



# HOW TO SET UP A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE ON SRHR

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## CITATION

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For further questions or inquiries, please contact us via [info@share-netinternational.org](mailto:info@share-netinternational.org).

## ABOUT SHARE-NET INTERNATIONAL

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Share-Net started out as the Dutch network on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and has been operational since early 2001. Today, [Share-Net International](#) (SNI) is an international knowledge platform on SRHR, that connects non-governmental organisations, researchers, policymakers, implementers, advocates, students, media, and companies operating in the SRHR field around the globe. SNI is organized in seven hubs with their own network of SRHR actors and knowledge activities. These hubs are located in Bangladesh (since 2014), Burkina Faso (since 2021), Burundi (since 2014), Colombia (since 2021), Ethiopia (since 2021), Jordan (since 2015) and the Netherlands (since 2001). Share-Net International is currently funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its secretariat is hosted by KIT Royal Tropical Institute.

## MISSION AND VISION

Below you can find the mission and vision of SNI. Due to different political environments, some of the SNI hubs have opted for the formulation of their own vision and mission, while all adhere in principle to our common vision and mission. All activities carried out by SNI are done with the hope of inching closer to the goals that our mission and vision include.

**Our vision:** All people have the freedom of choice, are able to make informed decisions, can take action on their sexual and reproductive health and have access to quality care to meet their sexual and reproductive health needs and rights.

**Our mission:** To strengthen linkages between research, policy and practice through sharing, generating, translating and promoting the use of knowledge for the development of better policies and practices in SRHR.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT & NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

All our activities can be classified under two big categories: knowledge management & network development.

### Knowledge management

Knowledge management contributes to better access to evidence-based information on SRHR for researchers, policymakers and programmes so that they, in their turn, can apply this knowledge into the formulation of better policies and practices.

At SNI, we generate new knowledge through research; share knowledge through websites, social media, newsletters and meetings; translate existing knowledge into products appropriate for the target audience (e.g. videos, infographics, document reviews, blogs, short articles, etc.); and promote the use of this knowledge through events, such as thematic meetings, round tables, capacity-building workshops, etc.

### Network development

As a strong network, we can influence policy and practice which has become more relevant and urgent in times that conservatism is growing and the space for civil society is shrinking. As a membership-based platform, network development is crucial to our work. We link and connect SRHR actors from across the world through our activities to build strong ties between different sectors working on SRHR.

## WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

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The term 'Community of Practice' describes a “group of individuals with shared interests that come together - in person or virtually – to tell stories, share and discuss problems and opportunities, discuss best practices, and review lessons learned”. Communities of practice emphasise the social nature of learning within or across organisations.<sup>1</sup>

Communities of Practice (CoPs) focus on social and organizational learning. Rather than seeing a CoP as an additional part of your work, it can enable you to do your work more effectively.

### OBJECTIVES OF A CoP

Through moderated CoPs, SNI members contribute to, discuss, share, use, and have access to evidence and knowledge-products that are most relevant to their specific areas of work for improved SRHR policies and practices.

At SNI, we believe that CoPs need to be driven by members, goal-oriented and content-centred.<sup>2</sup>

### SUCCESS FACTORS

A number of critical success factors have been identified to ensure well-functioning CoPs:

- Commitment: the motivation and commitment of members, interest and enthusiasm to participate (What is in it for me? How can I contribute to a strong network?)
- Structure: a balance between a formal and informal structure
- Mandate: agreement about the thematic focus and expected concrete results of a CoP

CoPs work differently in every hub and have to adhere to local legal and judiciary constraints. They can have a thematic focus or be cross-cutting. Sometimes, the secretariat determines the mandate of the CoP, but in general, the work plans are co-created by the members of the CoP.



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2. NHS National Library for Health (2005). ABC of Knowledge Management. Accessed via [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/knowledge/docs/ABC\\_of\\_KM.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/knowledge/docs/ABC_of_KM.pdf)

3. Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation [SDC] (2007). Community of practice (CoP): From own to shared knowledge. Accessed via [https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/deza/en/documents/die-deza/strategie/150317-flyer-cop\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/deza/en/documents/die-deza/strategie/150317-flyer-cop_EN.pdf)



## EXAMPLE OF A COP IN BURUNDI

Since 2020, Share-Net Burundi has established CoPs to ensure the generation, dissemination and sharing of new knowledge, practices and experiences. A total of six CoPs are in place, five of which are active with another in progress through the EKN Solutions program in Burundi.

