Africa RISING
Communities of Practice support pack
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The Africa Research In Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation (Africa RISING) program comprises three research-for-development projects supported by the United States Agency for International Development as part of the U.S. government’s Feed the Future initiative.

Through action research and development partnerships, Africa RISING will create opportunities for smallholder farm households to move out of hunger and poverty through sustainably intensified farming systems that improve food, nutrition, and income security, particularly for women and children, and conserve or enhance the natural resource base.

The three projects are led by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (in West Africa and East and Southern Africa) and the International Livestock Research Institute (in the Ethiopian Highlands). The International Food Policy Research Institute leads an associated project on monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

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What is this support pack?

This support pack document is meant to help the champions of each community of practice (CoP) kick started in the second phase of Africa RISING to do their job as CoP champion as best they can.

The pack consists of some information about what communities of practice are, what they mean in the context of Africa RISING (AR), how the AR CoPs can be best supported, and finally some background literature and references are offered to find out more about communities of practice.

At any time, during their tenure as CoP champions, anyone is welcome to contact the author of this support pack Ewen Le Borgne (e.leborgne@cgiar.org) to find out how to do their job best or to get some advice on the process of facilitating CoPs generally.

The CoP support pack is also supported by the Africa RISING wiki, which federates information about communities of practice at: http://africa-rising.wikispaces.com/CoPs. Each individual CoP has a dedicated page that can be used to store information about that CoP and its respective conversations:

1. Socio-economic assessment of technological innovations
2. Nutrition
3. Private sector engagement for better linkages of farmers to input and output markers
4. Livestock intensification and integration
5. Translating research outputs into scaled innovations
6. Virtual farming
7. Integrated watershed management
What are communities of practice?

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a craft and/or a profession. The concept was first proposed by cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger in their 1991 book Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger 1991). Wenger then significantly expanded on the concept in his 1998 book Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998).

A CoP can evolve naturally because of the members’ common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created deliberately with the goal of gaining knowledge related to a specific field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991).

CoPs can operate online or offline (face-to-face). Virtual CoPs are easier and cheaper to organize and in principle guarantee a more permanent exchange. In any case, experience shows that even for virtual CoPs, having members know each other face-to-face and having occasional direct physical contact is a great factor to boost interactions.

As explained in a handy flyer developed by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) agency, CoPs combine six elements:

- A community – the group of people interested in sharing knowledge
- A domain – a clear thematic field that is not too broad nor too narrow to federate a community around it
- A practice – a set of activities common to all practitioner members and gives them matter for sharing their own reflections, based on their practice. “While the domain provides the general area of interest for the community, the practice is the specific focus around which the community develops, shares and maintains its core of knowledge.” This is the defining feature of CoPs as opposed to ‘communities of interest’ where the members may not be specialists of a given field but are just interested in talking about a given domain
- Motivation – CoPs are typically not part of daily routines, they feed off of their members’ interest and energy in discussing the domain and practice
- A mandate – which describes the strategic intention and the expected results from CoP interactions. This is especially true of organizational CoPs, but Africa RISING follows this model
- Structure – A balance between some formal roles and informal interactions. That balance is crucial to make CoPs flourish
There are various models of communities of practice – and some argue that communities of practice are not started but emerge. In any case communities of practice are – unlike project teams – in principle not bound by deliverables, formal and set roles and responsibilities, defined by a strict timeline. They evolve along the way and remain in place so long as they are relevant.

CoPs have been hailed, in the knowledge management arena, as a useful approach to innovate on products and services, reduce the learning curve, respond more quickly to inquiries and needs, reduce reinvention of the wheel and encourage more sharing and learning across the board.
Communities of practice in Africa RISING

The intention behind Africa RISING CoPs
The Phase II proposal of Africa RISING explains that throughout Phase I there has been too little learning happening across all three projects (East and Southern Africa, Ethiopian Highlands, West Africa) while the program ‘has an urgent need to link and connect and capitalize on the expertise and knowledge spread across the countries and partners’ and needs to consistently harmonize approaches and science.

Phase II thus places “much greater emphasis on cross-project and cross-issue exchange and learning to support scaling and spill-overs” (program proposal).

