KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOL
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE:
TAKING LEADERSHIP IN SHARING KNOWLEDGE

An action plan for partners to share new approaches, address challenges
and replicate good practices in local economic development in
FCM's Municipal Partners for Economic Development Program (MPED)

This document aims to inform the development and implementation of communities of practice (CoPs) to support effective knowledge development and sharing among MPED partners, as well as with other members of LGAs. It presents the success factors of effective CoPs, followed by their main components and suggestions about how local governments can implement CoPs. Each country program is expected to pilot at least one CoP as part of support it receives from MPED.

1. WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE? (COP)

CoPs are "...groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."[1]

The main purpose of CoPs is to allow members to share knowledge, learn from each other and deepen their expertise and understanding of specific issues of common concern. CoPs can engage in a **wide range of activities:** exchange of information via various means of communication, research, development of document repositories, contacts with external experts, face-to-face meetings, field visits, training programs, etc. They can be very small or quite large, sometimes including as many as a thousand members. They can be very structured or quite informal.

Although they can be of different sizes and shapes, all CoPs have the following three elements in common: **domain, community and practice**. They have an identity defined by a shared ***domain*** of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain and some shared competencies that distinguish members from other people. The ***community*** is that group of people who are ready to commit to participating in a

group for learning purposes. All tools, ideas, information and tips that members share are considered ***practices***.

Experience with CoPs suggests that the following factors contribute to their successful implementation:

- The presence of an active facilitator;
- The sharing by participants of common concerns, questions and interests;
- The adoption of a regular schedule for exchanges among members;
- The distribution of leadership among members, who take turns in leading and organizing activities;
- The recognition of different levels of participation (core and peripheral) as legitimate participation;
- The capacity to establish a dialogue with outsiders (to the CoP) who may possess relevant, useful knowledge.

The presence of an active facilitator is a key factor of effectiveness and sustainability of a CoP that warrants specific mention. His/her multi-faceted role may include a range of tasks including: supporting the exchanges between members, keeping the discussions going, eliciting the participation of peripheral participants, mobilizing the participation of outside experts and/or identifying relevant materials to be discussed, etc. The facilitator can be one of the CoP members or can be recruited from outside; rotating facilitators can be used, but should be considered carefully to avoid confusions in roles.
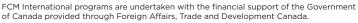
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[1] Wenger, E. et al. (2002). Cultivating Communities of Practice. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.

2. DOMAINS, COMMUNITY AND PRACTICES FOR MPED PARTNERS: AN OVERVIEW

2.1 Domain: Sector Knowledge Emerging from Demonstration Projects[2]

MPED is concerned with the development of new models, approaches and practices **to pursue local economic development**, which are **grounded in the roles and capacities of local governments**. In particular, the program is seeking to support community **leaders** who are committed to engage their peers and develop productive networks to transfer LED knowledge and good practices in their respective municipality, region or country.

2.2 Community: Participants

The key in creating a CoP is to **ensure that participants have sufficient interests in common** to generate fruitful exchanges and that an open environment is created to allow participants to do so. The groups can be homogenous or heterogeneous. The participants of each CoP can come from a wide range of groups: LGA staff, municipal elected officials, municipal employees, academics interested in LED, members of civil society organizations, Canadian municipal volunteers and/or practitioners engaged in LED initiatives, etc.

2.3 Practices

The practices that can be included in the exchanges of the members of the CoP can cover many dimensions of the work of demonstration project partners. Participants can share practices, ideas and thoughts on what works best for them under specific circumstances. In some cases and when appropriate, practices might be tested and evaluated before being shared with the members of a CoP. Some examples of what the practices can cover include: strategic planning tools and processes; ideas and technical solutions to implement new services to businesses; design and implementation of programs, methodologies for engaging citizens; etc.

3. WHERE TO BEGIN?

The establishment and functioning of any CoP depends on the active participation and engagement of its members. In order to organize your CoP, it is recommended that you reflect on the following topics:

- **A learning agenda:** What are the topics and issues of common concern that you would like to address through a CoP? What do you expect to learn? How will this learning be linked to your expected results? What are the challenges that you face for which exchanges with peers or others would be helpful?

