

Communities of practice for development in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract: Development-oriented communities of practice (CoPs) are relatively new to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. A number of international agencies have tried to promote the concept of CoPs as a means to enhance the cross-fertilization of experiences, and promote the exchange of development knowledge. However, most of this work has been focused on the internal business of these agencies. A joint World Bank Institute-UNDP project implemented in 2003-2004 sought to better understand the scope of CoP activities in the MENA region, the environment which shapes their operations, and their potential as development actors. To do this, they conducted a survey of all of the entities they could find which seemed to fit the definition of a CoP, while also providing seed money and technical assistance for the establishment of three pilot regional CoPs. The survey revealed a relatively barren landscape in which CoPs have scarcely begun to emerge in the region as a result of barriers such as access to the Internet, limited translation into Arabic, a hesitation to share substantive lessons via the Internet and a limited understanding of the CoP concept itself. Although provided with similar assistance and funds, the three CoPs had very different experiences and provide important lessons to those working in the field. Different factors were found to affect the success of the CoPs. Ownership, capacity building, language, IT skills, focus, product, vision and leadership were all found to have profound influence on budding CoPs. Surprisingly, although funds are important, they are not a determining factor in the success or failure of a CoP. The project also found nascent interest in the ideas of knowledge management, but much awareness raising and promotion is still necessary.

[Seyed Javad Fozounkhah Some Sarani Mohammad asadi. **Communities of practice for development in the Middle East and North Africa.** *J Am Sci* 2013;9(6):88-94]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>.
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Keywords: CoP- UNDP- MENA- MDF- Drylands- Traboulsi

A joint initiative was launched in early 2002 to explore the potential of communities of practice (CoPs) as a tool for capacity building for development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Under the aegis of the Mediterranean Development Forum (MDF), the initiative took the form of a partnership between the World Bank Institute (WBI), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and prominent regional think tanks dedicated to the empowerment of civil society to engage in public policymaking.

CoPs are informal networks of professionals or practitioners who are dedicated to sharing experience and knowledge. In the development field, CoPs often contribute to a more informed dialogue with decision-makers. They also facilitate problem solving among individual members, stimulate learning, promote professional development, address individual questions and generate the type of knowledge that members need in their daily work.

The impetus for this initiative came from a concern among the key stakeholders of the MDF that the MDF was not achieving a lasting impact from its main programme activity, a large-scale regional development conference held once every two years. As year-round, interactive knowledge sharing groups,

it was felt that CoPs could complement the large conferences by both generating ideas for the conferences, and by continuing the networking and dialogue that takes place during the events.

The WBI/UNDP collaboration focused on two main activities. The first was a desk study on 'Regional communities of practice' completed in June 2002 (Traboulsi 2002). The second activity was technical and financial support to three regional development related CoPs that were identified through an international competition.

Together with the desk study, the experience of the three CoPs has provided WBI and UNDP with lessons on the challenges and opportunities of supporting regional networking activities. This paper highlights those lessons through a review of the progress of the three CoPs, as well as the key findings of the desk study, including an update in 2004 of the 2002 survey.

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The experience of MDF-supported CoPs

In an effort to promote regional networking and the exchange of information, MDF agreed to support the work of three regional communities/networks. As already mentioned, one objective of the project was to pilot alternative ways to sustain substantive year-round deliberations. The three communities were identified through a competition and an international call for proposals. Of 25 proposals received, seven were short-listed. The three winners were selected by an MDF Executive Committee using objective criteria that included: clarity of objectives, focus, leadership, policy impact, use of information technology (IT) tools, regional diversity and realistic budget. Each of the three winners received a small grant amounting to \$20,000 USD and technical assistance from WBI and UNDP.

MDF communities of practice profiles

The Community of Practice on Access to Information is a network of researchers, activists and experts focusing on the sharing of information and know-how on campaigning and advocacy for Access to Information Legislation. Hosted by the Lebanese NGO, Lebanese Transparency Association, the network includes members in Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Mauritania and Jordan. The network documented, in the form of country reports, the best practices and lessons learned on access to information, and is developing 'model' legislation.

The Sustainable Livelihoods in Drylands Community of Practice brings together professionals from across the MENA region to exchange know-how, build capacities and influence policy toward sustainable livelihoods in drylands. Hosted by the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit of the American University of Beirut, the CoP includes members from Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, Tunisia, Syria and the Palestinian Territories. It aims at providing an open space for dialogue and knowledge exchange on sustainable livelihoods and human development in drylands.