“Keys to success are that a community has a clear focus that strongly attracts and interests people to contribute; that it has some deliverables; that it has some incentives or rewards; and that it is facilitated in some way.”

The program proposal recognizes that CoPs will be mostly virtual but that some face-to-face interactions will be planned to energize the participation of CoP members.

Five initial CoP domains of practice have been identified by PCT as of particular short term use to advance the Africa RISING agenda:

1. Socio-economic assessment of technological innovations
2. Nutrition
3. Private sector engagement for better linkages of farmers to input and output markers
4. Livestock intensification and integration
5. Translating research outputs into scaled innovations

In addition to these five, a couple of ‘spontaneous’ CoPs have emerged at the first program science event in January 2017 in Dar-es-Salaam:

6. Virtual farming
7. Integrated watershed management.

Each of these CoPs has a champion identified and in some cases a co-champion. The five priority CoPs are also supported with some budget (USD 10,000,00 per year) that will help organize face-to-face interactions. Two of these are financially supported by IITA, two by ILRI and one by IFPRI. Each of these five CoPs is also lightly ‘supervised’ by a member of the Program Coordination Team (PCT) so as to ensure they start their activities.

Various people have expressed their interest in joining CoPs – these initial members are all listed on the dedicated CoP wiki page.
Getting started
Each CoP is expected to follow the same terms of reference to get started. This consists in the following:

- Establish a community of researchers with common aims and interests relating to the CoP mandate;
- Formalize aims, deliverables and milestones to address the CoP mandate over the five year lifetime of Africa RISING’s second phase;
- Maintain regular interactions amongst CoP members (including circulation of relevant materials, virtual and face-to-face meetings);
- Promote best practices relating to the CoP topic across all Africa RISING projects and partner organizations for greater harmonization of approaches and methods;
- Disseminate learning experiences and successes related to the CoP mandate to the wider research and development community;
- Consider, as / if appropriate, mechanisms for maintaining the CoPs beyond AR-II for suitable exit strategies to ensure that their deliverables persist.

Of all these activities, the most important ones are probably the first two:

“IMO, most of the effort needs to be put into talking to members of the teams to discuss what their needs and expectations of the CoPs are. The platform itself can work with one communication a month or twenty a day - what matters is the relevance of what is on it to members and the extent to which they help rather than add burdens to what people are trying to achieve.”

(Mike Powell, former director of Information/Knowledge Management Emergent Program, in a discussion on the Pelican list about communities of practice, March 2017)

Implementation
The implementation and animation of each CoP is left to its (co-)champion.

One of the key features of implementation is the choice of platforms that will be used for the CoPs. The PCT has discussed this issue and decided to go for Yammer as the platform of choice to get started. This platform is well integrated and most AR members have been trained on its usage so the threshold for participation should be rather low.

The Africa RISING Comms team is going to provide support to the implementation of CoPs. This support will happen both through this service pack and the general support given by the author of this service pack, but also by assigning a communications specialist to each CoP in order to support communication of key messages from each of the CoP and technical issues with the Yammer platform.
It is anticipated that each CoP will contribute to program synergies and integrate with e.g. the program learning events, exchange visits and other program-wide components ‘as a deliberate approach to improve program-wide learning, knowledge sharing, program harmonization, science leadership and technology spill-overs.’ This includes for instance the review of research protocols etc.

The experiment with CoPs will be assessed after the first six months to a year, upon which their set up and implementation might be revised and perhaps the set of CoPs itself might be also reviewed and revised.

There are various short-term and long-term benefits to contributing to a CoP, both for individuals and the collective behind, as articulated in this excerpt below from the FAO guidebook for online facilitation (of communities of practice).
Facilitation

This section contains some tips for how to best facilitate the Africa RISING communities of practice around the four different aspects highlighted in the concept note introducing Africa RISING communities of practice (which is documented on the Africa RISING CoP wiki page:

- Clear focus (domain / practice)
- Deliverables
- Incentives and rewards
- (Actual) facilitation

A clear focus that strongly attracts and interests people to contribute

As explained above, a community of practice is structured among others around a community, a domain and a practice. The community in question here is the Africa RISING community at large, and more specific sub-sets of it for each CoP.

