



The role of communities of practice in facilitating cooperation and knowledge exchange in the integration sphere

COMMENTARY

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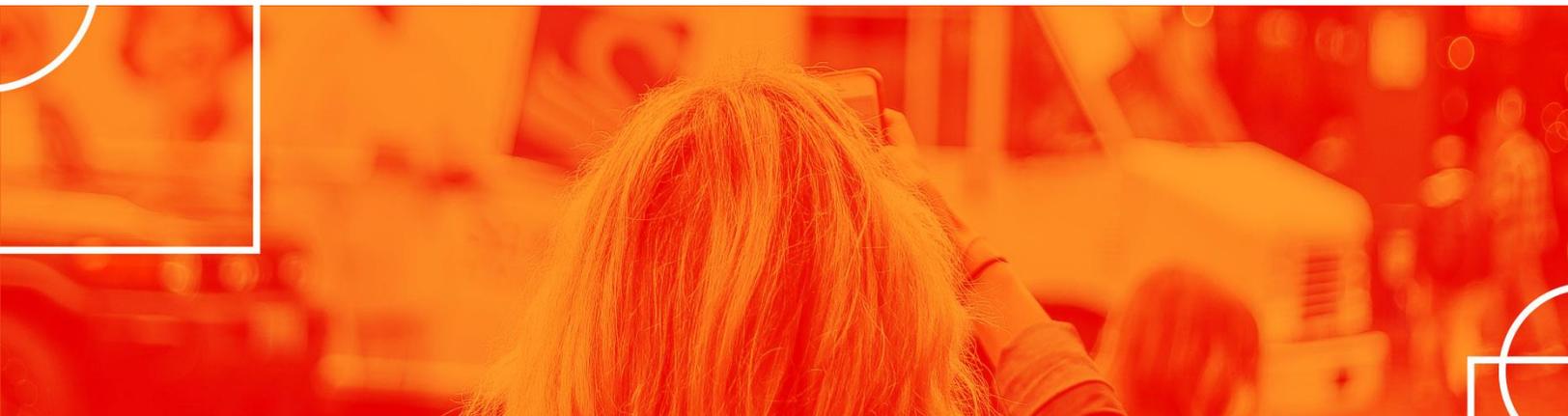


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Responsible Author	Daria Huss (ICMPD)
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SPRING is a EU-funded project focusing on the integration of recently arrived migrants in the context of the large-scale arrivals of refugees and other migrants since 2014. It aims to develop a toolbox to improve the innovation, effectiveness and sustainability of the work done by Europe’s integration stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. The project mobilises significant research, networks and communications capacity and gathers, summarises and shares the best available research and evidence on the effectiveness, innovation, transferability, sustainability and evaluation methods for integration policies and practice.

The SPRING Platform integrationpractices.eu is the main hub to make the project results available to practitioners as well as to the general public.



The large-scale inflows of migrants and refugees in 2015/16 and the current response to the integration needs of people fleeing Ukraine has brought sustainable changes to the integration sphere, while integration is further mainstreamed into standard social services, existing integration practices are scaled up, and new initiatives are put in place. While there is ample evidence of what works (and under which conditions), transferring this knowledge remains a challenge in a context characterised by insufficient opportunities for exchange and mutual learning among integration practitioners. Communities of practices (CoPs) thus play an increasingly important role in facilitating this knowledge exchange and transfer.

This commentary focuses on the role of CoPs in: Facilitating knowledge exchange and transfer; Engaging in participatory approaches to knowledge production; Systematising knowledge of integration practitioners and bringing this knowledge to the attention of integration policymakers. It shares insights based on research undertaken as part of the [SPRING project](#) on sustainable practices of integration.

What are the knowledge needs of integration stakeholders?

Integration stakeholders face a range of knowledge needs. The [SPRING knowledge needs survey](#) showed that respondents felt that they would particularly benefit from greater knowledge on best practices, mainly in other fields of work (71% of respondents) but also in their own field (50%). This can be attributed to **a range of challenges to good practice transfer** identified in a [SPRING analysis](#), including difficulties in identifying suitable practices and insufficient information for assessing the transferability and added value of a practice in the receiving context.

Although personal contacts would greatly facilitate the exchange of information needed for successful good practice transfer, survey respondents indicated that their organisations would benefit if the exchange with other entities *in their field* was further expanded – particularly with

peer organisations in other countries (81% indicated that they ‘fully agree’ with a statement to this effect, while 17% indicated that they ‘rather agree’) and with (other) NGOs (73% ‘fully agree’ and 25% ‘rather agree’).

However, **certain factors seem to be impeding an enhanced level of exchange**, including the complexity of the integration field, the diversity of the integration landscape, and a lack of time to engage with peers (not least due to insufficient and uncertain funding). Moreover, despite the availability of earmarked EU funds for civil society organisations supporting people fleeing the conflict in Ukraine, new integration stakeholders in particular still face challenges in accessing these funds – due to a lack of information on funding schemes or narrow eligibility criteria, according to the [PICUM/ECRE policy note](#).

