



Making Collaborative Learning Work

Insights on Building and Running Effective Communities of Practice (CoPs)

January, 2025



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IPA's Thriving Through Play Community of Practice in-person meeting, Dubai, 2025

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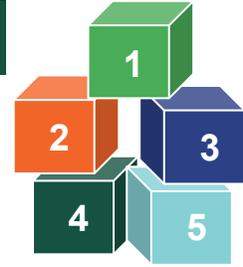
Executive Summary

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are increasingly adopted in international development to strengthen collaboration, learning, and the use of evidence across diverse programs and organizations. When executed effectively, CoPs allow funders, implementers, and partners to learn together, adapt programs efficiently, and make evidence more actionable. However, this promise is not always met. While some CoPs thrive, others struggle with low participation, unclear strategic direction, or limited follow-through.

This synthesis, developed by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) in collaboration with The LEGO Foundation, is a qualitative reflection on nine CoPs and how they were experienced by funders, learning partners, and members alike. It serves to guide consideration of when to establish a CoP, what can it achieve, and how to design and facilitate one effectively. While not a comprehensive or definitive study, it aims to provoke an evolving conversation by surfacing actionable insights as well as open questions.

To distill these insights, we have organized our findings around **The Five Building Blocks of Successful CoPs**. These building blocks summarize the essential elements—from the decision to establish one, to the initial setup and ongoing management—that we believe are critical for a CoP to deliver genuine learning and sustained value to its members and the wider sector.

The Five Building Blocks of Successful CoPs



1. Start with clear goals, and identify if a CoP is the right mechanism to achieve them.

The decision to establish a CoP should start with a defined vision and a deliberate assessment of whether a COP is the right mechanism to achieve it. Once decided, well-defined goals should reflect a shared purpose. CoPs work best when funders, learning partners, and members agree on what they want to achieve—and what success will look like. Keep goals realistic and revisit them regularly to stay focused and adjust as needs change.

2. Build the right foundations

Trust and collaboration don't happen automatically. Identify whether members already share common interests, goals, or experiences that can support learning. Where these foundations are missing, take time to build them—through early in-person meetings, open communication, and support from a capable learning partner who can build strong connections.

3. Balance roles and leadership

Effective CoPs share responsibility. Funders provide resources and offer strategic guidance but give members room to lead. Learning partners coordinate activities, connect people, and ensure discussions have clear takeaways. Members bring real-world experience and should help shape and lead the CoP's work. Over time, leadership should naturally shift more toward members as trust and confidence grow.

4. Design for meaningful participation

Good design turns conversations into results. Involve members in setting agendas, balance theory with practice, and keep sessions interactive and practical. Follow up after meetings to capture key lessons and help participants apply them in their own work.

5. Choose the right formats

Match the format to the goal. Use in-person convenings to build relationships and tackle complex issues, and online sessions to maintain contact and momentum. Combining both—through hybrid approaches—offers flexibility while keeping engagement high.

Methodology

This study conducted a qualitative, mixed-methods retrospective synthesis to capture and analyze key lessons from nine learning-oriented CoPs. All research was structured around a dedicated Learning Agenda, ensuring a systematic inquiry into the design, implementation, and effectiveness of CoPs.

Structured Inquiry: The Learning Agenda

The Learning Agenda structured the research to ensure relevance. It was developed iteratively and shared with key stakeholders before data collection began. This consultation process allowed us to gather feedback, refine our learning questions, and ensure alignment with stakeholder priorities. (For the full Learning Agenda, please refer to Annex A.)

Data Collection and Triangulation

To capture a comprehensive understanding of CoP dynamics, we employed multiple qualitative methodologies and triangulated the findings across diverse stakeholder groups. This provided a well-rounded analysis that incorporated perspectives from practitioners, learning partners, and funders.

The research activities and data sources included:

- 1. In-Depth Interviews with External Stakeholders:** Six interviews were conducted with external funders and learning partners who have established or facilitated CoPs. These discussions focused on their decision-making processes, core challenges, and successful practices. (An overview of these interviewees is provided in Annex B.)
- 2. Focus Group Discussions with Internal and Implementing Partners:**
 - a. IPA RFE Staff:** We engaged staff from IPA's Right-Fit Evidence (RFE) Unit to leverage their expertise as learning partners across three established CoPs.
 - b. Implementing Partners:** One online focus group was held with seven implementing partners to gather their direct experiences, perspectives, and reflections on participating in CoPs. (Participant details are available in Annex C.)

- 3. Literature Review:** This component examined existing research and best practices focused on evidence-based learning and collaborative CoP approaches. We prioritized the few rigorous meta-analyses available, acknowledging that much of the accessible literature consists of "grey sources" (e.g., reports from global organizations) which offer insights but lack rigorous findings. (See the list of references in Annex D.)



Start with clear goals, and identify if a CoP is the right mechanism to achieve them

Well-defined goals at the outset are critical for the success of learning-oriented CoPs (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2021). Our interviews revealed, however, that most CoPs were established with a broad vision: to move away from traditional grantmaking, where evidence was siloed and used primarily for accountability, toward models that placed portfolio-wide learning and collaboration at the center. As a result, many began with an overarching purpose rather than sharply articulated goals.

"Our previous grantmaking model wasn't working, so we shifted to an approach that puts learning as the guiding principle. We now create spaces where partners come together in different combinations to engage with evidence and...learn from one another."