### Menstrual Health Community of Practice

This CoP has been active since early 2020 and has organized various activities, including a live debate broadcast on the Share-Net Burundi member media Yaga Burundi. The debate focused on “the impact of the inaccessibility of sanitary pads on the empowerment of Burundian women” as menstruations remain one of the taboo topics in Burundian context. Another example of activity carried out, this CoP has already organized a meeting during which several stakeholders were invited including the Ministry of Health and the fight against AIDS through the national program of sexual and reproductive health (member of our steering committee), Burundian CSOs such as SaCoDe, AWIA, WUFF Burundi, APFB, ... without forgetting the United Nations agencies such as UNFPA and WHO which are among the leads of this CoP. Here, we must not forget the media who are among the guests at each activity to carry the message far.

This CoP is part of a process of change aimed at finding solutions adapted to the local context on how to address sensitive or even taboo subjects.

For more examples of CoP, check out our CoPs on the [digital platform](#).



# HOW TO SET UP A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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## 10 STEPS

### 1. STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

When you have decided that you want to set up a CoP, it is important to know who to involve in your CoP. A stakeholder mapping of organisations and individuals is therefore crucial to determine the potential members of your CoP. For the stakeholder mapping, the [power-influence grid](#) can be used. This will help you to assess which organisations and individuals to engage & consult, which ones to inform and which ones simply need to be monitored. Next to identifying the stakeholder, try to identify contact persons or entry points to contact these organisations.

To help you navigate who to include in your stakeholder mapping, please check out the chapter: [Who to involve in a community of practice?](#)

### 2. CALL FOR MEMBERS: ENGAGE AND MOTIVATE STAKEHOLDERS TO PARTICIPATE

Once you have identified the stakeholders you want to involve in your CoP, it is time to contact them and motivate them to participate. You can either do this written via email, your website or by mail, but you can also decide to approach people directly face-to-face or by phone. In general, at SNI, we use both approaches simultaneously and always develop a call for members. This document outlines what the objective of the first CoP meeting will be, clearly explains the benefits of becoming a member as well as the expectations towards the person or organization you are inviting in terms of participation, including time investment and human resources.

### 3. ORGANISE FIRST CoP MEETING

Now that you have invited potential CoP members and hopefully used all your social skills to make them as enthusiastic as you are, it is time to organize the first CoP meeting. When organizing the CoP meeting, you have to take certain things into account. It is most important to have the meeting in a neutral and safe environment in which people can speak up without facing consequences for their opinions. Secondly, the chosen location needs to be accessible and appropriate for all your invitees. For example, think about people in wheelchairs. Can they access the location you chose? Are the doors wide enough? Is there a lift for use? Etc.

Accessibility is not only a matter of the location but also of the timing, language, etc. Make sure that you organize the meeting at a time at which your invitees are available. For example, if you are inviting young people who are still in school, make sure that the meeting is held at a time in which they do not have school obligations. In terms of language, choose a language that your CoP members speak. For regional or international CoP, check out [this chapter](#). To be sure that you are taking the needs of the CoP members into account, you could approach them directly to ask about it.

### 4. IDENTIFY VALUES AND GROUND RULES

Now that you are having your first meeting and the potential members of the CoP are gathering, it is time to identify common values and set ground rules for both the meeting as the CoP. This is important to [create a safe space](#) in which members feel confident, comfortable and safe to speak up while holding others accountable to the ground rules. Ground rules can include active listening, being on time, the confidentiality of what is discussed, avoiding technical language, and many more.

Additionally, it is important to discuss how you want to communicate with your fellow CoP members. Talking about values and ground rules, it is important to note that CoP members should be given the freedom to withdraw their CoP membership at any time when they do not agree with the identified values and ground rules. CoPs rely on freedom of choice whether to participate or not.

## 5. IDENTIFY LEADS, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Once the values and ground rules of the CoP have been identified and established, it is time to talk about leads, roles and responsibilities within the CoP. You have already included the expectations for participation in your call for members, so build on that. Additionally have a look at [Roles and responsibilities](#) for roles to divide. Every CoP is different and it depends on its members who want to take on which responsibilities.

