refer to the importance of boundaries, peripheries, linkages and interfaces, although the terminology employed is slightly different. For Engel, linkages comprise connections between actors that allow the exchange of resources such as information, money, labour and other material or immaterial assets, such as power, status, or 'goodwill' while interfaces comprise a shared boundary between actors where interactions may occur. Some of the interfaces are strategic. For Wenger, as communities of practice differentiate themselves, they comprise a complex social landscape of shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections and encounters.

Fourthly, both approaches are focusing on participation as an important characteristic of communities and networks. For Engel, participation comprises the involvement of actors in the process of making decisions that will affect them, including what is to be done and how. For Wenger, participation (or mutual engagement) refers to the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises. In communities of practice, participation forms a complex duality with reification – 'the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'', such as tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts – which

are both needed for distinguishing meaning. Strongly related to participation is the notion of volition, described by Engel. Volition emphasises both sense-making (creating comprehension and purpose) and commitment to stick to decisions that have been made. It also involves fluidity: an informed and thoughtful volition which is never in error and which is always subject to challenge and re-formulation. In addition, volition shows purpose and determination, even if no objects and results are specified in advance. Volition cannot take place in a social vacuum: it relies on mutual engagement to make it possible.

Differences

Despite these similarities, there is a substantial difference in emphasis. Influenced by Senge's learning organisation, Wenger looks at communities of practice within an organization, emphasizing the development of practices and social learning. For Engel, the main focus is on innovation. It would probably be fair to say that Wenger is more interested in the process of how new practices are developed while Engel and colleagues are more interested in problem identification and the output of this process, namely innovation. However, this does not mean that these two approaches are incompatible but rather, they are taking a slightly different perspective on the same phenomenon.

As has been mentioned in section I on the development context, the different terminologies of networks and communities often appear to be used interchangeably. However, the Resource Centre for Development of the Skat Foundation (2004) finds a simple distinction between the two:

> *…the term "network" is used for institutionalised partnerships between institutions or organizations and may even take the form of a legal entity. The network partners are still autonomous and contribute their resources voluntarily. They share a common vision, objectives and rules. The network partners have a set of common activities and regular events are organized. According to this definition, networks are more institutionalised and organised than unregulated exchange mechanisms or communities of practice.*

Thus, networks are more institutionalized while communities of practice are 'unregulated exchange mechanisms'. Wenger emphasizes that communities of practice are 'informal', they involve in organic ways that tend to escape formal descriptions and control. In Wenger's words,

> *The landscape of practice is therefore not congruent with reified structures of institutional affiliations, divisions and boundaries. It is not independent of these institutional structures, but neither is it reducible to them.*

We would, however, argue that, rather than representing two separate entities, communities of practice and networks are part of a continuum, ranging from informality - spontaneous groups of professionals forming a community of practice - to formality, more institutionalised in the form of a network, including a 'management unit' whose role it is to facilitate the networking process. Contrary to almost all communities of practice, most networking is characterised by more objectives than learning together alone. Some development networks for example focus, besides the aim of learning together, on the provision of services (providing documentation and training to third people) or have a clear advocacy objective, with activities facilitated by the network with the aim of influencing the public and political opinion.

Despite the difference in level of institutionalisation, we have seen that both networks (and in particular those we are talking about, the ones with a clear focus on learning) and communities of practices share the same principles. In short: a shared domain of interest, forming a community on the basis of common interests, while all participants are practitioners. Taking the perspective of a continuum recognises the common ground of the two concepts and makes it easier to reconcile these two approaches, which come from very different disciplines. It challenges both the proponents of both approaches to try to take the best out of each other.

Part V: Conclusions

The origin of this paper was an irritation that the two approaches, communities of practice and networking, were similar but that they were not learning from each other. We were also motivated by a slight concern that the two approaches were responsible for a certain sort of chaos and that they needed to be regimented and reconciled in some way. A review of the literature, however, led us to the conclusion that, although coming from different traditions and strands of thinking, both approaches are demonstrative of a tremendous creativity and that they are not incompatible. We have come to the conclusion that there are fundamental similarities in the two approaches which stem from their respective focus on social learning. Rather than representing two separate entities, we argue that they form a continuum of communities and networks of increasing formality, ranging from informal communities of practice to highly formalized networks with a huge variation in between. Indeed, these approaches are compatible, offering slightly different perspectives on similar and related phenomena. In recent years, the development arena has seen a huge blossoming of these communities and networks as development practitioners and different organizations rapidly take advantage of the opportunities for innovation provided by these communities of practice and networks for learning.

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Abstract
This paper examines the similarities between the concepts of 'community of practice' (Wenger 1997) and 'networking for learning' (Engel and Salomon 1997, and others). These concepts come from divergent traditions: the former has its roots in knowledge management and the latter comes from agricultural knowledge systems and soft-systems analysis. Although stemming from different strands of thinking, there are some common concepts and common elements. For both approaches, the characteristics, theoretical background and importance for development are explored. Next, similarities based on conceptions of social learning are explored. Finally, it is argued that communities of practice and networks for learning are part of the same continuum with varying degrees of formality, ranging from informal communities of practice to highly formal networks for learning.

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