– CoP Funder

Variety of CoP Goals

Evidence was at the core of all the CoPs we reviewed, though this took different forms: some focused on producing concrete outputs such as policy briefs, others conducted learning partner-supported process evaluations to gather evidence to drive program improvements, while others generated evidence to guide future investment decisions

To illustrate these variations, the table below summarizes the goals most frequently pursued by CoPs in our study.

Table 1: Most frequently pursued goals by CoP

<i>Most common goals</i>	<i>Less common goals</i>
<p>Knowledge sharing: creating spaces (in-person sessions, online check-ins, or virtual forums) for members to reflect on their work and exchange ideas, experiences, data and findings, challenges, and successes.</p>	<p>MEL capacity building: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning capacity building developed through learning partner support and sharing of MEL plans and experiences.</p>
<p>Iterative learning: Members incorporating program adaptations based on the learnings and exchanges that emerged from the CoP to improve their programs.</p>	<p>Policy influence: Influencing policy through the development of a collective output such as a policy brief.</p>
<p>Community-building: Fostering proactive, member-led connection, network-building, and collaboration outside official CoP convenings and beyond the life of the CoP.</p>	<p>Synthesis of learnings: Synthesize insights, typically led by a learning partner, by harmonizing data or findings to be relevant and actionable for all members.</p>

Goal Alignment

There were clear differences in how stakeholders viewed the goals of the CoPs. Funders and learning partners emphasized a broad set of objectives, including portfolio-wide learning and reporting, while members placed greater value on the practical aspects—sharing knowledge and applying lessons to improve their programs. About half the funders acknowledged this tension: the challenge of pursuing their own learning and accountability needs while also giving members enough space to shape the CoP agenda based on their priorities and experiences.

This underscores the importance of early alignment on goals—and an honest assessment of whether a CoP is the right mechanism to serve the priorities of all stakeholders effectively.

“We set three goals: (1) share back research and findings; (2) create a space for partners to learn from one another; and (3) community-building. Goal 1 was relatively successful - webinars

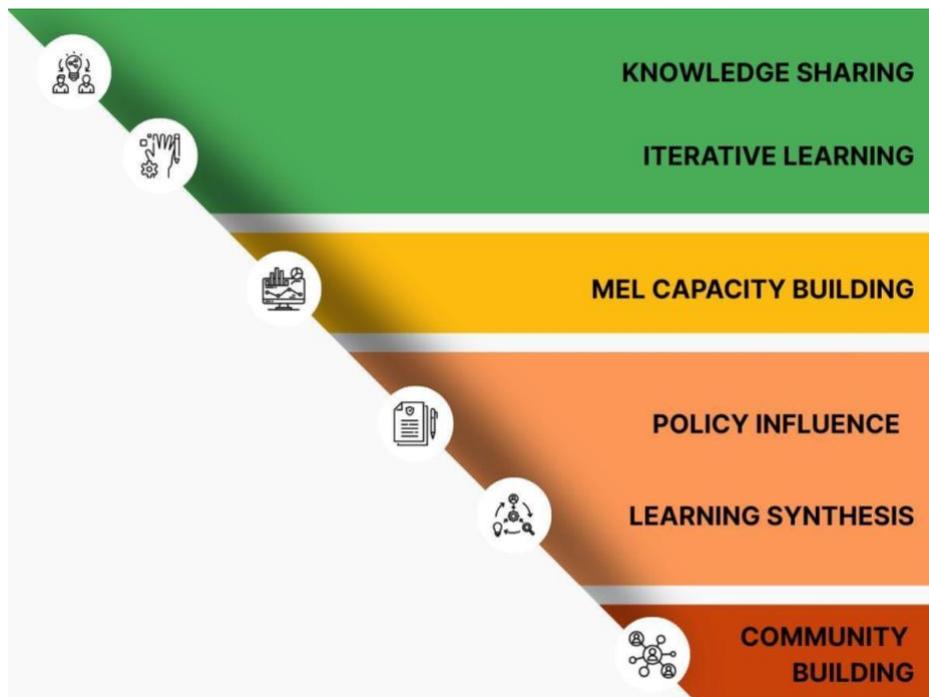
and virtual events made sharing out easy. For Goal 2, we had to balance letting people present with keeping the CoP focused, but the discussions were engaging. Goal 3 just didn't work—there was collegiality, but no evidence of connections or continued conversations beyond the CoP.”

— CoP Learning Partner

Goal Success

Across the CoPs studied, *knowledge sharing* emerged as the most consistently successful goal, with *iterative learning* and *MEL capacity building* close behind. *Policy influence* and *learning synthesis* were also achieved in some cases but required specific enabling conditions, such as strong policy linkages or extensive facilitation and harmonization efforts. In contrast, community building beyond formal sessions proved difficult to sustain.

Figure 1: Most successful (green) to least successful (red) goals



Deep Dive: Why Were These Goals Successful?

To better understand what drove these patterns of success, we examined the design and implementation features that made certain goals more achievable than others. The sections below unpack why these goals worked in practice.

Knowledge Sharing

Participants—including funders, learning partners, and members—identified knowledge sharing as the most consistently achieved goal across CoPs. This success largely reflected its central place in CoP design: sessions were intentionally structured to encourage members to present their work, share challenges, and exchange solutions. Learning partners played a key facilitation role, creating spaces for open dialogue and peer learning that enabled members to engage meaningfully with one another's experiences.

