EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN INDIA

Many organisations are currently strengthening their Knowledge Management activities, and in this regard, there is considerable interest in Communities of Practice (CoPs). This document is the outcome of a short study commissioned by Intercooperation on existing CoPs in the development sector in India.

CoPs have their origins in the private sector, and were adapted later in the larger multi-lateral and bilateral development organisations. The paper thus includes experience in the private sector in India, as well as the development sector. Within the latter, a variety of examples of groups and networks that display at least some characteristics of CoPs are highlighted. They include Adikke Pathrike (a farmers' group producing a journal in Karnataka); an NTFP Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP); a listserv and email discussion group, dnrm; an information sharing group on livelihoods and gender equity, jivika; and a group championing women's rights, Nari Shakti.

This Working Paper should be of interest to anyone interested in the generation, capturing and sharing of knowledge in the development sector, particularly in India.

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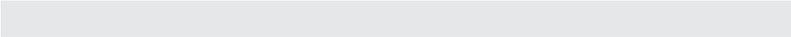
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Natural Resource Management
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Intercooperation in India
WORKING PAPER 1

EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITIES
OF PRACTICE IN INDIA

Contents

Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

APPS   Ananta Paryavarana Parirakshana Samiti

APDR   Association of Protection of Democratic Rights

CRM   Customer Relationship Management

CoPs   Communities of Practice

DNRM   Decentralised Natural Resource Management

IT   Information Techonology

JFM   Joint Forest Management

KM   Knowledge Management

LAs   Learning Alliances'

MBTI   Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

NTFP-EP   NTFP Exchange Programme

SVA   Sukhar Virodhi Abhiyan

OISSG   Open Information Systems Security Group

PRIs   Panchayati Raj Institutions

PCN   Process of Black Communities
            (PCN, Proceso de Comunidades Negras)

RoI   Return-on-Investment

Executive Summary

Many organisations are currently strengthening their Knowledge Management (KM) activities, and in this regard, there is considerable interest in Communities of Practice (CoPs). This document is the outcome of a short study commissioned by Intercooperation on existing CoPs in the development sector in India.

CoPs have their origins in the private sector, and were adapted later in the larger multi-lateral and bilateral development organisations. This paper thus includes experience in the private sector in India, as well as the development sector. It begins, however, with a review of the literature, noting that there are six essential elements of CoPs: the obvious ones are the community, the domain, and the practice, whilst more hidden ones are the motivation of the members, their mandate, and the informal structure of the group.

Within the Indian private sector, Knowledge Management is already widely accepted in theory and in practice. Overall, two broad kinds of CoPs are identified – self-organising, and sponsored. The former tends to be informal, and to exist as a result of a shared interest of its members in a particular theme or practice area. Sponsored communities, by contrast, are initiated, chartered and supported by the company management.

Turning to the development sector in India, a wide variety of groups and networks that bear some characteristics of CoPs are identified. Highlighted examples are *Adikke Pathrike* (a farmers' group producing a journal in Karnataka); an NTFP Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP); a listserv and email discussion group, dnrm; an information sharing group on livelihoods and
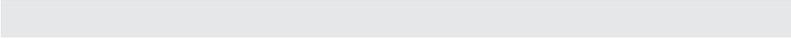
gender equity, *jivika*; and a group championing women's rights, Nari Shakti. Other examples are mentioned in less detail. The goals and domains of the groups reviewed range from the very specific and functional, to the somewhat more open. Membership also shows great variations in size from large numbers in e-groups, to usually smaller face-to-face groups. In all, one of the most important features has been the leadership provided by a few individuals or organisations with the time and energy to contribute. This is not only with regard to initiation, but also for continuity (either by the same initiators, or others). It was striking that the main concerns for the future centres on the role of the core group or the moderator/leaders, rather than financial arrangements.

Returning to the more theoretical level, it is noted that a major challenge for the future concerns the question of generating, capturing and sharing 'tacit' or 'soft' knowledge – and the related need for defining different types of knowledge. As a final thought, the paper highlights the growing significance of non-academic knowledge generated through people's movements and similar initiatives.

Introduction

Study background and objectives

Intercooperation commissioned a short consultancy study to:

● review CoPs in the development sector in India, including salience and types of CoPs, and their characteristics;

● provide lessons for supporting CoPs as a part of Intercooperation's KM activities.

This Working Paper is a shortened version of the final study report.

The current portfolio of Knowledge Management at Intercooperation includes people-to-people exchanges, (e.g., facilitating multiple stakeholder fora); electronic sharing of information; and documentation and dissemination. Intercooperation recognises the utility and value of CoPs and is exploring their potential in the context of the Indian development sector – with its multiple stakeholders dispersed over a large area, a digital and language divide which results in high access to information at one end of the spectrum with little percolating to the other, but also a wealth of relevant field experiences and unpublished information.

Study approach and limitations

Beginning with a short literature review on Knowledge Management and CoPs, a long list of candidate groups and networks was generated on the
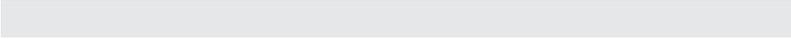
basis of available sources of information: on the web, through e-mail, telephone and face-to-face discussions with people, annual reports and other printed matter.

In the short-listing, the primary filter used was whether they demonstrated features commonly attributed to CoPs. Further, an attempt has been made to cover different types of groups – groups from different domains of activity and endeavour (e.g., industry, civil liberties, NRM, gender and HRD); groups with varied membership units (individuals and organisations); groups using different interface methods (e-mail and web-based, physical or face to face groups, and hybrid groups); groups functioning at different levels (community/grass-root to practitioners to wider publics) and scales (local/districts, states, cross-country region); and so on.

Two cases were taken from the corporate sector to draw lessons, although the focus of the overall study was on formations from the development sector and public action.[1] After covering more than 20 such groups, a shorter list of about 10 groups was selected for detailed study. While only some of these show characteristics of CoPs, many contribute to an understanding about specific features that 'pure CoPs' might attempt to emulate. Information collected on a number of other groups and networks was used to understand what types they signified, and to confirm their features, even if they have not been incorporated in this document (this was limited by time, hazard of repetition, and in some cases, the group being an 'outlier' in terms of relevance of the realm of practice).