Furthermore, it is important to identify leads (usually 3 members from 3 different organisations) who will keep an eye on the process and progress of the CoP. Together, they can guide the CoP towards the desired outcome. Usually, 3 CoP members from 3 different organisations take up the lead role to ensure an uneven number of decision-makers. They receive the mandate on behalf of the CoP to take final decisions and solve conflicts, motivate members and solve problems in case they arise.

## 6. CAPACITY-STRENGTHENING OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND OTHERS IF NEEDED

As mentioned under step 3, it is important that your CoP and its meetings are accessible and appropriate for your target group. To ensure this, it might be needed to offer capacity-strengthening, additional information and resources or mentoring to other CoP members and especially young people. These can include capacity-building on the specific SRHR topic, but can also consist in providing opportunities to co-chair a meeting to practise facilitation and chairing skills.

Besides capacity-strengthening, there are also other steps you can take to make your CoP more accessible for all. These include, but are not limited to, using a simple language without acronyms, avoiding difficult technical language (jargon), adapting your facilitation methods to your audience, sharing takeaways via different communication channels, using anonymous idea boxes, etc.

## 7. NEEDS ANALYSIS OR IDENTIFICATION OF OBJECTIVES

With most of the practicalities in place, it is important to clearly define the topic you will be working on as a CoP. You probably already had a topic in mind when you decided to set up a CoP and started your stakeholder mapping. But now with all the stakeholders on board, it is important to come up with a clear scope and objectives.

To do this, it might be useful to do a needs analysis, document review or member consultation to assess the gaps in research, policy and/or practice (or whatever you are focusing on). By doing this, do not underestimate the knowledge that you already have within the CoP. Being set up from a clear mapping of stakeholders, organisations, key populations and influencers, the knowledge about what the gaps or challenges are on the specific topic might already be present. It is therefore important to assess and delimit the topic with the CoP members first before deciding to do an in-depth document review or study.

## 8. DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN OF THE COP

Once you have identified the knowledge gaps in research, policy and/or practice and defined the objectives and scope of the CoP, it is time to make an action plan on how to reach your objectives. This can be formalized in a work plan or terms of reference if wanted. It is important to include the following information in the action plan: action points, necessary steps to realise the action point, responsible person, timeframe, required resources and monitoring.

Remember that an action plan is not a fixed document but should be revisited from time to time to update it, monitor it and adapt it to relevant changes.

## 9. RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Actions often require resources. In your action plan, you have identified the required resources. It is now up to the CoP to determine whether these resources are available or whether you need to mobilise them. Often resources (especially in-kind resources and time) can be mobilized within the organisations the members of the CoP are working for. Think of rooms to hold meetings or events, layout or printing costs, staff time, etc. Additionally, SNI annually provides a small-scale budget to CoPs for additional activities, such as hiring an intern or consultant to do a literature review, coffee and tea arrangements during events, hiring facilitators for events, etc. If this is not enough, the members of the CoP need to engage in fundraising activities to fund their activities. More about this in [Budget and financing](#).

## 10. LET'S GO!

Now that you have set up your CoP, defined the topic and established a detailed action plan, it is time to move on and get on with it! It will depend on your action plan, what steps you will take next and what the most convenient way of working is for your CoP. For some CoPs, monthly face-to-face meetings might be the way to go while for others, having check-in moments via WhatsApp or email work best. Whichever way works best for you, we are sure that working as a CoP will help you to achieve the goal you set together as a team!





## WHO TO INVOLVE IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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To recap, a community of practice is a group of people with shared interests that come together to tell stories, share and discuss problems and opportunities, discuss best practices, and review lessons learned. It is therefore important to involve all the stakeholders and population groups (target groups and their communities) involved with the issues discussed in the CoP. In other words, make sure to create a CoP composed of diverse stakeholders and groups that is inclusive and leaves no one behind.

Stakeholders include all populations that have a stake in a certain issue. These can be groups that have a positive or negative impact on the issue. It is thus broader than vulnerable populations only. For example, although early marriage and teenage pregnancies mainly affect adolescent girls, it is also important to involve adolescent boys and young men in addressing these issues as they are agents of change.