Figures 2a-b illustrates examples of how this exchange was structured in practice.

Figure 2a: Examples of knowledge sharing practices



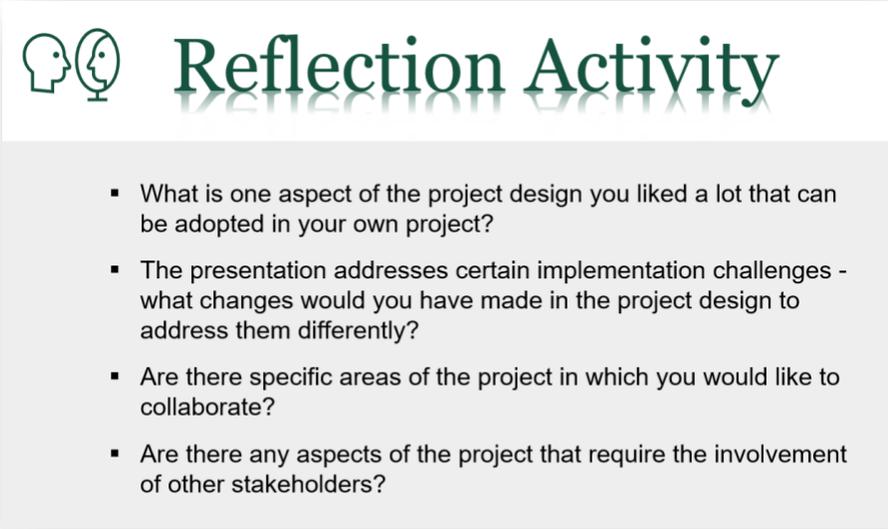
PROJECT FAIR

PROJECT FAIR

Instructions:

- **One person** from each organization will present about your project. You can take turns if you want.
- Everyone else will be split into **5 small groups**. Stay in your groups!
- Each presentation round will last **7 minutes** (3-5 minutes to share information about your project, 2-4 minutes for Q&A)
- After 7 minutes, each group will **rotate clockwise** to the next project station.

Figure 2b: Examples of knowledge sharing practices

The graphic features two stylized human heads in profile, one facing left and one facing right, positioned to the left of the title. The title 'Reflection Activity' is written in a large, green, serif font with a subtle reflection effect below it. Below the title, a light gray rectangular box contains a bulleted list of four questions.

Reflection Activity

- What is one aspect of the project design you liked a lot that can be adopted in your own project?
- The presentation addresses certain implementation challenges - what changes would you have made in the project design to address them differently?
- Are there specific areas of the project in which you would like to collaborate?
- Are there any aspects of the project that require the involvement of other stakeholders?

Iterative Learning

While knowledge sharing naturally fosters learning, turning that learning into concrete program improvements requires intentional effort. CoPs helped bridge this gap by providing members opportunities to reflect on lessons and apply them in their own contexts. For example, one implementer shared that insights on government partnerships from a program in Ghana were later used in Bangladesh to strengthen government capacity in play-based learning.

Still, iteration faced challenges. Rigid program plans and stakeholder commitments limited flexibility to adapt, while several members emphasized the need for more time and opportunities to discuss and refine lessons with peers before acting on them. Importantly, iterative learning was most successful when members shared similar programmatic features—such as focusing on early childhood education or teacher-facing interventions—a theme explored further in the next section on enabling conditions.

MEL Capacity Building

MEL capacity building emerged as a more focused and deliberate form of knowledge sharing and iterative learning, centered on a common technical area. Across CoPs, members strengthened their capacity to develop or refine theories of change, identify learning questions, define credible indicators, and use data to

inform decisions. See examples of MEL capacity building for COPs in Figures 3a-b. In some cases, this extended to more technical skills such as instrument design and data analysis.

The success of MEL capacity building was largely enabled by two factors:

1. Common MEL elements across members' programs, which created a shared foundation for peer learning.
2. A learning partner with MEL expertise, who reinforced group sessions with tailored one-on-one technical support.

These conditions allowed learning to translate into practical improvements and sustained technical growth.