The Regional Network for Teachers is a network of high school teachers acting as 'lead trainers' to help integrate the use of IT in the classroom. Hosted by the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Centre (RITSEC) in Cairo, the network includes members from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The trainers are expected to support each other through the network and train other teachers in their respective countries.

CoP approaches: what worked and what didn't

Each of the 3 CoPs adopted a different approach based on their unique context. These approaches offer insights into the types of activities CoPs can implement in a start-up phase.

Demand versus supply

Evidence has shown that CoPs are most active and dynamic when there is an expressed need for their existence by the members themselves. As voluntary groupings, their value is only as great as their worth to their members. Two of the pilot CoPs had a clearly identified demand from their members, who had requested a formalization of interactions. The members of these CoPs were familiar with each other from past regional events, or through their professional reputations. The grant was therefore used by these two CoPs to solidify an existing network with a pre-existing identity. The third CoP did not tap into an existing network, but rather sought to create a new network. This more supply-driven approach had mixed results.

Community leaders

Two of the CoPs applied a considerable portion of their funding to cover the costs of the community leaders and community coordinators. The third CoP did not apply the seed funding to staff, but rather covered these costs through the support of their organizational host. The CoPs that specifically allocated funds to community leadership witnessed more dynamic activity over the course of the two years, whereas the activities of the third CoP have all but stopped. Dedicated facilitation, as well as leadership and direction, of the CoP are critical factors to its success. According to the leader of the Sustainable Livelihoods CoP:

Leadership is not just about having a dedicated person. Its about having someone in place who has the substantive capacity, animation skills, energy and time to devote to the CoP. In the absence of such leadership, members of the community will lose interest and their focus will be dissipated.

(Interview with Dr Rami Zurayk, 30 March 2005)

Workshops

The one CoP that did not place emphasis on community leadership instead invested heavily in a face-to-face workshop of its community members. This workshop was intended to build social capital among community members, enabling them to continue networking after the event. Unfortunately, this investment did not succeed. This is mainly due to a lack of follow-up which left the members without a facilitator to keep them connected. The other two CoPs invested more modestly in face-to-face meetings, attempting to optimize their funding by arranging side meetings during larger events. Funding was thus maximized, and they were able to build on the content being discussed at the larger events as a means of generating content for the CoP. This appeared to be quite a successful strategy.

The content base

The Access to Information CoP focused heavily on generating country reports in its areas of expertise to attract the interest of members and establish a core of knowledge to build on:

Commissioning the country reports through the network [...] proved to be the right approach to use. The members of the network engaged in discussions and followed up each other's work on Access to Information every time they had the opportunity to meet.

(Access to Information 2004)

Another CoP adopted this approach after some time had passed, recognizing the importance of substantive new content to the CoP. For this CoP, however, content was not country-based, but rather focused on sub-themes of the CoP. The third CoP did not invest in any content but instead based its work on content generated by a partner organization. This

approach allowed the CoP to start on a clear content-related footing, but it has meant that the CoP has not engaged in knowledge generation of its own.

Policy impact

Two CoPs were successful in achieving some policy impact. Through their network, the Access to Information CoP agreed to work jointly on drafting a model law on Access to Information which can be used by various countries and organizations. This concrete output with clear policy impact has been a valuable tool for the members and their national partners, and has shown a real value-added for this kind of regional collaboration. The Sustainable Livelihoods CoP has also focused on policy change as it relates to the certification of organic products from dryland areas and developing marketing structures. Focusing on high value initiatives seems to pay off in terms of real change on the ground.

Websites

All of the CoPs developed their own websites as a knowledge repository. Unfortunately, all are static websites with minimal new content added, one of which has been completely stagnant since its creation. While website interactivity represents a higher level of development in the life of a CoP, these websites could be moving in this direction. One of the reasons for this hesitancy is the difficulty that two of the CoPs encountered with e-mail discussions. If the CoPs are unable to sustain interactivity via e-mail, it is unlikely that web interactivity would occur. It seems that, at the initial stages, websites are used as information tools, providing details about the work of the community. These sites are good repositories for any knowledge products developed by the community, such as reports, policy notes, best practice papers and newsletters.

E-mail

Two CoPs have attempted virtual interaction using e-discussions. One CoP took a very informal approach, and saw quite limited response. The other was less formal but still well organized, yet the response was disappointing (though greater than the other CoP). Both CoPs have decided not to attempt another e-discussion at this time. However, one CoP decided to send one-way e-mail alerts to all members with updates on new web content and CoP activities. This may represent a way of building towards a more interactive exchange in the future. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the reasons behind the failure of these e-discussions. Was language a barrier to communication, given that two CoPs mostly used English in their e-mail exchanges? Was access to the Internet and connectivity difficulties an obstacle? Do people prefer oral communication to written communication as reflected in the progress reports of one of the CoPs? Were the topics of discussion chosen

not specific enough, too specific, or just not interesting? Was there a critical mass of members on the e-mail network? Is a level of trust needed between the members prior to engaging in e-discussion? All these questions are worth further exploration.