This study was largely desk-based,and does not purport to be an exhaustive coverage of groups and networks in India, nor even in any given sector (in fact, many development sectors have not been covered at all). The emphasis has been on understanding different types of groups and drawing lessons from them. Hence, the lessons are better treated as tentative and

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1. Some new communities like those promoted by UNDP Solutions Exchange were not covered as a part of this study.
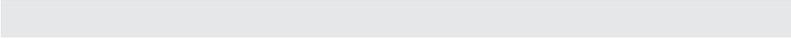
emerging signs that are deeply embedded in a number of contextual factors that merit greater understanding beyond the appreciation of the 'technical' factors of group functioning.

Communities of Practice: descriptions and dimensions

A CoP is broadly described as a group of *self-motivated people* (and/or organisations), usually *without a formal structure*, that interacts/meets *regularly* and in which members *share their knowledge and experience* with each other with a view to *learning and improving* the effectiveness of their *realm of practice in an identified area* or domain (after Wenger, 1998, and SDC, n.d.). CoPs have been described by different people over the last two decades.

At the simplest level, 'CoPs are small groups of people who have worked together over a period of time and through extensive communication have developed a common sense of purpose and desire to share work-related knowledge and experience'. (http://www.tfriend.com/op-lit.htm, cited in WB, n.d.)

In the 1990s, Jean Lave (an anthropologist) and Etienne Wenger (an independent thinker and researcher) were credited with coining and formally describing the term CoP as:

'Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'.

The definition had three crucial characteristics:

- **The Domain**: 'not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people'.

- **The Community**: 'members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that

enable them to learn from each other. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together'.

- **The Practice**: '..not merely a community of interest – people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice'.

Wenger identified three dimensions of CoPs:

- What it is about – its *joint enterprise* as understood and continually renegotiated by its members

- How it functions - *mutual engagement* that binds members together into a social entity

- What capability it has produced – the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

Corporate origins: KM, intra-organisational CoPs and beyond

CoPs have their origins in the private sector. Informal groups of employees, meeting regularly to share experiences and learn from each other in corporations like Xerox, Boeing, etc., have been in existence since long. By the late 1980s, recognition of Knowledge as the fourth important factor of production and efficiency had led to organisations to search for approaches for their personnel to learn from within the organisation, as well as from outside. At this time, under the influence of possibilities offered by information technology, many organisations were prompted to interpret knowledge management narrowly as digital capture and retrieval of information. This was, however, insufficient
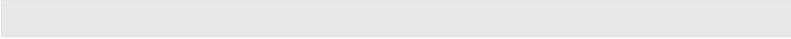
to address problems of incentives and barriers to learning on the part of individuals, organisations and institutions.

Almost in parallel, conventional methods of human resource development were faced with increased costs and uncertain effectiveness in many organisations that were exposed to a much more competitive and increasingly connected world. The search for a comprehensive approach for organisations to learn, ended in authors like Senge (1990) drawing from a vast array of disciplines to consolidate and give a comprehensive framework for knowledge management. One of the effective stratagems was the import and adaptation of social communities – groups within the organisation who would share and learn from each other, impelled by their own search and interest, and contribute incidentally to the greater goals of the organisation.

By the 1990s, many of the larger corporate organisations (both in the private sector and development agencies such as the World Bank), had instituted communities to elevate their levels of learning towards improved performance and building more dynamic and learning organisations. The large number of employees, across many geographical locations and divisions, meant that special efforts were required to get people and organisational units to learn in an informal, yet semi-structured manner. The 1990s witnessed a large number of Indian private sector organisations also experimenting with CoPs and by the turn of the century, this was common in many organisations. Some had also taken the initiative to root CoPs in their Knowledge Management approaches and structures, as benefits became obvious. CoPs across organisations had also become popular by now, bringing together professional practitioners irrespective of organisational affiliations – a step that many of the already existing professional associations (e.g., HRD professionals, accountants, lawyers, etc.) could easily promote.[2]

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2. It has not been possible to enumerate and study such professional groupings but there is anecdotal evidence pointing to the existence of groups that show some, if not all, features of CoPs.
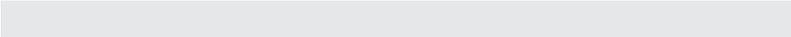
Development organisations (donors, INGOs) are now attempting to utilise the approach of CoPs in working with their client organisations, i.e., community based and non-governmental organisations, and more importantly, with individuals working in these organisations, or other independent researchers, field workers and activists (See Ford Foundation, 2004). Working through networks and groups of organisations has been practised in the realm of development for many decades. In the post-independence decades, many of the Gandhian organisations in India worked much in the manner of communities of individuals and groups that were committed to certain domains of work, and collaborated intensively in each other's work. Utilising the opportunities (improved economy, better reach, constituency building) presented by working with a group of individuals and organisations, rather than individual organisations separately, many donors and INGOs in the 1990s consciously adopted the strategy of supporting the development of networks. This was for regional spread, or for lobbying and advocacy that required building multiple alliances, or even for sharing or replicating technical and social development approaches. Such strategies often depended, however, upon the presence and support provided by donors. Thus the networks were implicitly designed to wither away once their tasks were accomplished or support withdrawn.

The new approach that has emerged with CoPs is that of experimenting with sustainable groupings and formations of individuals and organisations, which are (or will remain as) communities of practice irrespective of the presence of donors or support agencies. In other words, this new approach seeks to take back to the public domain, especially developmentalist groups, the incentives and lessons that spontaneous and voluntary social groupings provided in the first place – but building on existing relations and resources embedded in networks. It becomes germane to quickly revisit what different bodies of experience and theoretical work had to say about learning societies and organisations.

Conceptual underpinnings: psychology, sociology, KM, and CoPs

Even though the description of CoPs appears simple, the development of its framework draws from a wide swath of disciplines. In the late 1960s, Abraham Maslow enunciated his famous pyramid of hierarchy of needs – physiological need, the need for safety and security, the need for love and belonging, the need for esteem, and the need to actualise the self, in this order. He talked about the innate need for individuals to have values of being and a deep need to engage with society, nature and life around.[3]

Another set of scholars has been following developments on how social networks function, and in particular, how groups and networks form and sustain, how open and closed networks behave, and what happens to groups who are 'better connected'. The social theory of networks, which later with the concept of social capital enunciated by some scholars, sought to utilise concepts from information and network sciences to explain and apply to the situation of social groups. Social capital has gained prominence over the past two and half decades, drawing apologists and critics alike. Collective action (Olson, Hardin, Ostrom and colleagues) literature dwelt upon the conditions of collective action and applied them to specific domains. Work of other sociologists attempted depicting a way of life as a viable combination of social relations (patterns of interpersonal relations) and cultural bias (shared values and beliefs), and explored different combinations of 'grids and groups' within societies (Thompson et al, 1990). In his seminal work, Castells (2000) provided a comprehensive contemporary treatment to the advent of the information age in relation to economy, society and culture. The World Development Report 1998/1999 summarised the case for the importance of application of information and knowledge in development.