Figure 3a: Examples of MEL Capacity-Building Activities

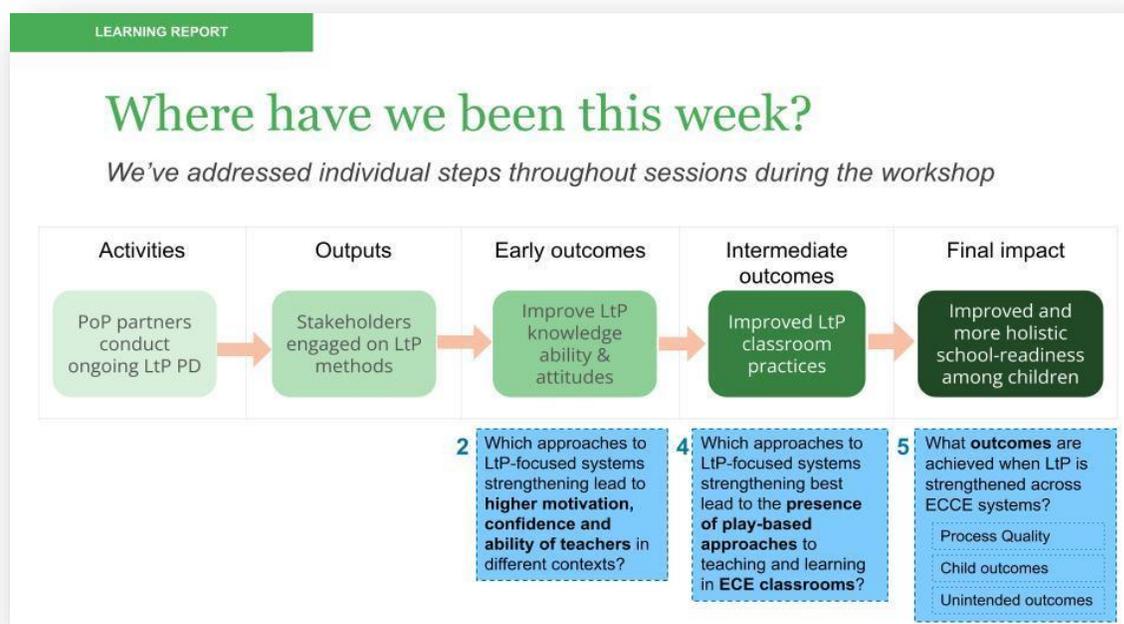


Figure 3b: Examples of MEL Capacity-Building Activities

SYNTHESIS CONTEXT

What have we learned about enabling LtP?

 What is the strength of each ToC link?

 Given the gift of hindsight, what would we advise our previous selves in implementing the ToC?

 What changes would we make to our ToC?

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Policy Influence

Policy influence was achieved in a few CoPs where specific conditions enabled success. Those that reported tangible policy outcomes had defined this as a goal from the outset and leveraged existing networks with policymakers. For example, in a national CoP on early childhood education, members set out to develop a policy brief from the start, and the strong policy connections of the funder and participants ensured its rapid adoption. Similarly, a global CoP spanning 40 countries influenced education policy by synthesizing evidence on school practices—an effort supported by clear objectives and the funder’s established government relationships.

Learning Synthesis

Synthesizing learning across projects and partners can yield valuable insights into a program’s broader performance and generate public goods for the sector. However, it is also resource intensive. One CoP in this study successfully produced a cross-portfolio package of findings and tools for the wider education and MEL community. Achieving this required sustained facilitation, extensive member engagement, and significant time and effort to harmonize diverse data across initiatives.

Even with this success, participants noted that future syntheses would benefit from more upfront planning and continued support to ensure outputs meet both internal and external needs. Funders and learning partners should consider whether synthesis products are intended mainly for internal portfolio learning or also for broader dissemination—since the latter requires additional time, investment, and communication planning from the outset.

Community Building

CoPs were generally effective in building strong relationships during sessions—connections that supported knowledge sharing and learning—but maintaining engagement beyond formal convenings proved difficult. Most CoPs created online spaces to continue collaboration, but these were rarely used due to time constraints and competing priorities. In-person meetings paired with informal digital channels (e.g., WhatsApp groups) saw somewhat greater success in sustaining engagement.

This raises an important question: if strong relationships within CoP sessions are sufficient to achieve learning goals, what additional value does broader community building provide? The contrast between effective in-session collaboration and limited post-session engagement suggests that funders and learning partners should clarify the intended purpose and expected benefits of ongoing community engagement before investing in it further.

Takeaway

Clear goals are the foundation of successful CoPs. When funders, learning partners, and members align early on what the CoP is meant to achieve—and what success will look like—they create the conditions for meaningful learning and collaboration. Conversely, when goals are too broad or serve different purposes for different stakeholders, CoPs risk spreading efforts thin and losing focus. Establishing and revisiting goals regularly helps ensure the CoP remains relevant, balanced, and able to deliver value for all participants.



Build the Right Foundations

A CoP's success depends on more than simply bringing people together. Its value emerges when the right conditions—common ground, trust, and capable facilitation—are in place from the start. Funders should assess whether these conditions exist before launching and, if not, invest early in building them.

Funders must also consider not only whether they can launch a CoP but whether they can sustain it over time. Strategic shifts, such as portfolio redesigns or changing institutional priorities, can deprioritize the initiatives for which a CoP was created. Sustained commitment is essential to preserve continuity and ensure the CoP's long-term relevance and value.

Common Ground

CoPs were most successful when members shared meaningful commonalities aligned with the CoP's objectives. Programmatic overlaps facilitated targeted knowledge sharing and iterative learning; shared stakeholder relationships strengthened policy influence; and common MEL priorities and practices created a solid base for collective capacity building.

While diversity of perspectives can enrich discussions, some CoPs struggled when members' interventions or contexts were too different to allow for focused collaboration. In these cases, conversations remained broad, and progress toward collective goals was limited.

Trust and Relationships

Trust emerged as a key enabling condition. CoPs that began with pre-existing relationships among members advanced more quickly, as those relationships brought credibility and openness that supported early collaboration. In one case, existing ties acted as a "collaboration accelerator," allowing members to engage in joint problem-solving from the first meeting.

“Pre-existing relationships can help build trust. In this specific CoP, implementers saw their counterparts more as collaborators, not evaluators or competitors. The key to success was mindset: how they viewed the relationship, which was partly influenced by those pre-existing personal relationships.”