Diversity is important as it leads to a better representation and variety of views and opinions which leads to more creativity and increases the possibility of learning and co-creating solutions. Furthermore, diversity leads to more resilience and the ability to adapt in organisations. In CoPs, specifically, diversity helps to reduce stigmatisation, creating a better sense of belonging and ability to advocate for a better legal-political environment.<sup>4</sup>

At SNI, we therefore aim to involve the following groups in our CoPs, next to NGOs and researchers:

- **Young people:** Many SRHR topics disproportionately affect young people. Think of early marriage and teenage pregnancies, female genital mutilation/cutting, unsafe abortion, STIs and HIV, sexual violence, etc. Young people themselves should therefore always be involved when issues concerning them are discussed. “Nothing about us without us”. At SNI, we commit to meaningful youth participation in our CoPs. If you want to learn more about this concept, check out the Flower of Participation created by CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality and YouAct.
- **Minorities:** Like with young people, CoPs on certain issues should always involve the populations we are talking about and the populations close to them, that can be agents of change or counterforces. Examples of populations that are disproportionately affected by SRHR issues are women and youth, people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, sex workers, people living with disabilities, people and especially youth living with HIV, people living in rural areas, internally displaced populations, refugees, etc.
- **Private sector:** In many countries, the private sector takes up a large role in the provision of SRHR services and products.<sup>5</sup> Over the last years, the focus on private sector participation in SRHR has grown, due to the recognition of its financial and technical contributions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. In some cases, customers turn to the private sector, wanting to bypass certain barriers existing in their countries. On the other hand, the quality provided by the private sector may be better than the one provided by the public sector, for instance for contraception services. In Burundi, for example, young people prefer to buy condoms in private rather than go and get them where they are available and free, out of fear of being judged by the neighbourhood (which is common). It is therefore important to engage the private sector in your CoP to ensure alignment and join efforts in achieving quality SRHR for all.

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4. Ostrowska, B. et al. (2021). Guidelines in learning space innovations. Navigao project. <https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/es/biblioteca/guidelines-in-learning-space-innovations>

5. Countdown2030 Europe (2020). Private sector engagement in sexual and reproductive health. Accessible via [https://www.countdown2030europe.org/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/C2030E\\_Private%20sector%20engagement%20in%20SRH\\_Nov2020.pdf](https://www.countdown2030europe.org/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/C2030E_Private%20sector%20engagement%20in%20SRH_Nov2020.pdf)



- **Government:** As a central and essential body in health, SRHR and other related issues, governments have sectoral programmes to ensure the coordination of interventions of the actors involved. In most countries in Africa and around the world, the government is the key duty bearer of health and at forefront of all interventions in all sexual and reproductive health programmes. By involving government actors in your CoP, you can hold them accountable, influence policies and work towards quality SRHR for all together. It is however important to note that involving the government can also work counteractive and should be reconsidered when working on topics that are restricted by law in your country. Examples include access to safe abortion services, LGBTQI rights, sex work, etc.

When organizing a CoP, we adhere to the ‘Leave no one behind’ principle. You can aim for diversity but if you do not take the necessary precautions into account, it is likely that you will demotivate certain groups to participate. In practice, this means that before organizing a CoP meeting or activity, you should assess the needs of the different groups you want to involve and take the necessary actions to ensure their participation.



## REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CoPs

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Regional and international CoPs work slightly differently than the national CoPs. They include members from different countries. These can include representatives from national CoPs, but also members and SRHR professionals working regionally/internationally. Most activities take place online, but incidental face-to-face meetings can be arranged. The main objective of regional and international CoPs is therefore to exchange knowledge, lessons learned and best practices that can be used in other countries and ensure learning.

Working regionally/internationally can have different challenges, including differences in language, time zones, access to the internet and other communication channels, cultural differences, and different policies and laws. How to address these challenges can differ per CoP and should be discussed with the CoP members.

### **At SNI, we have come across different possibilities:**

1. The international CoP on COVID-19, SRHR and Gender Equality that was set up in 2020, worked completely online and chose English as the working language. It included members from more than 15 countries throughout Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Members of the international CoP represented their own organisation or themselves and exchanged knowledge, best practices and lessons learned regarding including SRHR in the COVID-19 response.
2. The regional CoP on the use of digital approaches to promote adolescent and youth SRHR that is in the process of being set up in the Sahel (Bénin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) chose to set up national CoPs in each of the countries. Representatives from these national CoPs regularly meet online to exchange, learn and link efforts. They are responsible for informing the regional CoP on national activities to ensure collaboration between countries. The CoP members chose to work in this way due to unstable internet connection.

It is therefore up to you and your regional or international CoP to choose what works best for you and to find solutions to your challenges together!