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3   In the late 1980s, Manfred Max Neef and colleagues contested this *hierarchy* and emphasised the simultaneity, complementarity and trade-offs of such needs. Exploring the applications of wants and needs to human development, Max-Neef classified the fundamental human needs as: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, *participation*, recreation, creation, identity and freedom. See Max Neef, Human Scale Development: an Option for the Future (1987).
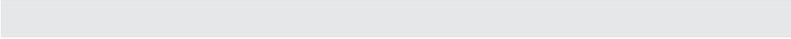
One of the important elements of CoPs has to do with how individuals, groups, organisations, and societies learn. The different approaches and pedagogies of learning found an echo in the work of developing concepts of CoPs, most important being the process of learning as a continuum, not a project that concludes. From the Knowledge Management arena came the contribution that to valorise and convert tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge required processing by way of sharing and, more important, recurrent practice.

Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) had comprehensively drawn from various disciplines to bear upon the question of the ingredients of a learning organisation. Senge applied the body of work in systems dynamics to provide a conceptual frame for organisations to make a paradigm shift into:

'…organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together'.

Senge details personal mastery, systems thinking, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning as the five 'disciplines' that need to be approached at one of the three levels: *practices* (what we do); *principles* (guiding ideas and insights); and *essences* (the state of being those with high levels of mastery in the discipline). He urges the need for practice to meaningfully bridge the conscious with the subconscious, and converting tacit into explicit knowledge (Senge, 1990).

Dimensions of CoPs

A recent SDC paper (SDC, n.d.) attempts to resolve the definitional issues in order that there is an operational framework to study and situate groups in a CoP framework. It identifies six essentials of a CoP:
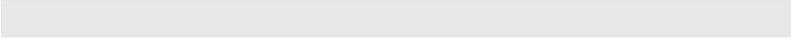
Three obvious aspects:

1. **Community –** with more and less active members. Members regard the community as something special and accord a certain priority to it. They like to meet and to share.

2. **Domain –** a clear domain or theme, neither too narrow nor too large, relevant and meaningful for the members.

3. **Practice –** each member has his/her own practice within the domain and members know about each other's practice.

Three hidden essentials are:

4. **Motivation –** of its members, visible in their personal interest and in the priority they attribute to CoP in their daily activities.

5. **Mandate –** of the concerned organisation(s) defines on one side the thematic focus with the declared interest of the organisation in a concrete outcome; on the other side, the mandate gives open space for self-commitment to its members (working time and financial resources).

6. **Informal structure –** beyond organisational boxes and lines. Most CoPs make a link between organisational units and between organisations.

CoPs aim at sharing knowledge that comprises:

- communicating knowledge in usable forms;

- recognising the value of the gained knowledge in another context or situation.

In this way, the CoPs run by alternating cycles of practice, and extracting and sharing.

Differentiating CoPs from other types of associations or groups, the paper suggests diagnostics as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Distinguishing features of CoPs

What is the **size** of the group?	Open, between 10 and 100, or even more.
Who is participating? What is the commitment?	Interested professionals, committed by personal professional interest.
What is the inner **structure** of the group? What roles can be differentiated?	Informal structure, no hierarchy. Core group with owners, experts and facilitator; inner circle with active participants; open for interested people (outer circle).
What is the **domain** of concern (theme, topic)? Who defines it?	A clearly defined domain (= thematic field), defined by owners and active participants.
What is the **aim** of the interaction?	Increasing quality of the professional work through access to relevant information, knowledge and experience.
To what extent motivation and interests are personal and to what extent **mandate**d by the institution?	Personal interest is predominant. The institutions declare their interest in general terms.
What kinds of results are expected? Who defines them?	No strict planning of activities and results. Often concrete results are the outcome of a process, not planned, but happening by chance.

What is the planned **duration** of the interaction?	Open, depending on funding. Reviews prove the value (outcome and concrete results) of a CoP. A CoP exists as long as it serves the members and member organisations. Without concrete results, a CoP closes down.
How is the working **mood** of the group?	A high commitment by the members is very typical for a CoP.
Where is the **source** of the information/knowledge/ experience?	Mainly by the active participants (inner circle and core group); external experts may be consulted.
What are the working **tools** of the group?	Networking, workshops, peer exchange, peer review, joint projects, joint evaluations, joint planning, etc.
How is the group **financed**? Who has an interest in its financing? *Source:* SDC, n.d.	Financing through interested organisations (funds and working time).

The paper traces the different stages of evolution of a CoP from creation to extinction, and highlights the following:

- Make sure key **stakeholders** are members
- Be aware of the specificity of the **subject** (domain)
- Care for shared internal **rules**, a code of conduct
- Keep the **energy** flowing
- Create links between (different) stakeholders and their **realities**
- Adjust to **changes** in the environment
- Strive for most practical and tangible **outputs/outcomes**
- Stay aware of **ownership**
- Make the **resources** available
- Select carefully the ways of **communication**, of 'being connected'
- Focus on the **value** of the CoP for the members.

This framework provides a good starting point for analysing groups and networks, and identifying which qualities of CoPs are demonstrated by these groups. Underlying the above framework however, is a number of confounding structures, influences and forces, as the previous section has shown. These pertain to the social context and environment in which the groups are located, motivational factors for group formation, background of members, and medium of exchange, apart from other factors pertaining to group and network behaviour itself. A simplified version of the above framework is used to examine the groups and networks in India, in the search for CoPs and the lessons they may hold.

In the following sections, a variety of case studies are highlighted in text boxes. Details of other examples that are referred to in the main text but not elaborated, may be found in the original study report.

The private sector in India started adopting Knowledge Management approaches in the 1990s. Initially, this was understood as capturing and storing huge volumes of data and information, and disseminating this (or making it available for whoever wanted) to employees at different levels. In the later stages, it was felt that structured or 'hard' knowledge needed supplementing by experience, practice and the 'softer' and tacit elements, in order to be complete and useful.

By the turn of the century, many of the larger Indian companies had become alive to the criticality of an effective KM strategy, i.e., one that impacted the performance of the organisation, in the face of considerably increased competition from the opening up of the Indian economy, as well as the tremendous changes that information technology was bringing about. While each had their own set of events that triggered off work in the knowledge management area, most firms have embraced the best practices and good-fit strategies from the table that Senge had enunciated almost a decade ago. The case of TATA Steel shows how CoPs became an integral part of its KM strategy that in turn is inter-woven into the company's core processes, and HRD and organisational development systems that are geared to performance improvements.