Partnerships

Each of the CoPs worked to establish linkages with other like-minded groups. One CoP was successful in leveraging additional funding resources. Another focused heavily on targeting new and innovative approaches by other agencies in order to build the knowledge base of the CoP (i.e. scientific innovation). In one case, the CoP developed a special project that its members will work on in cooperation with other specialized agencies. Diversifying funding sources has been another important lesson identified by the Sustainable Livelihoods CoP which has managed to build partnerships with donors and with research institutions. By ensuring that the sources of funds are diversified, they have managed to guarantee better chances of sustainability and continuity.

An assessment of impact

After two years of observation, two of the three CoPs have fulfilled the hopes of the project. While providing a basis for community formation, the Network of Teachers did not continue facilitating interaction among community members. The Network became a time-bound initiative that has provided teachers with specific set of knowledge, and then moved on. The hope was that these teachers would share their experiences and spread the word to other teachers in the region. If interaction between the initial 40 teachers still continues, it is not apparent.

The other two CoPs witnessed significant, if slow, progress. The Sustainable Livelihoods in Drylands Community increased its membership and provided an ongoing flow of new knowledge in this relatively undeveloped field. It has established itself as a credible resource on these issues (i.e. via its Best Practice notes) and attracted new support, notably from UNDP's Drylands Development Centre, to ensure its sustainability in the medium term. By establishing links to centres of innovation in other countries (France, Finland and Canada), this CoP is also in an excellent position to spread the use of new approaches (Jamali and Zurayk 2005).

The Access to Information CoP also generated considerable new knowledge in its field, and attracted the attention of others working in the field of transparency and governance in the region, notably through a publication including country case studies. Its work on access to information legislation provides an opportunity for the CoP to have a significant impact on policymaking in the region by developing model legislation for Lebanon that can be used by its members in other countries.

Lessons learned from the MDF Communities Project

The experience of working with these three CoPs revealed several lessons that can be applied to the development of new CoPs, either by their leaders or by other agencies that provide financial or technical assistance. These include:

- A limited understanding of what a CoP entails can significantly affect the relevance and quality of CoP activities. The MDF competition could have benefited from a deliberate process of awareness building on the concepts of CoPs.
- As a result of this limited understanding, CoPs can be easily mistaken for short-term activities, meaning CoPs may get started but that they will not last. Donors who are thinking of supporting CoP activities should be aware of this, and adjust their expectations accordingly.
- The most important issue determining a CoP's success is leadership. A committed, energetic leadership is vital. For potential donors, it is important to gauge the commitment/passion of leaders before deciding to support a CoP.

Regional coverage

The number of countries covered by each CoP varies from five to 16 countries. The countries that are most frequently included as members of the CoPs are Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine, followed by Morocco and Tunisia. These are followed by Yemen, Sudan, Syria and Algeria together with the six Arab Gulf countries. Several CoPs also include non-Arabic countries, such as Iran, Israel and Turkey.

Membership

Membership was difficult to gauge, due to the CoPs' differing ways of counting their members. Some counted individuals, others organizations, and still others the number of subscribers to e-mail lists (see Graph 1 for a breakdown of members per CoP). Due to the more informal nature of CoPs, some do not keep rosters of members or collect membership dues like formal associations. As a result, it is difficult to know exactly what the membership of a CoP is at any given time.

Graph 1: CoPs Membership Size

Despite these inconsistencies, the survey showed changes from 2002-2004. Nine of the 34 original groups reported increases in membership. One CoP, Aman, reported a jump from 767 to 1,250 members. Two groups reported a decrease in membership.

The profiles of CoP members are also diverse, including: government employees, researchers, academics, engineers, NGO staff, media,

lawyers, development consultants, education professionals, business people, all types of practitioners and activists (human and children rights, women and gender, environment, development). In some cases, CoP members come from the same uniform practitioner groups, such as lawyers, journalists, and IT professions. In other cases, CoP members cut across professions and are motivated by their interest in a particular issue.

Thematic focus

The central themes for networks/CoPs include women and gender equality, human rights and democracy, and sustainable development. These themes seem to be in harmony with the priorities of a larger segment of the NGO sector in the region and within the international aid community. Interest in networking for exchange of knowledge around other themes is minor and has mainly originated from professionals involved in fields of work such as water management, IT, business promotion, and the media. (See Graph 2 for a breakdown of CoPs surveyed by theme.)

