ACTonGender Policy Brief

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How to support Communities of Practice for driving institutional change towards Gender Equality

This document presents reflections on the experiences of the facilitators of the communities of practice (CoP) which were established as part of the project ACT. Since the CoP approach is increasingly becoming recognised as a useful way to stimulate practice of and knowledge on institutional change towards gender equality (GE), we provide information on aspects that should be taken into account by policy makers on European, national and institutional level. We suggest where resources should be invested in order to make the CoP approach a feasible and sustainable way of driving institutional change.

INTRODUCTION

In simplified terms, a community of practice is a group of people who deal with a common problem (i.e. gender equality in R&I) and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. It is more than a network due to a commitment of the individual actors to this learning relationship, their shared identity and clear rules for membership. One group member holds the role of a facilitator who is taking care of group communication, organising exchange and co-creation of knowledge. As a method for sharing knowledge and driving change, CoPs have been applied to a variety of activities and societal processes (e.g. citizen science; data-driven administration). Communities of Practice are increasingly supported by the European Commission, through targeted projects and initiatives, especially for the purpose of driving institutional changes towards gender equality in higher education, research and innovation (e.g. HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ERA-01-80 — Centre of excellence on inclusive gender equality in Research & Innovation). Such CoPs are becoming ever more relevant in the context of new Horizon Europe policy which requires all participating public institutions to have adopted a gender equality plan. Therefore, it is of importance for both policy makers and future practitioners to get information on how this approach plays out in practice, and what we can learn from it.

ACTIVITIES, ANALYSES, IMPLEMENTATIONS

Within the project ACT, eight CoPs were established and supported (for at least 2,5 years), while the facilitators came from the consortium partners. They differ in their scope but are relatively uniform in their structure: all of them are inter-organizational CoPs involving persons that are located across different organisations (cf. Müller & Palmén, forthcoming). Some of them are geographically dispersed but focus on a discipline (LifeSciCoP – Gender Equality in Life Sciences; GENERA - Gender Equality in Physics and beyond), sector (FORGEN – Funding Organisations for Gender) or topic (GenBUDGET – Gender Budgeting in Research Organisations; STRATEGIES – Strategies for Sustainable Gender Equality), while some are organised around geographical region (GEinCEE – Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe, LAC – Gender equality in Latin America) or within one state (Alt+G – Alternative

[Infrastructure for Gender Equality](), Slovenia). Except in the case of FORGEN, the members of these CoPs are research and administrative staff who are involved in driving change in their institutions, and in few cases the members are coming from professional networks. All institutions participating in the CoP have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the facilitator's organisation and the ACT project coordinator, however, not all individual members are officially representing their institution.

The CoPs were created on the basis of facilitating organisations' previous networks and co-operations, Europe-wide community mapping and mobilisation at ACT conferences. Facilitators were trained by ACT consortium with expertise on the method, and regularly consulted on the challenges of the facilitation process. Each CoP determined its own objectives through a co-creation process in order to find common points among different priorities of interested members. CoPs adopted various strategies of communication and interaction, forming internal structures like working groups and target implementation projects, all of which needed to be adapted to the situation of Covid-19 pandemic.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience within project ACT informs that CoP approach can contribute substantially to support passionate individual change agents and activists who are set out to start and drive institutional change towards GE. However, this approach has its limitations, and conditions under which it is more successful in practical application - all of which should be taken into account when CoP are envisioned in public and institutional policies.

→ Facilitator's role needs to be financially compensated

As an informal and democratic way of sharing knowledge and mutual learning, CoPs are dependent on voluntary participation of its members. Precisely for this, a facilitator needs to stimulate communication, regular exchange and/or meetings, organise online and live events, conceptualise forms of knowledge sharing, keep catalogue of relevant documents and sources shared between the CoP members, archive meeting minutes, and be involved in both group and one-on-one communication (as members can have varying degrees of autonomy and expertise on GE). These are time consuming activities which need to be regularly executed, and important responsibilities that are inherent to the role of a facilitator. Therefore, policy initiatives that envision CoP approach as a driver of institutional change towards GE need to plan financial resources for employing a facilitator.

→ CoPs need (financial) resources to sustain

To establish an effective network and make substantial progress in the member organisations and activities started, sustainable funding is needed that goes beyond temporary project funding. Financial resources are needed in order to compensate facilitators, organise events and commission expertise when needed. Therefore, there is a need for policy initiatives that will provide support and funding not only for establishing but also for sustaining successful CoPs.

→ CoPs should be supported in order to scale up their achievements

CoPs are groups limited in their size in order to remain operational (the largest CoP in ACT project comprises 34 members). This means that knowledge and experience accumulated within CoP cannot be spread simply by enlarging the group by adding new members. Rather, policy makers should support scaling up activities, such as: twinning projects (between CoP members and non-members); public presentations of CoP results at national and international conferences; targeted events inviting relevant stakeholders, policymakers, experts and other interested parties on a specific theme; supporting membership of larger networks and associations in CoPs (which can then scale up practice and change to their members); publishing scholar findings on institutional change, etc.

→ Facilitators should be trained and supported for their role

Facilitation is a competence that requires specific skills, knowledge, and experience - all of which could be retained through adequate training. Therefore, a policy initiative that envisions supporting CoPs should also entail a programme of basic training in skills needed for facilitation.

Exchange amongst facilitators is very helpful for identification of synergies, establishing opportunities for collaborations, and peer support. Therefore, it is advisable to make a platform for mutual exchange and support among the facilitators, possibly by supporting a network of facilitators.

→ CoPs could provide valuable input in developing concrete policies

Since CoPs gather professionals who exchange and produce knowledge through joint engagement in institutional change towards GE, they accumulate hands-on experience in facing gaps between legislative and policy framework, on one hand, and needs of institutions and actors involved in the process, on the other. Therefore, CoPs should be given the opportunity to provide input on legislation and policy documents drafted by the European Commission and national governments.

SUSTAINABILITY

The biggest challenge in the feasibility of the CoP approach is ensuring their sustainability beyond the duration of the project funding through which a CoP was initially established. On the basis of experience of eight CoPs supported through ACT project we recognise following strategies that CoP members took on in order to ensure group's sustainability:

- support in the CoP members' institutions by ensuring that involvement in CoP activities becomes a long-term commitment (e.g. part of a job description for particular employee or job position);
- searching for applicable national or international funding by the facilitator's organisation or by another CoP member that takes over this role;
- joint application for funding through COST actions and similar modes for network funding;

- lobbying at the European Commission for supporting sustainability of CoPs with a small funding structure;
- crowd-funding;
- dispersing responsibility for the CoP facilitation among several CoP members in order to share the workload, especially in case of lack of funding for the position of facilitator (cf. Kathrin Rabsch & Elizabeth Pollitzer, Sustainability Plan, ACT Deliverable D6.4).

Policy makers should be aware of these strategies for sustaining CoPs and incorporate them into future policy framework and budget planning.

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PROJECT INFORMATION	
PROJECT NAME *ACRONYM*	Communities of Practice for Accelerating Gender Equality and Institutional Change in Research and Innovation across Europe ACT
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