What knowledge do integration practitioners bring?

Integration stakeholders impart **first-hand knowledge on their needs and those of their target groups**, the obstacles to implementing integration policies, and possible solutions. This knowledge constitutes a valuable resource for informing policy and the design of research projects.

It is particularly relevant in the emergency context, when the situation on the ground is evolving quickly, and often leaving researchers and policymakers removed from the actual prevailing needs. In practice, however, the voices of practitioners are not always systematically taken into account in policy-making processes on integration.

What role do CoPs play in strengthening the practice-research-policy nexus?

Communities of practice in the field of integration contribute greatly to **addressing the knowledge needs of integration practitioners**, while identifying and addressing research gaps, systematising the tacit knowledge of practitioners and bringing this to the attention of policymakers.

The [SPRING project](#), which aimed to address potential knowledge gaps by gathering, summarising and sharing best available research and evidence on integration, paid specific attention to CoPs and their role in contributing to improved integration outcomes. In this context, CoPs were broadly [defined](#) as *“a group of professionals informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge”*.

Although **different definitions of what comprises a CoP** do exist, all of them [refer](#) to: **i)** a shared domain of interest and shared competence in this domain; **ii)** regular interactions, exchange and activities related to this domain; **iii)** a shared repertoire of practices on how to address common problems. While the difference between CoPs and cooperation networks is fluid, it is safe to say that every CoP can be characterised as a network, but not every network can be characterised as a CoP.

Yet, [CoPs are highly diverse](#) in size, target group and thematic focus. They can be characterised as **formal or informal and composed of homogenous or diverse stakeholders**, either within or across organisations, networks or geographical spaces.

Fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange among practitioners

Fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange lies at the core of the work of CoPs. They take an active role in **pooling resources, creating synergies or finding joint solutions** to common problems, while facilitating knowledge exchange and mutual learning; for example, through multi-stakeholder discussions, workshops, conferences, trainings, study visits, and peer learnings. What distinguishes these approaches is the fact that the respective activities are concrete and targeted, designed based on the needs of those involved in the CoPs, while offering contextualisation and sense-making. These approaches require trust-building as a precondition for open exchange, particularly when sharing difficulties faced in one’s area of work, which calls for long-term engagement.

Bridging research and practice

Beyond knowledge exchange among practitioners, CoPs also engage with external researchers and experts to produce knowledge based on the needs identified by their members. While some CoPs draw on a dedicated budget that allows them to commission research, in other cases these resources are engaged on a pro bono basis. What CoPs have in common, however, is **a participatory approach to knowledge production**, which ensures ownership of those involved in the CoP over the topics covered – and the content produced.

Bridging policy, research and practice

However, CoPs do not only work towards knowledge exchange and production, but do take a step towards bridging the practice-research-policy gap: CoPs consolidate the knowledge generated through exchange among practitioners and commissioned research, while bringing this to the attention of policymakers. For this purpose, **CoPs translate practitioners’ experiences, needs and ideas** for possible solutions into policy recommendations and advocacy messages.

In the EU migration context, this requires intense communication and exchange with affiliated stakeholders on EU decision-making processes and how they can be influenced through advocacy

work. It also entails long processes of finding joint positions – particularly in cases where the CoP has a highly diverse stakeholder base.

CoPs then use **different strategies** to feed their learnings into the policy cycle. CoPs active at EU-level and beyond strongly engage in advocacy work and participate in relevant EU expert groups and policy consultations, and engage with parliamentarians. CoPs that connect integration stakeholders at the local, regional or national level use different channels to report their learnings to government; for example, through regular meetings with relevant ministries. However, due to diverging political priorities, these messages are not always taken up in the policy-making process.

Challenges faced by CoPs

While CoPs play a distinct role in contributing to improved integration outcomes, they face a **range of challenges**, mostly related to a lack of time and stable funding sources, both on the side of affiliated integration practitioners and those maintaining the CoPs. These issues have been exacerbated by continuing inflation and a pandemic that has left many integration practitioners unable to pay their membership fees (although not all CoPs operate based on formal membership). In the context of their advocacy work, CoPs are often faced with lengthy policy discussions in which political priorities sometimes outweigh the evidence they provide.

How to foster the CoP contributions for improved integration outcomes?

While facing challenges in their own right, **CoPs play a distinct role in addressing the challenges of integration practitioners** by facilitating cooperation and knowledge exchange and strengthening the practice-research-policy nexus. In the context of the greatest movement of people seen on the European continent since World War II, integration practitioners are confronted with the need to quickly address the issues at stake and identify which approaches work best under the circumstances, the distinct role played by CoPs further gains in importance.

To better support the work of CoPs, **it is crucial to acknowledge this role and reflect it in relevant funding schemes**, while ensuring that the knowledge generated by CoPs is actually taken up in the integration policy cycle – at local, national and supranational level. Doing so will require long-term investment, but will ultimately lead to improved integration outcomes.

This commentary is based on the SPRING policy brief [“Sustainable migrant integration: The role of Communities of Practice”](#).