A correlation was apparent between the MDF proposals and the regional activities of the UNDP, World Bank and the European Union. In most applications, the creation of the CoP or the new regional network is described as linked to regional conferences and workshops sponsored and supported by international organizations. **Graph 2: CoPs by Thematic Area** Women & Gender, 9 Information and Communication Technology, 4 Palestine and Peace in the Middle East, 3 Childrens' Rights, 2 Water Management, 1 Development & Environment, 7 Democracy & Human Rights, 9 Media and Journalism, 4

Strategy and types of activities

In terms of their overall strategic orientation, the overwhelming majority of MENA CoPs pursue a combined policy and practice approach. In 2002, of 21 survey respondents, only one CoP indicated that it was exclusively policy oriented, and only three were focused on the exchange of practices. This orientation shifted slightly toward a policy orientation in 2004, with four CoPs focusing exclusively on policy and one focusing on the exchange of practices only. The majority of respondents indicated that they were involved in both policy and practice.

When reviewing specific types of activities, it was evident that networking for the purpose of learning takes on very different forms in the region. However, these activities are mainly conventional, combining meetings, conferences and the exchange of information through publications and newsletters. Chatting and conferencing through websites remains limited. Information gathered from the review supported previous findings that the most interesting

networking often occurs informally, peripheral to regional meetings and conferences.

The following specific tools and activities were mentioned in the survey responses:

Real-time chatting and message boards;

Petitions;

Regular polls;

Electronic emailing of information;

Publications; and

Conferences, workshops and meetings (video and face-to-face).

Intensity of interaction

Due to the inconsistency of responses in the survey regarding the intensity and frequency of exchanges and interactions, it is difficult to make use of the responses in this analysis. It is hard to determine the actual quantity of e-mail exchanges by either source or geographical spread. Respondents also did not distinguish between administrative/management and knowledge/practice focused exchanges. Nonetheless, it was surprising to find that six regional networks were not involved in any substantial e-mail exchanges.

In 2002, 12 CoPs considered their activity to be not only 'reactive' (i.e. responding to inquiries), but also 'interactive' (i.e. ongoing exchange of ideas and information). The 2004 survey revealed the following breakdown:

Reactive: 16, of which 1 was exclusively reactive; and

Interactive: 22, of which 7 were exclusively interactive.

Although lacking an agreed-upon definition of interactive, informal discussions with some CoP members indicated that e-mail is still not completely integrated into CoP work patterns. Some expressed misgivings about sending e-mail messages to a group, when its members may not be fully known. This emphasizes importance of building trust within a community and ensuring that members feel confident and comfortable contributing.

Strengths, weaknesses and impact

Given that CoPs are a relatively new phenomenon in the region, it is difficult to assess the impact they are having, or to systematically assess their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, respondents indicated in their replies that impact is not yet a priority issue for them. They are more concerned with the operational issues of getting the CoP up and running. Nonetheless, most of those surveyed did respond to questions regarding their strengths and weaknesses, though their answers were generally vague and brief.

Two respondents cited their global networks and an outreach approach as strengths. One

respondent mentioned the support the CoP received from a UN agency, and three respondents said that their strong point was in relation to their ways of working: their structures, core partnerships and creative approach. Another respondent indicated that the CoP's main strength came from being decentralized and having a flexible structure.

In terms of weaknesses, most respondents referred to their limited material capacity and resources. One respondent noted the narrow membership base of the CoP, stressing the need to engage in recruitment. Three other respondents indicated that their main weaknesses were not yet having a well-developed structure.

her respondents pointed out to the limited usage of e-mail and Internet browsing in the Arab world, as well as the generally limited communication infrastructure. One respondent recognized the need to be more focused in the CoP's work, while another respondent acknowledged a key weakness in not being capable to monitor its activities.

Obstacles to CoP growth in the MENA region

As the previous sections illustrate, development-oriented CoPs and regional networks in the MENA region are still in the early stages of development, and face significant challenges and growing pains. The following paragraphs examine some of the key constraints that may limit the development of these new groups.

One of the most significant, and widely recognized obstacles to knowledge sharing is government control of information (McCann and Johnson *In press*). In countries where citizens are free to express their views on policy issues, there is a more dynamic flow of ideas. In 'closed societies', the government monitors the dissemination of information, using official censorship and coercive tactics to prevent the dissemination of opposing views. Many countries in the MENA region fall into this category. This political atmosphere discourages the kind of networking and knowledge exchange that CoPs seek to stimulate. This has been noted in several studies of NGOs in the region, many of whom indicated that the exchange of knowledge and learning plays a limited role in their organizational strategies (El-Baz 1994).