KM and CoPs within the organisation

TATA Steel launched its KM initiative when a number of recurrent and similar breakdowns in its manufacturing facilities were traced back to the lack of a culture and systems within the organisation, to tap into its *own expertise and experiences*. The company entered into the new millennium '..with a confidence of a learning and knowledge based organisation'. Their KM programme was '..to capture the available abundant knowledge assets in the form of tacit (experience, thumb rules, etc.) and explicit (literature, reports, failure analysis, etc.), to organise and transform the captured knowledge, and to facilitate its usage at the right place and in right time'.

Apart from investing in IT infrastructure, the company incorporated participation in KM activities in staff members' performance appraisals. Knowledge communities were created for its core processes and systems – there are about 20 communities functioning now (for about 4,000 executives). The communities are a knowledge-sharing platform, not a task force to solve a problem – they bring people together to share what they know and to learn from one another. Since many of these are large in size, there are further specialised sub-communities who federate into that community. Each of the knowledge communities has a few distinct roles viz., Champion, Convener, Practice Leader, Lead Expert and Practitioners, etc. Communities meet face to face every month, and hold presentations, discussions, visits, sharing of experiences, talks by experts, etc. Some salient features of the company's KM approach were:

- Strong support and commitment of Senior Management to KM.

- Performance measurement system that takes account not just of tasks performed and roles fulfilled, but also a KM index.

- The approach has been of documenting; simplifying, refining and then passing on knowledge for use using pedagogically simple methods (in preference to loading personnel with dense material) – a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' knowledge.

Source: www.TATASTEEL.com; discussions with TATA Steel KM Team, Sep 2005

KM and CoPs in the IT industry

In the corporate sector at present, a number of drivers for Knowledge Management have emerged. These include: increased workforce mobility, growing complexity in business environments, the need for lifelong learning, willingness by companies to invest in KM, the need to reduce loss of intellectual assets from employee turnover, the need to avoid reinventing the wheel, the faster pace of innovation, the need to operate at the global level, an increasing shift from tactical to strategic adoption of KM practices, and a steady absorption of internet and wireless technology.

A survey of IT companies (Rao, 2003) found that the reasons why 70 per cent of the surveyed companies adopted a KM initiative were *enhancement of internal collaboration* and *capture and sharing of best practices*.

HR-related practices like e-learning, customer-focused systems like Customer Relationship Management (CRM), and market factors like competitive intelligence, also figured as reasons underlying adoption of KM in at least 40 per cent of the companies.

The study used the 8C framework for assessing and enabling the success of KM practices in 15 global InfoTech companies of which three initiatives are based in India – Infosys, i2 and I-FLEX. The salient features of the 8C framework and the analysis of findings from the study of the 15 IT companies using this framework are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Assessment of Knowledge Management in the IT industry with the 8C Framework

No.	The Cs	What they mean	The IT scene
1	Connectivity	What is the level of connectivity between knowledge workers? Field to office, mobile to HQ, etc: devices, bandwidth, interface, technology, and tools.	All have robust and multi-tier connectivity. Some have been sensible enough to anticipate and plan, while others progressed to this level over time. Wireless is seen as the next best bet.
2	Content	What knowledge assets are relevant to the workflow and what are the strategies for codification, classification, archival, retrieval, usage and tracking?	Sophisticated strategies to manage content. Improvisations of the library management practice but with more depth and options in view of technology available. All provide for user-creation of content with supervision. Unmediated and open systems led to proliferation that was corrected over a period.
3	Community	What are the core *communities of practice* aligned with business and what organisational support is there for	Generally a top–down approach in identifying the community sites based on an analysis of workflow and

		identifying, nurturing and harnessing?	business model. However, community development and content has been a bottom-up process. Health check systems for CoPs also developed.
4	Culture	Does the organisation have a culture of learning where employees thirst for knowledge, trust one another and have visible support from the management?	Knowledge-centricity and innovation driven by top-management strategies. Change management roll outs felt needed as support.
5	Capacity	What are the organisational strategies for building knowledge-centric capacity in your employees via workshops, white papers, mentoring and e-learning?	Strong support for knowledge building through a mix of in-house efforts and using external consultants.
6	Cooperation	Do employees have a sense of open cooperation plus does the organisation cooperate on KM with clients, partners, universities, and industry consortia?	Cooperation internally advocated as a priority by top management. Cooperation with external agents a feature in all.
7	Commerce	What commercial and other incentives does the organisation use	Mix of commercial and non-commercial incentives. E.g.

		to promote KM? How does it price contribution, acceptance and usage of knowledge assets?	Infosys's knowledge currency units (KCUs), MITRE's KM achievement award.
8	Capital	What share of revenues is invested in KM? How does the organisation measure its usage and benefits in monetary and qualitative terms?	Aimed at developing suitable Returns on Investment (RoI) metric.

Source: Rao (ed.), 2003

The positioning of knowledge communities has been situated in a framework of knowledge management in the above companies, along with other ingredients of KM, as elegantly presented in the 8Cs approach.

As we move into the second half of the current decade, KM and CoPs are finding stronger recognition in all types of companies, pervading both those that were 'old' economy (e.g., engaged in manufacturing and trade, and see knowledge as one of the means to re-invent themselves) as well as the new generation of business that is information and knowledge intensive.

Another development noticeable is the emergence of cross-organisational CoPs from a particular area of knowledge and practice. One such story is that of an IT security community that developed and is popularising a new framework. The Open Information Systems Security Group (OISSG), is a not-for-profit organisation, created to promote awareness of Information Systems Security using different media, through the provision of a hosted environment. This virtual forum was started in 2003 amongst security enthusiasts for sharing and learning. Membership is free and open to anyone willing to learn about Information Security.

Another example of a cross-organisational CoP is that of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) Synergy Group, highlighted in Box 2. This is interesting in that it shows that a lack of opportunity to practice may spell demise for a well-meaning and interested group.

Box 2: The MBTI Synergy Group

The MBTI Synergy Group was a spontaneous creation of all the people who attended the MBTI accreditation course in April, 2004. (MBTI is a personality or psychological type inventory developed by two psychologists). It was built up as an e-group, participants being from 10 different Indian cities. The goal was to keep in touch with developments and experiences of members as they continued their practice of MBTI. The group started with around 30 members – of which most were active through the first 6–8 months. There was no structure, as such – just people who were excited about learning and practising MBTI and wanting to keep in touch with each other. One of the more experienced persons in the group took on the mantle of guiding the group including moderating the exchanges, and another member volunteered to set up and manage the e-group.