— CoP Learning Partner

Pre-existing relationships are not a prerequisite for success but should be leveraged when they exist. Where they are absent, deliberate efforts are needed at the outset to build trust—particularly through in-person convenings and interactive formats that create space for members to connect personally and professionally.

These investments early on lay the groundwork for effective collaboration and collective learning later.

Learning Partners as Enablers

Across CoPs, the role of the learning partner consistently emerged as critical to success. Learning partners facilitated sessions, curated agendas, coordinated member inputs, and synthesized lessons across diverse contexts. Through this active facilitation, they helped translate broad aspirations into tangible outputs—whether through MEL capacity building, iterative program adaptation, or the synthesis of learnings into actionable insights.

Effective learning partners served not just as organizers but as enablers of progress, connecting people, clarifying goals, and ensuring that learning was captured and applied. Their technical expertise and ability to bridge perspectives among funders and members often determined whether a CoP's ambitions were realized in practice.

Takeaway

Strong foundations—common ground, trust among members, and capable facilitation—are essential for a CoP to deliver meaningful value. When these elements are missing, CoPs risk becoming passive discussion spaces rather than engines of collaboration and learning. Investing early in relationship-building and engaging skilled learning partners ensures that a CoP starts from a position of strength and remains equipped to achieve its goals.



Balance Roles and Leadership

Effective CoPs depend on a balanced distribution of roles among funders, learning partners, and members. Power dynamics and participation shape how CoPs function, and each stakeholder brings a different form of value. CoPs worked best when responsibilities were shared clearly, leadership evolved over time, and all parties understood both their role and the expectations placed upon them.

Funders

Funders typically provided the core resources that enabled a CoP to function—financial support, logistics, and the engagement of a learning partner—along with strategic guidance. Many funders intentionally maintained a light day-to-day presence to avoid turning the CoP into an accountability exercise. Their continued commitment, however, ensured sustainability and lent legitimacy to the group's work.

A recurring challenge funders noted was finding the right balance between stepping back and participating meaningfully. While they aimed to avoid dominating the space, some CoPs benefitted from more direct funder involvement. In one case, a funder attempted to hand facilitation over to a third party, but members insisted they strongly preferred continued direct engagement from the funder. This example illustrates that each CoP has a unique dynamic. Strong relationships between funders and members can be an asset, and funders should remain responsive to how members view their involvement.

Regardless of the degree of hands-on engagement, funders must clearly communicate a CoP's purpose, expected value, and required time commitment from the outset. Reflecting CoP goals and expectations within individual grant agreements helps ensure coherence between the day-to-day activities of implementing partners and broader CoP objectives.

Learning Partners

Learning partners consistently served as the operational engine of CoPs, providing the facilitation, structure, and continuity that drove them forward. Their responsibilities extended well beyond logistics. They guided sessions, built trust, synthesized diverse inputs into actionable insights, and supported members individually—often functioning as the CoP's most neutral and trusted actor.

Members and funders repeatedly emphasized the centrality of learning partners to achieving goals such as MEL capacity building, iterative learning, and knowledge sharing. Their ability to translate broad aspirations into practical progress was vital.

At the same time, learning partners faced three notable challenges:

1. Trust and relationship-building

Trust is fundamental to a CoP's success, yet learning partners often entered communities where they had no prior relationships. Some members initially viewed them as external auditors rather than collaborators. One member noted that it took nearly a year before they fully trusted the learning partner and saw

the value they could offer. Learning partners need to invest significant time early on to build credibility and establish meaningful, value-driven relationships.

2. Responsibility without power

Learning partners were responsible for organizing meetings, soliciting inputs, and driving follow-through, but they lacked formal authority to enforce participation or accountability. This gap between responsibility and power complicated their role, especially when consistent member engagement was needed to deliver expected outputs such as synthesized learning. Addressing this dynamic required early discussions with funders and collective agreements with members about expectations and ways of working.

3. Synthesizing learnings

Producing clear, comparable takeaways across diverse thematic areas, geographies, and organizational maturities was complex and time-intensive. Learning partners highlighted the importance of aligning early on whether synthesis was an expected CoP outcome—and preparing adequately for the level of effort required to produce cross-cutting insights.

Members

Members are at the heart of a CoP's purpose and impact. Individual members typically came from implementing partners' MEL or program teams, and many CoPs benefitted from having both represented. This pairing strengthened evidence-use practices by integrating learning with implementation.

Members contributed by sharing their experiences, applying insights from peers to their own work, and—where relevant—co-creating joint outputs such as shared learning agendas or policy briefs. In some CoPs, members also took on leadership responsibilities, shaping agendas or facilitating sessions.

However, member engagement was often challenged by inconsistent attendance due to time pressures, competing priorities, and staff turnover. Participation tended to be stronger when CoP activities aligned with members' project responsibilities and when the CoP created visible value for their daily work. Conversely, discontinuity hindered learning because returning members had to catch up and new members had to build relationships to participate fully.

Member-Led Leadership Models Strengthened CoPs

CoPs where member roles gradually evolved toward leadership reported richer dialogue, stronger commitment, and consistently relevant agendas. While learning

partners typically facilitated in the early stages, many later created space for members to lead specific discussions or nominate “topic leads.”

One global CoP with more than 150 members implemented a clustered leadership model, dividing participants into small groups and designating co-leaders and “champions” to guide workstreams. This approach resulted in high sustained participation—even in a fully virtual format.