The domain and the practice should be well defined by the champion (and co-champion) so as to be clear to all, when they ‘formalize aims, deliverables and milestones to address the CoP mandate over the five year lifetime of Africa RISING’s second phase’.

Practical tip: Write in one paragraph about what the domain covers (and what it doesn’t cover) and under it try to identify at least 2-3 typical practices that are expected to be common among all members of this CoP. E.g. for communication these would be: writing web stories, engaging with the media, archiving outputs etc. This will help your CoP members clearly identify the focus you have for the CoP.

As specified above, the focus should be broad enough that it attracts enough people and specific enough that it’s not everything to everyone and thus of no specific interest to anyone. Having a small community doesn’t matter so long as the members contribute (and they are, on the other hand, more likely to know each other than in a larger group).

Deliverables

A typical CoP that was born outside of organizations does not have a list of deliverables that comes with it. But in Africa RISING there is a mandate for these CoPs to be active agents of learning and change across the program by making sense of the work that is being done in specific domains of expertise across all three regional projects.
The (co-)champion should thus develop a list of anticipated ‘deliverables’ that they would see as desired outputs from the interactions of the CoP.

This can – and should – be developed with other CoP members. It is likely that this list of deliverables also evolves over time as some of these deliverables are finalized and the ‘next frontier’ appears.

The deliverables should be detailed enough that it is clear to everyone what they will look like. The details of these deliverables can also be co-created with other CoP members.

**Practical tip:** Having clear deliverables is important, but it shouldn’t overshadow the development of the community itself. It takes time for people to feel comfortable in a conversation space. It takes even more time for these same people to produce something together. If you treat the CoP as a deliverable-producing project team you run the risk of suffocating the energy of the group. But asking members what they would like to see as outputs of their participation in a CoP is probably a good idea.

**Incentives and rewards**

This is an area that is very sensitive and requires a careful approach. Not offering enough incentives or rewards might prove a fatal mistake in establishing young CoPs, especially if the members are not valuing the sharing of knowledge in and of themselves. Verging too much on incentives and rewards, on the other hand, bears the risk of stimulating response-driven engagement, ie. of seeing members interact simply out of interest to gain the rewards. Incentives are perhaps thus more important to consider here.

Incentives to participate in a CoP include: the motivation to share knowledge because it helps improve one’s own and others’ ideas and ways of working; the recognition of expertise (reputation, self-esteem) that comes with making contributions; the development of social capital and relationships between CoP members – all the way to developing the sense of community; anticipated reciprocity to have access to good information etc.; being able to collectively solve a problem that wouldn’t be solved otherwise; having a space to express oneself etc.

The point is, different members react differently to different incentives. But the more you are aware of the possible motivation the more you are able to support the members find their own sense of achievement and enjoyment through the CoP.
Cultivating communities of practice – a quick start up guide (E. Wenger)

And then there are other factors that create perhaps more ‘collective’ incentives for a CoP to thrive. The *Wikipedia page on communities of practice* lists a number of factors that influence the successful cultivation of CoPs. Among these are:

- Letting the CoP evolve naturally – changes that are felt as important by the CoP members should be allowed to take place;
- Bringing in external perspectives to change the way we look at certain issues;
- Accepting and welcoming different levels of participation: the champion and co-champion will invest more of their time, some other members will be present and active some of the time and yet other members may end up ‘only’ actively listening – but that doesn’t mean that their engagement is restricted to that and they may invisibly be sharing a conversation in other places/networks and cross-pollinating knowledge in that way;
- Allowing private conversations. The default is to have public conversations but certain issues can be taken offline and bilaterally too. Sometimes it’s about engaging with specific members bilaterally to ensure they are comfortable interacting with the wider group too;
- Focusing on the value of the CoP: the champion should allow conversations where members clearly articulate what they see as the value and productivity of their participation;
- Combining familiarity and excitement: finding a mix between some structure and some unconventional approaches keeps the fire going in any CoP;
- Finding the natural rhythm of the CoP: it will take a while but a CoP group should naturally ease in to a volume of interaction that feels right for it, at an optimal arm’s length between apathy and hyperactivity.
Perhaps some rewards, especially intrinsic (e.g. related to the fame, responsibility etc. of members) could be considered occasionally to attract the interest of members.