This community worked entirely through the electronic media. The moderator suggested once or twice that people in the same city meet up, but timing was an issue and this did not happen. Most were happy posting their queries in the initial weeks. Since the moderator had more hands-on experience than others, a lot of the questions were aimed at getting his advice for specific issues. At times, the moderator took the initiative of posting some tips that he thought people would find useful – and always got a rich response in terms of others joining for a 'conversation' over a period of 10–15 days each time. The frequency was almost daily in the initial weeks; from the third month onwards, it declined to once a week or so. By the end of about 8 months, it became infrequent. There was a visible shift from 'practice'-oriented dialogue to more of 'conceptual' dialogue over a period of time, finally leading to dormancy. The 'group' still exists (August 2005) but now has perhaps only one exchange in several weeks.

Source: Bharat Krishnan, Note for CoP Study, Aug 2005
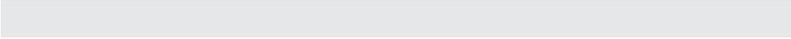
Like the example of internet security, the MBTI group had a highly specialised subject but this was unfortunately a tool that sponsor organisations could do without. The members' inability to practise their 'trade' and skills meant that the group could not sustain beyond a point.

Key lessons from private sector KM and CoPs

The private sector initiatives point to two kinds of communities – self-organising, and sponsored. The former (the OISSG case) tends to be informal in nature and has shared interest in a particular theme or practice area as its reason for existence. Communities sponsored by companies are initiated, chartered and supported by the management. The key lessons learnt from these approaches are:

Self-Organising CoPs

- *Existence of a demand that goads people to organise themselves:* the particular sub-theme in security ('penetration testing') combined with the open-system philosophy and low cost of access, were major accelerators in a situation characterised by technology in an emergent phase (few experts and less than complete know-what and know-how) and available services expense (training from proprietary service providers);

- *Orientation of content to live concerns of members and enabling learning*: this was facilitated through multiple tiers of interaction, e.g. e-mail-based discussion coupled with face-to-face practice sessions in local chapters, and building identity and group meta-think through conferences;

- *Design principles that enabled sharing across organisational boundaries:* the open-systems paradigm was the enabler here, facilitated by employers' support to the community.

- *Professional satisfaction, recognition and identity* were ensured to members active in the community. While core activities of the group enabled knowledge sharing and help in professional skill enhancement,

the group dynamics and platforms for interaction set the base for individual recognition. Further, the community has used conferences and its publications/products to build a group identity from which the members derive associational benefits.

Sponsored CoPs

- *Importance of a KM vision and strategy* that is closely aligned to the business goals of the organisation. This is driven by a combination of technology, people and process considerations, keeping in mind the complexity of organisational behaviour, challenges of the business and heightened competition.

- *Perception of communities as a key element in the operationalisation* of the strategy, but not at the exclusion of other operational elements such as creation of repository, archival-retrieval, etc. For the cases examined, the knowledge strategy aligned with business goals was paramount. Most institutions identified sites for potential communities and even initiated them, while sharing platforms; knowledge use was kept open enough to allow germination of any new communities for which the knowledge workers felt a need.

- *Great clarity on a Return-on-Investment (RoI) metric for KM*: The Achilles' heel of KM is, in most cases, measurement of performance. While few companies appear to have fully resolved this question, TATA provides an example of a company consciously working on the matter.

- *Management support and belief in the KM strategy* is crucial for effectiveness. In some cases, senior management has to initiate and drive this from the top while providing incentives and opportunity for mindset and behaviour change.

- *Significant effort in training and facilitation* needs to be put in to orient members to contribute and use platforms that are set up, and to enable change management/workflow changes as part of orientation towards business logic.
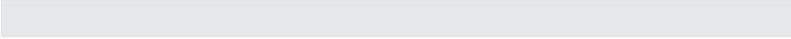
- *Key mistakes* have included:
  - Leading with technology only;
  - Treating KM as data/information management;
  - Positioning KM as a stand-alone or an add-on;
  - Ignoring the need for extensive training and change management;
  - Identification of communities or KM models through an examination of workflow and business needs, rather than practice areas.

Formation and nurturing of communities needs support both within organisational situations, and for connecting individuals across organisational barriers. The commitment and resources that a top management-led KM strategy brings is replaced by the entrepreneurial leadership and voluntarism, and members' interest, in the cross-organisational communities. Thereafter, a number of factors, support structures and processes as described above explain the success of communities of practice in the Indian private sector. A number of these features are also relevant for KM and CoPs in the development sector.

3

Communities of Practice in the development sector in India

A scan of groups and networks in the development sector shows that not only is there a huge number of them, but also depending on the subject, region and nature and purpose, their types defy any comprehensive classification or categorisation. In this study, an attempt was made to cover a range of types of such groupings in public space and especially in the development domain.

These groups or formations include:

● mobilisations and movements that tended to show organised forms at later stages;

● organisations that were at the centre of mobilising other groups and individuals into communities;

● groups of NGOs that came together to work or lobby for change;

● groups of individuals and of organisations that showed signs that emulated or in some cases went beyond the descriptions of CoPs.

Hence, there is a full spectrum covering small groups of individuals to social mobilisations on the other end.

While these cases are mostly not CoPs (some surely are that and more), they are presented to draw general lessons on the whereabouts of collective/ group/network behaviour, extracting what works, and what does not, for different types of groups in different settings. This wider remit also allows

a more inclusive approach whereby the bounds presented by operational indicators of CoPs (summarised earlier) are stretched a bit to gain better analytical leverage.

This section provides a summary version of selected cases, for a quick appreciation of the range and features of the studied groups. Further details may be found in the original study report.

Groups and networks in India: Some examples

The case of *Adikke Pathrike* (southern, coastal Karnataka and northern Kerala) is an attempt at facilitating journalism involving farmers to share experiences and promote knowledge sharing among them.

Box 3: *Adikke Pathrike*: Farmers' journal builds a CoP?