“We [...] identified leaders in each group. When we saw organizations taking the lead [who weren’t] officially the leader, we called them ‘champions,’ to recognize and incentivize their enthusiasm. Thanks to this clustered leadership model, participation never dropped below 80 percent, even though it was voluntary.”

— CoP Funder

Power Dynamics in CoPs

Power dynamics shaped how CoPs operated and how openly members shared challenges. The potential for power imbalances is innate for funders and also present where learning partners also serve as evaluators of implementers’ projects or of a CoP-wide program. CoPs functioned best when funders signaled support but ceded operational control, learning partners facilitated as neutral conveners, and explicit norms created confidence that sharing failures would not lead to repercussions.

Clear roles, strong relationships, and a culture of trust helped mitigate these dynamics, enabling members to view the CoP as a safe space for reflection, learning, and experimentation.

Takeaway

Balancing roles and leadership is essential for a CoP to achieve its goals. Funders provide strategic and financial support, learning partners drive facilitation and synthesis, and members bring lived experience and should increasingly shape the CoP over time. When these roles complement each other—and when power dynamics are acknowledged rather than ignored—CoPs build ownership, deepen engagement, and create durable value.



Design for Meaningful Participation

Effective CoPs depend on purposeful design that turns participation into progress. Thoughtful planning, skilled facilitation, and consistent follow-up ensure that members engage actively and that convenings lead to tangible outcomes.

Our findings highlight specific practices across three stages of the convening process—before, during, and after—that fostered engagement, ownership, and practical learning.

Before Convenings

Intentional preparation helped transform convenings from information-sharing events into collaborative learning spaces. Involving members early, preparing inputs in advance, and aligning on session focus improved relevance and participation.

Engaging members in agenda design

Inviting members to help shape the agenda increased ownership and ensured that discussions reflected their priorities. Learning partners used several mechanisms: pre-workshop surveys to identify needs, assigning rotating facilitators from among members, and defining the next agenda collaboratively at the close of each session.

Preparing content and inputs in advance

Individualized pre-session support from learning partners maximized session value. Preparation typically involved one-on-one meetings or structured templates for members to complete beforehand. The individual meetings proved most effective—allowing learning partners to refine presentations, verify data accuracy, and align messages so discussions were cohesive and outcome-oriented.

During Convenings

Well-facilitated convenings balanced conceptual learning with practical problem-solving and created an atmosphere of trust and openness. Learning partners played a central role in achieving this balance.

Prioritizing smaller, focused sessions

Smaller group convenings encouraged deeper exchange and peer learning, particularly for problem-solving and application. Larger, CoP-wide sessions

remained valuable for introducing shared concepts but worked best when complemented by smaller, follow-up discussions focused on applying those ideas to real-world challenges.

Balancing conceptual and practical learning

Conceptual learning provided theoretical grounding, but members valued opportunities to connect it directly to practice. For example, one CoP hosted a large-group session on teacher engagement strategies, followed by breakout discussions on adapting those strategies to specific programs. The right balance depended on participants' familiarity with the topic—something learning partners assessed and adjusted for in session design.

Fostering engagement through play and trust-building

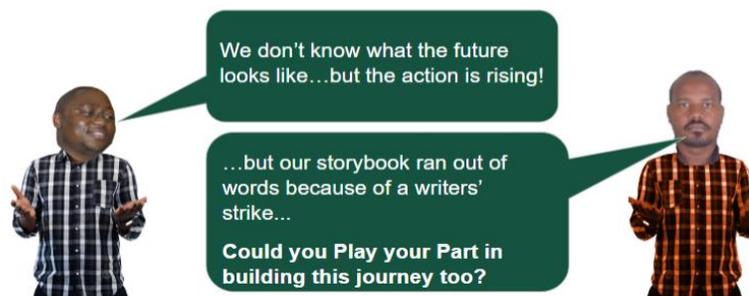
Interactive and playful methods proved essential for sustaining attention and encouraging open dialogue, especially around challenges or failures. Learning partners intentionally incorporated activities that reduced barriers and modeled vulnerability.

Across CoPs, three main types of play-based strategies were used:

- **Games and icebreakers** unrelated to content to build ease and connection (e.g., photos of team members incorporated into slides in Figure 4).

Figure 4: Use of playful content in slides for engagement

Chapter 3: *Choose your own adventure...*



- **Playful metaphors** to spark creativity and reflection (e.g., the “scaly monster” in Figure 5 representing challenges in scaling programs, or a ‘snowball fight’ to anonymously surface lessons learned through notes transformed into paper ‘snowballs’).

Figure 5: “Scaly Monster” playful approach

A scaly monster (share a learning goal related to scale)



- **Gamified learning activities** to reinforce key concepts (e.g., a red-light/green-light exercise on barriers and enablers, or puzzles forming a theory of change).

Successful COPs used strategies like these as a core approach to building trust and psychological safety, making sessions more engaging and memorable.

Other facilitation practices

Active listening—focused on understanding rather than response—deepened discussion quality while building trust. Inviting guest speakers introduced new perspectives and maintained participant energy across sessions.

After Convenings

Post-session engagement was critical to translate discussions into action. Structured follow-up kept momentum, supported accountability, and reinforced learning.