## HOW TO MANAGE A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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### ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

There is no “one size fits it all” approach to CoPs, but there are a number of common responsibilities and roles which we see as important in upholding active and effective CoPs. These are proposed as to inform the set-up of each individual CoP and provide common ground among them.<sup>6</sup>

#### Members of the CoP

- Shared commitment and responsibility to the CoP
- Define and review the focus and objectives of the CoP
- Build trust and safe spaces (Annex 1)
- Active and inclusive participation
- Formulate the work plan of the CoP together
- Organising activities
- Commitment to sharing knowledge and identifying opportunities to create added value
- Provide information to SNI M&E system

#### Chair of the CoP (CoP member/s)

- Lead and moderate the CoP
- Identify and invite potential members and assessing their needs
- Oversee the implementation of the annual work plan
- Organise CoP meeting and create spaces where CoP members can interact
- Encourage members to actively participate
- Safeguard CoP ground rules (as agreed by CoP)
- Lead fundraising efforts of the CoP where relevant

#### Share-Net International Facilitation (CoP facilitator)

- Accompany and support the chair of the CoP in their tasks
- Identify opportunities for overall promotion of the work of the CoP
- Connect the CoP to other relevant CoPs and organisations
- Monitoring & Evaluation for SNI M&E system

### BUDGET AND FINANCING

CoPs usually function on a small budget. Organisations and members of the CoP provide their time to the activities of the CoP as an in-kind contribution. Additionally, SNI allocates a small budget for the CoP to cover the costs of projects, the creation of products, etc. Lastly, CoP members themselves engage in resource mobilization for the organization of their meetings, events, or knowledge products. Support can, for instance, come from other funded programmes if the CoP theme aligns. Many donors encourage and applaud collaboration and coordinated and aligned efforts between organisations and programmes. Participating as CoP members in fundraising activities, contributes to the financial stability of the CoP.

### EXCITED?

Excited about the concept of a CoP and are you thinking about joining a Share-Net International CoP or setting up your own? Feel free to reach out to us to explore opportunities! We are excited to hear your story and learn about your experiences.

Contact us at [info@share-netinternational.org](mailto:info@share-netinternational.org) and stay tuned via our socials.

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6. This is a suggested set to be discussed and adapted. This list is informed by SNI's tacit knowledge about hosting CoPs and further informed by lessons learned among CoPs working in the field of climate change as described in: Understanding Communities of Practice: An overview for adaptation practitioners. IIDDD 2012



## ANNEX 1 SAFE SPACES

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### WHAT IS A SAFE SPACE?

A safe space is *“a place or environment in which a person or class of persons can be confident that they will not be subjected to discrimination, criticism, harassment or other emotional or physical harm.”*

### WHY IS A SAFE SPACE IMPORTANT?

#### Reflection exercise:

- Have you experienced a time when your environment was made up of problems? How did this affect your focus?
- Have you ever encountered a situation where you were not listened to or your ideas were rejected? How did this make you feel?
- Have you ever “made a mistake” and had a negative experience?

In any of the above scenarios, people will inevitably feel less valued, less confident or less empowered. In this case, they won’t have the energy to focus, be productive and happy.

### KEY COMPONENTS OF A SAFE SPACE<sup>7,8</sup>

- Building trust (team rules, making time for each other)
- Respect and open communication (not blaming)
- Feedback and encouragement (encourage ideas, give praise)
- Opportunities for growth (coach and mentor)
- Connecting the team to the why (team needs to understand the big picture)

### TEN STEPS TO CREATING A SAFE SPACE WITHIN A CoP<sup>9</sup>

1. Choose the venue with great care
2. Be aware of hosting and receiving individuals
3. Make sure the group of participants is inclusive and diverse
4. When preparing for the event or dialogue, remember to carefully plan the opening
5. Set ground rules or guidelines that the group will then be responsible for
6. Allow sufficient time for the dialogue or activities
7. Take the conversations to the personal level
8. Create space to acknowledge the past and take responsibility for the future
9. Accompany each participant individually before, during and after the event
10. Last but not least, be aware of your facilitation posture and approach



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7. [Creating A Safe Space For Your Team](#) | by Claire Tran | The Startup

8. [Groups Want Safety – A Facilitator’s Guide to Creating Safe Space – North Star Facilitators](#)

9. Adapted from [10 conseils pour créer un espace sûr](#) | IofC



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