The medium-to-heavy-rainfall districts of southern, coastal Karnataka and northern Kerala, are characterised by low hills and lateritic soils, making the area unsuitable for the intensive rice production. Farmers in the area grow small amounts of rice and other food crops but most of their efforts are devoted to cash crops like arecanut, coconut, cashew, cocoa, and black pepper. A particularly severe drop in prices in the mid-1980s caused a crisis in Karnataka. The All-India Areca Growers' Association attempted to search for solutions. Several committees were formed through the association and Shree Padre, a local journalist (and areca grower), volunteered to produce a newsletter for growers, on an experimental basis. The first several issues of the four-page tabloid were sold for Re1 and, with the help of advertising revenue, it managed to break even. The positive response to the newsletter led to a search for a more extensive magazine: and *Adikke Pathrike* was born. A monthly magazine, about 28 pages is attractively produced, with a colour photograph on the cover, additional black-and-white photos and diagrams to illustrate news items. It is written entirely in Kannada, the local language. The magazine is 15 years old now, has never missed a deadline, and brings out a special annual issue.

Beginning with Areca, the publication soon expanded to discuss a wide range of crops and other rural activities: management techniques for crops, prospects of new crop enterprises, farm machinery, farm household improvement, and even new recipes. The editorial stance of the magazine is 'pragmatically green' – favouring technologies that lower dependence on external inputs. Furthermore, advertising from pesticide manufacturers is not accepted. The magazine is very 'science friendly' and welcomes information on new technology. Some of the key features are:

● It tries to ensure that farmers themselves write about their own experience, rather than simply passing on information from university or public research institute scientists.

● An iterative and adaptive approach to technology description, i.e., in many cases an initial description of an innovation or new technique by one farmer may be amended, elaborated, or challenged by other farmers' experiences in subsequent issues.

● To encourage adaptation, there is a consciously strategised promotion of farmer-to-farmer contact. This is achieved through a question-and-answer section in which farmers share their experiences and ask for advice. Also, each article provides the farmer author's contact details.

● A sceptical and investigative stance towards newly promoted crops or technologies, particularly those featured in positive terms in the conventional press.

Unlike the normal creation of a community, here there has been a product – *Adikke Pathrike* – that bought itself or attracted a community of readers and contributors. This was also facilitated through the journalism workshops that created a team of potential contributors. Members are mostly farmers in the area and there is a core of 30 to 40 'friends' (workshop graduates including farmers) who visit farmers, and work with them to produce an article. The author is paid a small honorarium. In other cases, farmers themselves write brief communications or at least inform *Adikke Pathrike* of an interesting story. The articles are always based on first-hand farmer experiences although these may require

significant rewriting and editing. The combination of the cover price and advertising revenue supports a staff of five people. The magazine is a non-profit entity, registered as a trust.

Adikke Pathrike has demonstrated a significant demand for the opportunity to share experience, to stimulate experimentation, and to take a broader view of the farm household. An important part of its success is that innovations are discussed alongside more mundane issues (such as controlling houseflies) that contribute in an important way to the quality of rural life and to the incentives for pursuing technological change. An offshoot of the exchange in *Adikke Pathrike* is the establishment of a seed exchange group that meets monthly to share experiences and exchange seeds. The group is now 10 years old and has a membership of 30–40 farmers.

Source: CAAM Website (www.farmedia.org/index.html) and telecommunication with Shree Padre

Thus, one case of *Adikke Pathrike* demonstrates how (literate) farmers in a relatively prosperous rural area were mobilised as a community around a knowledge product, with a group of lettered 'friends' who act as facilitators to share knowledge through the journal. A more organised and cross-national effort is observed in the Non Timber Forest Produce-Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) for South and South-east Asia. This is a regional initiative with presence in India that facilitates exchange of information, knowledge and approaches at a very practical, 'real' level between practitioners and communities, working on a common issue, but in different national and local settings.

Box 4: The NTFP Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) – South and South- East Asia

The NTFP-EP for South and South-East Asia is a joint initiative of the Dutch organisations – ENDS, NC-IUCN and ProFound – in collaboration with the Asian organisations from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and other local and regional NGOs and indigenous organisations in South and South-east Asia. The programme was started informally in 1997 when the organisations felt a need to exchange information, knowledge and approaches at a very practical, 'real' level. This means that expertise in processing, value addition, marketing, policy advocacy and other issues can be shared freely. Meetings, workshops and technical trainings organised are essentially to help practitioners meet. These meetings are rather informal, do not follow many rules and sessions – but allow for free flow of information and experiences. Many times the sharing of the difficulties in different situations in different parts of the region is good enough, and generates debates, brainstorms, etc., on the issue over informal get-togethers. The topics are invariably related to forests, indigenous people, rights, access, products, markets, sustainability of resources, harvesting methods, fighting big lobbies such as timber loggers and oil palm industry, etc. It has been supported at different points of time by different funding agencies.

In the general context of continuous forest depletion and degradation, the group believes in facilitating the exchange of information and experiences between local NGOs and communities in the above countries on local, national and regional levels in the region. This includes support and monitoring of field-level initiatives and joint studies; workshops, regional meetings, training programmes and exposure visits; and liaison and strategic information support. In addition, the network tries to facilitate effective networking at a local and regional level. Members are usually individuals or NGOs working on issues of forest conservation with indigenous people – NTFPs being a major activity. Regional meetings are held by rotation in each country once a year. There are very regular e-mail exchanges and members are in touch with one another. Meetings are quite regular and exchange visits are arranged without much difficulty.

After functioning as an informal network without a structure for some time, a formal structure has been recently introduced. The office of the network is in Manila and the bulk of the task of running the network rests with one person, who maintains the cross exchange of information. One member each plays similar roles for the Philippines and for India.

The Exchange Programme has initiated a newsletter, *Voices from the Forest*, and regularly publishes technical bulletins/booklets useful for local organisations and communities. Apart from information–knowledge exchange, the programme stimulates ideas and helps organisations to work in their respective areas with indigenous people. Documentation is an important activity that is used very effectively. The programme pulls up members going through 'lows' and enables capacities and funding for them to continue.

Source: Snehlata Nath, *Note for CoP Study*, Aug 2005; www.ntfp.org

The NTFP-EP network is an example of a planned informal exchange process around a specific exchange topic and a commonality of purpose. The group demonstrates the interlinking of research to implementation; of 'educated' to indigenous people; and that these exchanges are easy, practical, and adaptable for different types of role-players. The diversity and different levels of engagement of the group are supplemented by efforts to build strong local/national networks as sub-sets of the regional community.

While this group formed, as a result of organisations in South and South-East Asia coming together on NTFPs, the dnrm listserv and discussion group started as a part of a research study on decentralised natural resources management in India. This was a collaboration between research agencies from the UK and India, and three Indian states. After conclusion of the study, the dnrm listserv 'took a life of its own' and continued as a platform for information dissemination, and discussions in the areas of decentralised natural resource management, decentralisation, and the political economy of development.