**Practical tip:** There is no better functioning CoP than one where members show leadership of their own volition and ‘take charge’ of aspects of the CoP because they are passionate about the topic and/or practice. As a champion you should cultivate these behaviors and recognize them when they happen. Good feedback rules apply here whereby you can give feedback by saying: “[name of the member], when you did xyz, this is how I felt/this is how it impacted me… [mention the effect]”. This tends to reinforce such positive behaviors in the future.
Facilitation of the community of practice

This is the section that is particularly covered in this support pack. The Phase II proposal reminds everyone that “Keys to success are ... that it [the CoP] is facilitated in some way.”

Roles of champions and co-champions

Champions and co-champions are performing the same work, the exception being that champions are first in line to organize the work. It is recommended for each champion to find a co-champion who can take some of the coordination work when the champion is not around.

As (co-)champion, you are expected to ‘hold the space’ of the CoP for all the members. This entails both the formal tasks mentioned above under ‘activities to get started with CoPs as well as a number of informal tasks. Let’s look at the latter here:

As part of holding the space you are expected to:

- Explain clearly to any new member what the CoP is all about (in due time anyone else in the CoP can do that too) and what it intends to do, as well as how it is run
- Help members (with support from the Comms team) to use the communication platform adequately – you can find some information about how to use Yammer here (access pending on Yammer membership)
- Make all members feel comfortable and get them to know each other to create a sense of trust and of ‘safe-fail’ environment
- Help the group keep track of its conversations and reach consensus where one is needed. This is done by suspending judgment first (allowing all kinds of ideas), using active listening skills and by building linkages between what people are saying so the group is progressively reaching that agreement, but not until people haven’t fully expressed themselves and feel ready to move forward
- Point anyone to the appropriate resource person as and when
- Encourage the participation of members in discussions etc. – this is a fine balance to achieve between encourage very active/vocal participants and encouraging the less vocal ones to feel comfortable to express themselves. This also means finding a balance
between intervening in the CoP as a member having something to contribute and as the champion facilitating the CoP process
- Encourage in the group and bilaterally the ever more active participation of members in the community (ie. tending to its documentation space, organizing conversations, connecting with the wider group etc.)
- Pay attention to the way the members are reacting to pick up early warning signals of their disengagement, frustration, anger or other strong emotions that prevent them from engaging meaningfully or fully in the CoP

There are many parallels between this role and that of an event facilitator. Feel free to ask Ewen Le Borgne for additional support on this.

In addition, the resources ‘CoP manifesto’ and ‘Cultivating communities of practice: a quick start up guide’ give some very good recommendations to make the CoPs more successful along the lines of the advice being given here.

**Practical tip:** Even though CoPs may not be part of your formal job description, you need to be well aware that facilitating them will require some time. For a community of 20 to 50 people, the World Bank guide listed in the resources estimates that the facilitation requires 10 to 20% of one person’s time. Bear that in mind and plan accordingly! Or be ready to spend extra time on your CoP because you love it.

### Roles of CoP members

As champion you might gently remind your CoP members that for the CoP to be successful their involvement should entail at minimum reading the contributions, posting or reacting to others' posts, and responding to any call for action by the CoP 'champion'. And anything else you wish to contribute to make your CoP a vibrant space of reflection, interaction and improvement.

As CoPs are being piloted in this second phase of Africa RISING, an opportunity is given for people to be ‘exploring members’ ie. to try out a given community of practice to see if the domain and practice is of interest and relevance to them, and after two months they can decide to relinquish their membership and concentrate their efforts on other CoPs. These members are not particularly expected to play any role, although as champion you can remind them that the more they invest themselves in a given CoP, the more they get out of it.

Some other traits to consider and cultivate among your CoP members: consistency (better engage regularly than a lot in bursts and then not any more), curiosity, suspending judgment (there are times when a group needs to hear different voices, and other times when they need to reach closure), finishing business and moving to action.