Synthesizing clear takeaways

Learning partners were instrumental in distilling complex discussions into concise, actionable takeaways. These summaries helped members see immediate value and provided a roadmap for next steps. Producing them was resource-intensive — especially in diverse CoPs where data and lessons were not directly comparable— but proved vital for sustaining engagement.

Creating rapid feedback loops

Post-session surveys and in-session polls gathered timely feedback that informed the design of future sessions, ensuring that content remained responsive to member needs.

Using interactive platforms

Digital tools such as virtual “whiteboards” enabled members to visualize key points and continue collaboration beyond the session. These platforms helped organize notes, share visuals, and maintain a living record of progress.

Conducting targeted follow-up

One-on-one check-ins and offline outreach addressed lingering questions and supported implementation of agreed actions. Members and learning partners alike valued this individualized support, which ensured continuity and accountability between convenings.

Takeaway

Designing for meaningful participation requires intention at every stage. Collaborative preparation makes sessions relevant, interactive facilitation keeps members engaged, and structured follow-up ensures learning translates into action. When designed this way, CoPs become engines of collaboration that turn shared discussion into actionable insights.



Choose the Right Formats

Choosing the right mix of in-person, online, and hybrid formats is essential to sustaining engagement and enabling meaningful collaboration. Each format serves a different purpose, and effective CoPs used them intentionally—leveraging in-person convenings to build relationships and tackle complex issues, and online touchpoints to maintain continuity and momentum.

In-Person Convenings

In-person gatherings consistently emerged as the most effective format for building trust, strengthening relationships, and supporting deep problem-solving. They created the conditions for open dialogue, informal networking, and collaborative work that was difficult to replicate online. These convenings were especially

valuable for navigating complex challenges and setting the foundation for future collaboration.

Many CoPs held annual or semi-annual in-person meetings, using them as anchor moments that re-energized participants, created shared understanding, and reinforced commitment to the CoP's goals.

Online Convenings

Online convenings offered flexibility and accessibility, making it easier for members to stay connected between major meetings. While virtual sessions rarely matched the relational depth of in-person gatherings, they played a critical role in maintaining momentum, sharing updates, and collaborating on short, focused tasks.

Online convenings varied in frequency—CoPs held monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly meetings. One funder felt that quarterly online convenings were a “sweet spot”—frequent enough to sustain engagement, yet spaced out enough to allow for meaningful progress between sessions.

Online formats also worked well when paired with digital collaboration tools such as shared whiteboards or group messaging platforms.

Hybrid Models

Hybrid models—combining periodic in-person convenings with regular virtual touchpoints—were the most common approach across CoPs and were considered most effective. In-person sessions were particularly effective early-on to establish trust and shared understanding, while virtual meetings and collaborative tools sustained engagement and supported ongoing work.

Between convenings, learning partners played a central role by conducting one-on-one check-ins. These touchpoints helped members prepare for upcoming sessions, reinforced commitments, supported capacity building, and continued cultivating trust.

Takeaway

Different formats serve different functions. In-person convenings create trust and enable deep collaboration; online sessions maintain continuity and make participation accessible; hybrid approaches combine the strengths of both. CoPs that intentionally blended formats—anchoring trust-building in person and reinforcing it through regular virtual engagement—were better able to sustain momentum, deepen relationships, and achieve their goals.

Looking Ahead

CoPs hold significant potential as vehicles for collaborative learning—enabling members to generate insights, solve problems, and build capacity in ways that individual organizations could not achieve alone. As interest in collaborative learning models grows, this is an opportune moment to reflect on what we know about how CoPs function, where they add value, and where gaps remain.

While CoPs are widely favored by funders and appreciated by members, their success is not inherent. This synthesis identifies five building blocks that can strengthen CoP design, facilitation, and outcomes, contributing to an evolving conversation about how to make CoPs a more effective and sustainable tool for learning.

Recommendations by Stakeholder

For Funders

- Clarify purpose early. Clearly articulate whether the CoP is meant to support learning, coordination, capacity building, or another function.
- Commit sufficient resources. Effective CoPs require dedicated time and budget for coordination and follow-through—not just convenings.
- Stay engaged but flexible. Show commitment through selective participation, while allowing members to drive discussions.
- Enable adaptation. Support partners in adjusting implementation and MEL plans based on what emerges from shared learning.
- Support sustainability. Plan for multi-year engagement and help transition leadership to members or champions over time.

For Learning Partners

- Facilitate alignment. Help funders and members align on goals and track progress throughout the CoP.
- Design and document. Use structured approaches to pre-session preparation, interactive facilitation, and post-session synthesis.
- Support action. Ensure that discussions are translated into clear takeaways and work with individual members on follow-up actions.

- Stay neutral. Build trust by ensuring balanced participation, especially from smaller or newer organizations.
- Build capacity. Coach members to take on facilitation roles, supporting long-term sustainability.
- Capture and share learning. Synthesize insights across sessions and produce short briefs when appropriate for broader dissemination.

For Members

- Invest in participation. Attend consistently, come prepared, and share openly—including challenges and failures.
- Connect CoP learning to your organization. Apply insights to your own programs and bring results back to the group.
- Take ownership. Volunteer to facilitate sessions, host convenings, or lead thematic discussions to strengthen engagement.
- Reflect on value. Periodically assess what your team is gaining from the CoP and identify what could increase its usefulness.