One area where government censorship has been on the rise is on the Internet. While increasingly difficult to control, government officials still attempt to block certain websites and web activity, and monitor websites. There are also governmental concerns regarding the use of the Internet as a tool for building online communities of radicals (Mandaville 2001). Concern for such developments may be over-inflated with many highlighting the moderating effect of the Internet. Nonetheless, citizens of Arab countries

are aware of the watchful eye of government on the Internet, and would, therefore, be more reluctant to engage in the open and frank exchanges of views that CoPs engender.

Statistics show that Arab states are low in use of the Internet, compared to other regions of the world. Although Arab countries rank higher than Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America in the number of personal computers (PCs) per 1,000 people, the region ranks lowest in terms of the number of Internet users per 1,000 people (UNDP 2002). This substantially affects the extent to which people in the MENA region can engage in online networking, and helps to explain why regional CoP activity in the region is low.

The limited use of the Arabic language in generating and disseminating knowledge both on the Internet and in print, restricts the potential audience for CoP and network members in the MENA region. All of UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports have argued for a concerted effort to generate more content in Arabic on the internet, given the potential of this new medium for development in the region. The lack of Arabic content is partly the result of the difficulties of working with html in Arabic. This has created a self-perpetuating problem because online communities do not have the specialized scientific or educational materials they need to engage in electronic knowledge exchange in Arabic. They will therefore be more likely to use English or French, thus marginalizing some segments of society and restricting involvement to the more educated classes who are comfortable working in a foreign language.

Future directions for MENA CoPs

As the results of the 2002 desk study (Traboulsi 2002) and the experience of the 3 MDF supported-communities reveal, regional CoPs/networks are still a relatively new phenomenon, yet they are contributing significantly to development in the MENA region. CoPs fill a gap in development approaches between the more traditional policy advocacy networks and structured, time-bound learning events. They network practitioners together for the purpose of learning.

Over the last ten or so years, many donor agencies have increased their support for knowledge-based activities. While Simon McGrath's and Kenneth King's analysis of donor assistance to knowledge-based activities is generally critical of the overly internal focus of this assistance, they are supportive of activities which they refer to as 'external knowledge-based aid' (McGrath and King 2004) These include activities such as CoPs which facilitate multidirectional, South-South knowledge exchange.

This is, in fact, a direction which institutions such as the World Bank and the UNDP are exploring.

The significant experience which has been accumulated from internal CoPs (known in UNDP as 'knowledge networks' and in the World Bank as 'thematic groups') is now being transferred to communities of external clients and partners. In order to advance the work which has already taken place in the MENA region, the following elements need to be taken into account, particularly by donors seeking to support these kinds of initiatives:

- Improve awareness/understanding of CoPs by translating and disseminating papers and toolkits on knowledge management and the role of CoPs into Arabic.
- Conduct additional research into the operations of CoPs, looking more closely at the role which is played by moderators and incentives that attract members. A

more in-depth look at the impact that these groups have on learning outcomes would also be useful.

- Identify the organic need for focused CoPs. Creating supply-driven networks will usually lead to failure.
- Conduct practical skill building and leadership training workshops on the facilitation of CoPs among CoP leaders and moderators in order to stimulate cross-learning and mentoring.
- Support CoPs to build partnerships with like-minded networks globally.
- Support the diversification of funding resources to improve sustainability.
- Encourage the focus of groups on specific products or services that bring tangible benefits to the members.
- Support initiatives with high policy impact.
- Distill and codify lessons of good practices and successful regional networking as examples for similar initiatives.
- Ensure context-appropriate IT solutions.

Disseminate existing tools for measuring CoP effectiveness and impact.

Conclusions

The 2003 Arab Human Development Report issues a sort of 'call to action' for citizens of the MENA region. It states that:

Without a strong and growing contemporary knowledge base of their own, Arab countries will be absorbed into the international knowledge society as

passive consumers of other countries' proprietary knowledge, technology and services...On the other hand, Arab countries can avert this passive fate by indigenizing knowledge and technology and developing the necessary absorptive, adaptive and innovative capacities and structures, which offer them the opportunity to participate proactively in the vigorously growing global knowledge society from a position of dignity and strength.

(UNDP 2003)

Communities of practice and other forms of networking offer one way of exploiting these opportunities. With what we know about the barriers to progress, and the keys to success, the MENA region is poised to take greater advantage of this new knowledge tool.

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