### Ideas of activities to facilitate the CoP

Here are a few ideas of activities that could help to stimulate interaction among CoP members. Some of these ideas were also shared on the CoP wiki page:

- Identify how this CoP topic is connecting to the others and to other formal spaces and networks across the Africa RISING program to ‘build bridges, not silos’
- Identify interesting conversation topics and key questions that this group needs to develop
- List and share useful resources on this topic, both from inside Africa RISING and from outside
- (Help) Introduce the members of your CoP to one another - with e.g. perhaps a line of 'why they think this particular CoP is interesting' or e.g. 'one thing they think they can uniquely contribute to this CoP'...
- Run 'YamJams' (on Yammer) or online conversations around specific topics
- Ask your members to bring possibly interested new members to the group and to 'buddy up' with them to introduce them to the CoP and its operating mode etc.
- Document conversations (with the help of your comms support person) on the wiki/Yammer or otherwise and share the key insights with the wider group on Yammer so everyone knows how vibrant your CoP is
- Link up with other CoP champions to run parallel conversations on similar themes etc. – even though the focus remains clearly on each specific CoP to develop its own dynamics and conversations
- Prepare and co-create activities and presentations that can be fed at larger face to face events e.g. review and planning meetings, science meetings etc.
- Identify interesting/relevant events and conversations, groups etc. that are in relation with the theme of this CoP
- Run a ‘peer assist’ to crack a concrete problem from one of the CoP members. A good video introduction to peer assists can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObmQyW3EiiE
- Run a poll among the members to find out about their upcoming interests, to get them to react on a provocative statement etc.

A file (in French) posted on the overall Africa RISING Yammer network provides 30 extra ideas to stimulate a vibrant CoP...
Support from the communications team

This team will provide the following support:

- Support in setting up the action plan and identifying activities for the CoP
- Technical or management coaching on how to get the CoP going - Ad-hoc coaching/advising on ways forward
- Communication platform support (if the platform chosen is supported by Africa RISING e.g. Yammer, wiki, etc. or if the comms specialist has personal experience with that platform)
- Finding additional literature and guidance documentation to share with champions
- Designing, preparing and/or running face-to-face CoP meetings
- Preparing learning or science events with the results from the CoP to integrate it further throughout the program

In addition to the above, any CoP champion or even member is welcome and invited to contact Ewen Le Borgne, Simret Yasabu or Jonathan Odhong to ask any question of support.

For specific support on the use of Yammer please refer to the Yammer master guidelines here or indeed contact either of the above-mentioned comms specialists.
Annotated literature and conceptual references

Bollinger, Ernst; Flury, Manuel (2007). CoP manifesto. SDC. Also available on AR Yammer: https://www.yammer.com/africa-rising/#/files/79738116. *This simple 5-page guide provides very good guidance about the factors that make a CoP more successful.*


Nutiinen, Maria; Neely, Constance; Garcia, Claudia and Avagyan, Armine (2016). Guidebook for online facilitators. FAO. http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5742e.pdf (accessed 16 March 2017). *This is possibly the most comprehensive guide to CoPs along with the World Bank one, with a very good structure that looks at different maturity stages of a CoP and activities that can be done, as well as many practical examples. Great resource!*

Swiss Development Cooperation (2006). Community of Practice (CoP) from own to shared knowledge. Also available on AR Yammer: https://www.yammer.com/africa-rising/uploaded_files/79738544. *This is a very simple flyer that explains the essence of communities of practice across 2 pages. Great to share with people who don’t know what CoPs are.*


Wenger, Etienne. Cultivating Communities of Practice, a quick startup guide. Also available on AR Yammer: https://www.yammer.com/africa-rising/uploaded_files/79738126. *This is only one excerpt from the actual guide, which summarizes some key steps and strategies to achieve successful CoPs.*

World Bank Group (2013). A gardener’s guide to communities of practice. http://www.fsnnetwork.org/gardeners-guide-communities-practice (accessed 16 March 2017). *Second to the FAO guide, this is the most comprehensive resource in the list here and one that can be referred to for various considerations in setting up and moderating CoPs. Thorough work!*