Box 5: dnrm listserv and discussion group

A study entitled 'Panchayati Raj and Natural Resource Management: How to Decentralise Management Over Natural Resources', launched in June 2000, focused on the political economy and relational dynamics of the three broad Decentralised Natural Resource Management (DNRM) systems in practice in India. These are: traditional (formal and informal) resource user groups; state-community 'partnerships' like Watershed Development and Joint Forest Management (JFM); and the emerging system of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The study involved a national review as well as secondary and primary studies in the three states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The study was jointly conducted by agencies based in London, Delhi, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Bhopal. One of the activities of the study was to elevate the study issues into a lively debate in the public domain. To this end, a mailing list and discussion group called dnrm was launched in January 2001 (dnrm@panchayats.org). Alongside the list, a dedicated website (www.panchayats.org) was also constructed – this site contained reports and outputs from the study, resources and links on panchayats and DNRM, as also message archives of the dnrm list. Given the interest of the group members, the host organisation (TARU) decided to continue the listserv and discussion group, and the website, after the conclusion of the study in 2003, as a public service, at its own cost.

The subjects of information sharing and discussion have included decentralisation and PRIs, community based management of natural resources; JFM and Watershed management, rights of indigenous people, rights violations, and various aspects of governance over natural resources. While inter-relational dynamics was the joining thread, many postings have been focused on individual themes, viz., resource use issues (e.g., water resources), land tenure, forestry, social mobilisation and movements, institutional dynamics, and so on. Dnrm is a moderated list – quick estimates show that 80 per cent of traffic is dominated by sharing or disseminating information or making announcements, 15 per cent of exchanges are in the nature of discussions and responses to issues raised or information received, and the remainder dedicated to queries for information.

The group started off with a membership drive and after an initial response from about 175 members in the first five months, membership had risen to 325 by Sep 2003, and remains at 329 (Aug 2005). The membership of the group is diverse: activists and researchers, and people from NGOs (grassroots and support levels), academia, journalists, and international donor/lending agencies. Most members are from organisations working in India, but a few are individuals based overseas. While the group is large, and the majority is 'silent', smaller sub-groups usually raise issues and provoke discussions.

The original study had organised a number of workshops in the states and at the national level that brought together activists, researchers and practitioners from diverse backgrounds into face-to-face interactions. These events played a crucial role in presenting the study findings, raising emergent issues, and most of all, putting people in touch with one another. Underlying the dnrm then, there developed a loose network of colleagues for which the group provided a structured and regular forum for exchange.

In terms of its character, the group uniquely espouses the protection of the democratic and humanist space in the NRM and decentralisation sectors that are victims of a series of rhetorical and untried approaches. It then brings a fresh political economy perspective to counter the technocratic and romantic approaches of the 1980s and 1990s. The listserv keeps links with other listservs and discussion groups (e.g., iatp water list), and cross-postings are not uncommon. The dnrm list is credited with a number of outcomes ranging from discussions on a wide range of subjects to critical analyses leading to policy change and action on the ground in many instances. The dnrm also facilitated out-of-network collaborations and a couple of other discussion groups and mailing list (on other topics) are reported to have partly drawn inspiration from the dnrm list.

Source: Rajesh R, dnrm Moderator; TARU drnm project Documents; dnrm archives; Sep 2005.

The dnrm study showed that while the study provided the initial impetus to e-group formation, the sustenance of dialogue has largely been explained by members' interest and engagement; and dedicated and deft moderation. Another group, jivika, also had similar origins in which putting together a book was the event that triggered its formation, and it straddled two hitherto distinct domains of development practice. But it is different in that it chose to depend on the promoters' voluntarism and members' interests, and kept away from institutional support and affiliations.

Box 6: *jivika*: for livelihood and gender equity

The origins of *jivika* lie in the efforts seeking to bridge the divide that existed between practitioners working in the area of environment and development, and those working on women's groups and gender empowerment. While editing a book, the initiator was in constant communication with contributors, some of who were known to her personally. Some of them met at a workshop and shared the desire to continue their common interests and concerns related to gender and natural resource-based livelihoods. A 'core' group formed within three months and quickly became 14 members. There was a lot of discussion within the group about the need for such a group, its name and identity, platforms of exchange, its scope, and the type of exchange. Jivika (livelihood) was chosen as the name and the group moved ahead with the understanding that information on events, news, conferences, etc., could spark discussion and would keep the group energised when discussions seemed to be reducing. Setting up a Yahoo-group (in mid-2003) appeared the most economical means of exchange; the group did not wish to be associated with any organisations (although offers were forthcoming to host the group). The group agreed on voluntary administration, and members would register to show their interest; and postings would be unmoderated. One of the core members became the administrator of the e-group, with the assistance of another member. It is a free, open and informal forum for women and men to share news of current developments, publications, workshops, projects, campaigns, etc.; to store and exchange documents and pictures; and to build a directory

of expertise. It also seeks to focus discussion from time-to-time on conceptual and methodological problems, issues and ideas related to livelihood and gender equity in community resource management, and identify areas for further research and action.

One or the other of the 'core' group knew personally all those who joined jivika in the early days. By Aug 2005, in a short period of 26 months, membership had grown to between 160 and 170 members. The members are mainly India-based activists/practitioners working with different kinds of NGOs (both Indian and foreign). There are also some academics, several Indian students doing PhDs or post-docs in India or abroad, and a few journalists. Jivika is primarily an internet-based group (with a listserv and a website with resources and links), but sub-groups have occasionally met face-to-face on the sidelines of other events, e.g., workshops. These brought together many members for the first time although they knew one another through postings. Although many members travel frequently, they manage to contribute to jivika regularly – a quarter of members being active.

The jivika group runs on the resources of individuals and does not have any sources of funding. It does not have immediate goals of influencing policy or achieving specific legal changes. Unusual for a group concerned with gender, jivika has had a remarkably high contribution from men. Reflecting differences in how gender is envisioned and comprehended, this is novel for those whose grounding is more in NRM or conventional 'women's projects'. Most important, jivika has challenged persons who have rich empirical experience as practitioners or activists to view their work in the light of larger frameworks. At the same time it has also challenged those whose appreciation of issues is more theoretical or ideological to review their understanding in the light of field experiences.