Measuring and Sharing Value

Even with stronger design and implementation, questions remain about the cost-effectiveness of CoPs. They require substantial investments of financial resources, staff time, and opportunity costs, making it essential for both funders and members to answer a core question:

Is a CoP the right mechanism for what we want to achieve?

Some CoPs have begun experimenting with measurement approaches—using learning or evaluation questions, member surveys, and interviews to assess connectedness, learning outcomes, or the effectiveness of different formats. However, these efforts are early-stage and limited in scope.

More intentional and ongoing measurement, planned from the outset, would help CoPs better understand whether they are achieving their intended goals. Beyond internal monitoring, there is a need for broader research to generate evidence on which types of CoPs deliver which outcomes, under what conditions, and at what cost.

Equally important is the sharing of lessons beyond the CoP itself. Just as CoPs thrive on internal exchange, the wider field of collaborative learning benefits from

systematic documentation of CoP achievements, challenges, and effective practices. Funders should consider integrating ongoing measurement and wider research on CoP effectiveness into future plans, and provide learning partners with the mandate and resources to capture and disseminate these insights.

Conclusion

CoPs remain a compelling and increasingly popular model for collaborative learning, especially as funders seek to maximize the impact of their investments. To fulfill this promise, CoPs must rest on strong foundations: clear goals, the right enabling conditions, balanced roles, and well-structured practices. Future CoPs can deepen their impact by pairing intentional design with thoughtful measurement and by proactively sharing what they learn.

By doing so, CoPs can deliver value that is truly greater than the sum of their parts—and justify the time and resources they require to operate effectively.

Annex A: Learning Agenda

1. Deciding to establish a learning-oriented CoP: In an effort to help funders and other organizations think about whether or not a CoP is the right mechanism for their learning objectives, our learning agenda asks:

Suitable objectives

- 1.1. What is driving the decision to establish a CoP?
- 1.2. What are common objectives CoPs set out to achieve?
- 1.3. Which objectives were more successfully achieved than others?

Enabling conditions

- 1.4. What pre-existing conditions have made CoPs effective, or not, in evidence-based learning?

2. Running an effective CoP: Once a decision is made to establish a CoP, the next challenge is to ensure that it runs effectively. To support funders and other stakeholders with this challenge, our learning agenda asked:

Practices

- 2.1. What goal-setting practices support the achievement of CoP objectives?
- 2.2. What practices foster member engagement and buy-in?

Participants and roles

- 2.3. What roles and leadership structures are most effective in ensuring the success and sustainability of learning-oriented CoPs?

Modality

- 2.4. How do in-person and online collaboration differ?

Annex B: In-depth interviews with funders and learning partners

Interviewee	CoP description
Funder Fondation Botnar	CoP where funder grantees can get together in different combinations (by topic or country) to engage with evidence: sharing and learning about what each other is doing.
Funder OECD	Global school network CoP established by a funder and connecting 150 schools across 40+ countries to exchange learnings on 20 evidence-based teaching practices and pinpoint the key ingredients for effective implementation.
Funder ELMA Philanthropies	CoP established by the funder to support its global Early Childhood Development (ECD) portfolio in Uganda, focused on strengthening members' MEL capacity, developing a sector-wide learning agenda, and influencing policy at the national level.
Funder Porticus	CoP established by the funder to support its global Agriculture portfolio. Started with a MEL capacity-building focus but shifted to a lighter, member-led format where members convene annually by region (ie., Americas, Asia, Africa), set the agenda through pre-meeting surveys, and exchange forward-looking lessons.
Learning Partner RTI	CoP with five members from Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, and Vietnam implementing play-based learning initiatives, focused on peer learning and community-building.
Learning Partner EDC	CoP with five members from Brazil, Denmark, Kenya, and Rwanda implementing play-based, tech-enabled education programs, focused on building knowledge and building collaborative relationships.
Learning Partner IPA	CoP with three members working in Rwanda, Zambia, and Uganda with the Learning through Play (LtP) methodology for Early Childhood Education (ECE), focused on refining member's project approaches, strengthening learning and scaling, and sharing learnings within the CoP and beyond to contribute to the LtP global conversation.
	CoP focused on learning in systematic stages to support each member in efficiently assessing and refining activities for results and scalability, for nine members working on playful learning in crisis settings (mostly refugee settings) across Uganda and Ethiopia.
	CoP established in response to interest from members of a donor-funded ECD program in Bangladesh. The five-member CoP focused on aligning each members' approach to learning with a program-level synthesis (evaluation) and reflecting on emerging findings.

Annex C: Implementing partners who participated in the focus group discussion

Implementing Partner	CoP description
Right to Play Africa <hr/> UNICEF Rwanda	CoP with five members from Brazil, Denmark, Kenya, and Rwanda implementing play-based, tech-enabled education programs, focused on building knowledge and building collaborative relationships.
Aga Khan Foundation East Africa <hr/> VVOB Vietnam	CoP with five members from Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, and Vietnam implementing play-based learning initiatives, focused on peer learning and community-building.
BRAC Bangladesh	
VSO Rwanda <hr/> VVOB Zambia	CoP with three members working in Rwanda, Zambia, and Uganda with the Learning through Play (LtP) methodology for Early Childhood Education (ECE), focused on refining member's project approaches, strengthening learning and scaling, and sharing learnings within the CoP and beyond to contribute to the LtP global conversation.

Annex D: Literature Review Bibliography

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