

# Recommendations for CARE Communities of Practice:

## *A Review of the Sexual & Reproductive Health Supported Communities*

Knowledge sharing (KS) at CARE aims to create an organizational culture that prizes learning and sharing and that learns openly with others who fight poverty. Improved KS that focuses on horizontal – country to country and cross-sectoral – learning will improve the effectiveness of programming by enhancing our ability to quickly share successful field practices. As one method of supporting KS, CARE’s leadership is interested in creating global **communities of practice** (CoP) around major cross-cutting themes and facilitating linkages between communities to learn from each other.

**Community of Practice<sup>2</sup>**  
A group whose members regularly engage in sharing and learning, based on their common interests

Since 1999 the Sexual & Reproductive Health (SRH) team has supported, through leadership and funding, six communities of practice (CoPs), as a mechanism to improve knowledge sharing and cross learning. Each community was theme-based: Female Genital Cutting (FGC) Abandonment in East Africa; Health Sector Reform in Latin America; a global Innovations Project Learning Group; Maternal and Newborn Health in Latin America; Gender and Sexuality in Asia; and Family Planning in Africa. In addition, each CoP was formed under different premises, with different facilitators

and drew on varying modes of communication. Thus they provide an array of experiences to learn from.

### What can communities of practice do?<sup>2</sup>

- drive strategy
- solve problems
- develop professional skills
- reduce “reinvention”
- promote innovation
- disseminate best practices
- share knowledge across boundaries
- foster mentor-mentee relationships

### Objectives

1. Summarize the Sexual & Reproductive Health (SRH) team’s efforts to promote knowledge sharing (KS) through communities of practice
2. Identify key promoters and constraints for CoP effectiveness
3. Solicit recommendations from CoP participants on how CoPs could be more effective within CARE

### Methodology<sup>1</sup>

1. Reviewing community documentation such as terms of reference and meeting reports
2. Key informant interviews with 6 community facilitators
3. Key informant interviews 10 with community members
4. Web-based survey of community members (31 responses)

When asked what **motivates** members to participate they said:

- Intellectual stimulation - sharing of learning and critical analysis
- Passion for gender and sexuality
- The freedom and creativity to learn and experiment
- To see an exchange between projects experimenting with underlying causes of poor SRH
- To learn about others’ experiences and explore common challenges with peers and experts
- To give me the opportunity to maximize CARE’s global experience to carry out my work in the maternal-neonatal health programs
- To learn from others to improve my work

<sup>1</sup>Methodological References from The World Bank

1. TG Leaders Interview/Survey - <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/WBIKO/TGtoolkit/links/TG%20Leaders%20Interview%20Questionnaire.pdf>
2. 2002 Thematic Group Leader Survey: Report of Findings - [http://info.worldbank.org/etools/WBIKO/TGtoolkit/links/2002\\_TGLeaderSurvey.pdf](http://info.worldbank.org/etools/WBIKO/TGtoolkit/links/2002_TGLeaderSurvey.pdf)
3. Thematic Group Leader Survey - <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/WBIKO/TGtoolkit/links/TG%20Leader%20Survey%20Findings%207-12-02%20-%20OED%20Report.pdf>
4. Thematic Group Leader Survey: December 1998 - [http://info.worldbank.org/etools/WBIKO/TGtoolkit/links/TG\\_Leader\\_Survey\\_1998.pdf](http://info.worldbank.org/etools/WBIKO/TGtoolkit/links/TG_Leader_Survey_1998.pdf)

## Key Findings

**Purpose** – the need for more cross sector and cross country learning is well understood as is the potential value of communities of practice as a tool for doing so. While members of the SRH-supported communities had a clear understanding of the objectives of their communities, they were less clear on how to judge their effectiveness.

Members reported that having a clearly defined workplan or outputs did not appear to be a requirement for participation. It is recommended though that members develop a shared learning agenda, including learning objectives, so as to provide greater clarity of purpose.

### How do they do it?<sup>2</sup>

By allowing people to share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster approaches to problems

**Staying Connected** – the opportunity to meet and stay connected with new colleagues was a primary motivator for joining and staying in communities. Providing opportunities for community members to get to know each other at the outset is key to both starting and sustaining community participation. Face-to-face meetings (as provided by a scheduled regional event, for example) were reported as the best way to form the relationships required to form a community.

**Modes of Connecting** – the six different communities drew on a variety of communication methods – face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, email, listservs, cross-visits and web-based learning spaces (e.g. CARE's Portal and SharePoint). Face-to-face meetings were reported as the preferred mode of communication followed by email. Teleconferences and collaborative spaces on the web are seen as promising tools as technology improves.

**Continuity and Cohesion** – communities with large enough membership to bring a good diversity of experience, yet small enough to feel like a community were most appreciated – approximately 15 to 20 people. Continuity

also helped with cohesiveness of the community. Opening the group to new members proved difficult. This could prove problematic over time, as new members can bring in new ideas and energy into a community. Mechanisms need to be developed to initiate new members into an established community.

### Who can participate?<sup>2</sup>

- People with a common passion
- Employees within the same organization or across organizations
- Hundreds of people or just a few people

**Champions** – having more than one champion to stimulate and encourage conversation was seen as essential to the momentum, and shared facilitation was reported as a way of ensuring the community remains responsive to the group's needs and as a way of building and maintaining trust.

**Recognition & Reward** – by and large community members reported that they had support from their supervisors for participating in their community, but freeing up time for meaningful participation was a challenge. While the desire to share and learn with their colleagues is a strong incentive to participate in CoPs, there needs to be greater recognition and reward from for doing so.

### What are the critical elements for success?<sup>2</sup>

- ✓ A mutual interest or passion among members
- ✓ A champion or committed moderator
- ✓ A common cultural context
- ✓ A shared physical or virtual space
- ✓ Voluntary membership
- ✓ Self-organization
- ✓ Trust among members
- ✓ Support from senior management
- ✓ Multiple, shifting and overlapping participation
- ✓ Technology that allows for easy communication

<sup>2</sup> Best Practices Text Boxes Compiled From:

1. *Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier* by Etienne Wenger and William Snyder
2. *Building Communities of Practice* by Stephen Denning
3. *Getting strategic value from constellations of communities* by Arian Ward
4. *Communities of practice and organizational performance* by E. L Lesser and J. Stork