Peer-to-Peer Learning and Communities of Practice

Lessons Learned from Implementation

Background

The GIZ project *Partnering for Readiness* (PfR) is dedicated to supporting partner countries in accessing climate finance resources. A key pillar of the project's activities is the promotion of global exchange and network building for the sake of experience sharing and learning from and with peers. According to the OECD's Effective Institutions Platform (EIP), no one knows the challenges facing development and policy practitioners better than the practitioners themselves.

As such, peer learning and Communities of Practice (CoPs) are embraced by financiers, especially the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and Adaptation Fund (AF), as key tools to ease access to climate finance by improving knowledge sharing and learning. Between the Community of Practice of Direct Access Entities (CPDAE), the Peer-to-Peer Learning Alliance on Climate Finance Integrity (P2P LA CFI) and other learning formats such as the GCF Readiness Learning Series, PfR has accumulated a wealth of experience coordinating peer learning formats.

This document summarises the lessons PfR has learned on how Communities of Practice and other peer learning formats should be set up and managed to offer space for effective and sustainable peer exchange.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned are divided into three sections corresponding to the main phases of setting up, implementing, and exiting a CoP.

Planning

In **choosing members** for the CoP, facilitators may want to consider the following:

- Large and small networks each have their own advantages and challenges, and the **optimal size of a CoP** depends on its thematic focus, members' level of engagement, and other factors:
  - Keeping networks small, disaggregating larger networks into smaller groups and having a clear thematic focus can help keep member engagement high. Formation of regional and/or technical working groups will help defining the focus of the Community and fostering member engagement.
  - On the other hand, a diverse set of members or an interregional approach can provide for a more heterogeneous set of experiences and interesting exchange.

- Depending on the objectives and the envisaged timeline of the CoP, it is worth considering whether members should **stay the same** throughout the implementation period, or whether the CoP allows for **new members** to join along the way.
- It makes sense for **two people** from each institution to be part of the CoP, ideally one practitioner-level and one decision-making level member (main and alternate focal point) – this has several benefits for both the other CoP members and the institutions:
    - It increases the likelihood that at least one member per organization can be present in all meetings.
    - It ensures that experiences and learnings from different institutional levels are shared.
    - It allows for decisions being carried and authorized by management representatives and implemented on the operational level within institutions.
- Other aspects that might be considered when choosing members are:
    - **Gender balance:** Facilitators should aim for a 50:50 balance between male and female participants.
    - **Regional/sectoral representation:** Depending on the objectives of the CoP, facilitators may decide whether a more homogeneous group in terms of regions and sectors is preferable, or if members' profiles should be more diverse. Especially for regional diversity, it is important to take time zone differences into account to avoid inconvenient times for online meetings.
    - **Language:** Fluency in a language is a prerequisite for open exchange and understanding. Facilitators should therefore ensure that members are proficient in the language of the CoP; for bigger CoPs, it may make sense to divide it into language groups to allow members to exchange in the language they are most comfortable with.

For bigger alliances/communities, a certain degree of **institutionalization** is sensible (governance framework, committee/board/secretariat or similar decision-making body, clear designation of roles & responsibilities, division into (technical) sub-groups e.g. based on language or region) to ensure long-term sustainability of the community and increased participation of their members.

Building a successful peer learning community is not achieved overnight but requires sufficient time for trust-building. **Longer time horizons** should therefore be planned with.

Implementation

- The **first meeting** of CoP members should take place **in person** and also include informal elements (such as excursions, joint dinners) to help establish personal connections.
- **Member engagement** is a basic requirement for peer learning. Sustained participation in online meetings is particularly challenging. A few approaches have proven useful to increase and maintain member engagement.
- Professional and engaging **facilitation** is a key factor for making participants feel comfortable enough to share experiences and create a space inducive to learning. Especially for virtual

meetings, professional facilitation techniques can increase the level of active participation and engagement.

- Limited (time) resources constitute a challenge for effective engagement of members; **MoUs or cooperation agreements** with members' line managers can be a potential solution, but this approach comes with increased bureaucratic efforts the more members are part of the CoP. Generally, it can be very helpful to involve members' line managers to a certain degree to ensure they are aware of the value of their employees' engagement and allow them to allocate work time to CoP activities.
  - Regular **face-to-face meetings**, at least once a year, are vital for trust-building and keeping members engaged. Virtual meetings can complement, though not replace, in-person meetings. Implementation back-to-back with other relevant conferences/events can lower transaction and travel costs and increase synergies.
  - Members who participate in a certain share of meetings (e.g. at least 75%) can be granted **certificates** to recognize their time and commitment.
  - The more members themselves are **responsible** for the content of their meetings, the more ownership and interest can be expected from them (see also section on "Exit Strategy" below).
  - An **online communication** platform helps foster (formal and informal) member exchange. For example, a joint WhatsApp group or a multilingual webpage have proven practical ways to enable exchange among members and update each other on news.
- In general, the more participants identify with their peer group, and the more relevant they find the exchange for their work, the more committed they can be expected to be. A high level of **trust and identification** with the group can be best achieved through in-person meetings, informal exchanges, and consistent and open communication, as well as involving the peers as much as possible in developing meetings agendas and defining strategic objectives.
- **Collaboration with other regional/global networks** working on similar topics can create further synergies and increase the attractiveness of engaging with CoP activities.
- Likewise, the presence and engagement of **strategic partners** (e.g. the GCF or other climate funds, NGOs, private sector entities, …) can act as a pull factor by providing direct access to information and contact persons within these partner institutions.
- In certain constellations, especially with bigger groups, it can be helpful to have a **regional coordinator** to support implementation on the ground (this can be a member of the secretariat, an external consultant, or a member organization representative).

Exit strategy

- Developing an exit strategy and ensuring the CoP's **independence and self-sufficiency** is vital. This is a longer-term process and should be factored in from the beginning of the CoP.
- Oftentimes, an organization such as GIZ will take up a management/secretariat function for the CoP, which can be helpful with a view to members' limited time resources. However, if a CoP is to exist for a longer period of time, it is recommended to **transfer as much responsibility as possible** to the members. This can be a gradual process including a "hand-holding" period, with the secretariat's involvement becoming less and less over time.

- A helpful strategy has been to **establish teams or groups** that are each responsible for a specific task or topic within the CoP, e.g. for establishing a long-term strategy, managing partner relations, or organizing (virtual) meetings and developing agendas. This way, the content of the meetings is also more likely to meet participants' needs and expectations.
- Any exit strategy needs to consider the **funding** of CoP activities which is often borne by the organisation acting as secretariat. This is arguably the trickiest part of making a CoP self-sufficient as oftentimes, member organisations do not have the resources to cover travel costs to joint meetings, for example. There are different options to deal with this:
  - As **virtual meetings** are free of charge, they can take place more frequently among members.
  - In-person meetings can take place on the **sidelines** of relevant conferences or events that members participate in anyway, in order to save on travel costs.
  - Activities under the CoP can be **budgeted** for in member organizations' financial planning, for example as part of staff capacity building measures, networking activities, or knowledge building.
  - Budget can also be acquired from **external sources**, e.g. some CoPs may be eligible for grant funding through certain programs.

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