- **Membership:** Who should be a member of the CoP? What would be the rules of participation?

- **Activities:** What activities will the members implement? It could be exchanges among members, seminars or research on specific issues of interest, training, production of knowledge materials, implementation of joint initiatives, etc.

- **Planning regular exchanges:** How often would members want to exchange or meet? Can you adopt a regular schedule? Note also that face-to-face meetings are usually important, and in particular in the early stages of a CoP.

- **Means of communication:** What type of exchange would you like to take part in? What type of communications process? Examples: meetings, conference calls, emails, newsletter, blog, electronic knowledge sharing platforms, etc.

- **Facilitation:** How should the exchanges be facilitated? A rotating facilitator selected from among the group members? An outside facilitator?

- **Roles and Responsibilities:** How will leadership and responsibilities be distributed?

- **Capturing knowledge from outside sources:** The knowledge needed to overcome the challenges faced by members of the CoP may have to be found outside of the CoP. Members should discuss how they will find additional information and knowledge and who will do it.

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[2]A demonstration project is defined as «... an innovative, sustainable, replicable and relevant LED model or practice that promotes and fosters measurable socio-economic benefits/impacts within a selected community/region ».

TEMPLATE TO PLAN YOUR COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

TITLE:

	Description	Definitions
Domain	Raison d'être of the CoP. *Why* is it being established? What are the issues, topics or challenges that will be addressed by the members?	
Community	*Who* should be involved? Define the group of people who are interested in this domain and ready to commit to participating in a group for learning.	
Practices	*What* should be shared within the CoP? Practices are tools, ideas, information, tips that members share.	
Action Plan / Tasks		**Responsibility and Deadline to Perform the Task**
Step 1	List the members of your CoP, with their contact information.	
Step 2	Ensure there is one (or a few) leaders or facilitators for the CoP.	
Step 3	Define roles and responsibilities (including expected contributions) of CoP community members.	
Step 4	Agree on means of communication and/or frequency of meetings.	
Step 5	Establish *ground rules* and key routines to ensure that CoP community will remain engaged.	
Step 6	Determine your learning agenda (schedule with discussion topics).	
Step 7	Develop activities that need to take place to support information sharing (*with budget if required*).	
Step 8	Ensure that knowledge emerging from exchanges will be captured.	
Step 9	Review Steps 1–8 on a regular basis (at least annually). Revise as needed.	

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

DOMAINS / THEMES	COMMUNITY	PRACTICES	ACTIVITIES
Overcoming the challenges of establishing municipal LED units.	• Relevant municipal staff. • As appropriate: municipal councillors, local consultants involved in supporting the participating cities, others.	• Various models for establishing LED units. • Steps to complete to establish the LED units: a how-to method. • Manuals and guides.	• Establish membership rules and ways of working. • Determine common learning "agenda". • Develop a list of relevant resources. • Plan to hold regular exchanges via the Internet or in-person. • When relevant, invite an expert to present on a topic of interest. • In some cases, for eg, when members discuss the tourism industry, site visits could be planned. • Invite representatives of organizations who have successfully overcome the challenges that your CoP is discussing to present their experience to the group.
Effective ways to foster citizens' involvement in the design and planning of LED programs.	• Relevant municipal staff and elected officials. • Representatives of civil society, or community-based organizations.	• Participatory techniques and processes. • Methodologies for public consultations.	
Developing community-based tourism	• Relevant municipal staff of cities who are implementing community-based tourism activities, and cities who are interested in engaging in it. • Relevant community groups and private business owners. • Marketing firms. • Civil society organizations (association of residents, local chamber of commerce, etc.). • Environmental organizations (if eco-tourism is possible).	• Developing a marketing strategy. • Learning about municipal branding and how it applies to your city. • Best practices of other municipalities: what other cities with similar profiles have done and what have been the results? It could be about policies, investments etc.	