The jivika group thrives due to the interest of members and the push of the initiator/moderators despite periods of 'silence' on the part of members. Some in the core group are also concerned about the dependence of the group on a few individuals. The underlying structure of relationships appears to have provided the buoyancy and stability to the group. Of significance is that apart from bridging theory and practice and domains, the group provides a platform for basic functions of

Thus, jivika may be considered both a CoP and a 'network'. *Those in the 'core' are a CoP, together with the larger number of those in the 'middle ground' who move in and out of the core, the boundaries between these areas being quite permeable* (Krishna, 2005). As the moderators of jivika highlight, the important crucial aspect is that an e-group may stimulate and challenge but is not a substitute for action on the ground – the practice provides the basis for the community (refer back also to the MBTI case in box 2).

A similar example of a purely voluntary and spontaneous grouping, and one that has sustained without any external assistance or support, is that of Nari Shakti, that started off as a 'NGO women workers' union' in Orissa. This group went on to highlight women's issues in the workplace, build capacities amongst its members and even helped women-led NGOs to grow.

Box 7: Nari Shakti, Orissa

In the end of the 1980s, there were very few women working in professional positions in non-governmental development agencies in Orissa. At this time, a couple of women gathered a few like-minded women activists and NGO workers to form Nari Shakti ('Women's Power'). The context was the need for emotional security, professional capacity enhancement and handholding for women professionals and activists to carve out their niche in the hitherto men-dominated organisations and roles in development work. Nari Shakti provided a forum to these women. A forum to share experiences, providing them the opportunity to build another's capacities, and work towards creating a safe, secure, and non-discriminatory environment where women could work freely. Given the above, right from the beginning, cases of sexual harassment would come up for the group's consideration and action (in fact, such cases

preoccupied the group in the initial five to six years of their existence till mid-1990s).

The group made a strategic move to celebrate Women's Day (March 8) right from the early 1990s. They organised a huge rally in Bhubaneswar in the early 1990s that drew about 10,000 women from all over Orissa. Since 1992, Women's day celebrations are a regular feature amongst the organisations with which Nari Shakti members work, but these are organised in different locations. Over time, members also took initiatives to start their own voluntary agencies – about five to six organisations were floated in the last decade. Nari Shakti members were supportive of such efforts and helped in a variety of ways. At a later stage, some voices in the group proposed that they ought to take on gender issues in development, but the overall consensus was that such specialised work was the remit of many organisations and activists, and the primary focus of Nari Shakti, i.e., support to women working in development, ought not to be diluted by expanding activities to gender and women's issues in general.

Starting with a handful of women in the late 1980s, the membership of Nari Shakti grew quickly to 40 women by 1990, and the popularity of the group was reflected in its strength of about 100 women by 1992. At present there are about 40–50 regular members who attend the meetings. Right from its initiation, the group was strongly against any formalised structures. Therefore, they thought of a role of a Convenor who would coordinate Nari Shakti meetings and activities. Historically, led by two active leaders, there has been an inner core group of five active members who share work and keep Nari Shakti moving. The group has some basic principles: no funding (purely voluntary); only individuals will join (not organisations), and no registration. The group started by meeting periodically and stabilised to meeting once in a quarter, which has been a regular feature since. Held in the style of informal gatherings at one of the members' residence for over half to one day every quarter, usually on a Sunday or a holiday, the atmosphere is informal although there may be fierce debate and discussions. The group values reaching consensus rather than 'voting' on issues.

The active role that Nari Shakti played in the first decade of its existence, in taking up cases of sexual harassment in the workplace, gave the group its identity and brand as a strong group. Apart from the resolution of such cases, Nari Shakti's presence was recognised amongst the development community in Orissa (and even the government) as a guardian overseeing values and standards owing to its membership and connections. This also imbued Nari Shakti's image as an undesirable union of women workers creating trouble – but overall, the number of complaints are also perceived by Nari Shakti members to have reduced over time. Other issues of discussion have included sexual harassment in the workplace in voluntary organisations; the anti-liquor movement led by women in the state; gender-budgeting; strengthening women in PRIs and decentralisation; women's policy issues; and a number of issues relating to seeking information about and researching the situation of women.

The group has earned its legitimacy within and outside the network, owing to its voluntary and principled work. Nari Shakti is a face-to-face group and does not take any external assistance. Toward the late 1990s, there was a proposal that it be registered. However, Nari Shakti chose to continue to remain an unregistered and non-formal group that would support itself and not seek resources from elsewhere.

The area of Nari Shakti's work is itself a unique one. Bringing women activists and NGO women together to resolve their issues and problems, was itself a novelty that members cherish. There are rarely or no other groups reported that are similar in character and membership. Despite the lack of funding or external assistance, the bonds between members are strong – the face-to-face nature and the binds of personal and professional ties provide the emotional support and confidence to members. Growing out of voluntarism, this is perhaps the most defining feature of the group.

*Source:* Discussions with Bishakha Bhanja, Nari Shakti, August 2005

Thus, Nari Shakti provides an example of a group that works with its own resources, mostly internal capacities, solidarity and commitment, and fierce independence.
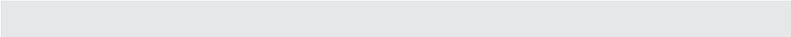
Moitree in Kolkata is another example of an initiative that brought together individuals and organisations to work together on gender and women's issues, but not in a programme or sector mode, and in areas where collective action would yield more than individual efforts would. Again, not assisted or supported externally, this is an example of a voluntary grouping of activists and practitioners. The distinctive feature of Moitree is its ability to enlist both individuals and organisational members, from highly unequal backgrounds and resources, the solidarity being maintained by an internal group code that deliberately brings all to an equal plane.

The Sukhar Virodhi Abhiyan (SVA, 'Counter Drought Campaign') is an example of an informal lobby and advocacy network that came about to address specific issues, in this case the chronic drought in Jharkhand. Comprising NGOs, social workers and a few individuals, SVA is an issue-based network that not only carries out studies and policy advocacy exercises but is also rooted in the grassroots work of members with communities. The Ananta Paryavarana Parirakshana Samiti (APPS) in Andhra Pradesh is also a similar network working in southern AP. Both these forms will be familiar to donors and INGOs, some of them having promoted this kind of network.

The above groups and networks resemble communities of knowledge and practice in many ways. There also are organisations that have nucleated or promoted voluntary action and campaigns in public space, and in specific domains of development. Unnayan, for example, a group from Kolkata, established and disseminated a form of practice of voluntary civic activism. Apart from its other activities, Unnayan played a key role in the National Campaign for Housing Rights in India in 1980s and 1990s. The Association of Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) is one of the oldest civil liberty organisations (without having any registration) in India. It transformed from a coalition of activists to a non-party political formation of human and democratic rights practitioners fighting state violence in West Bengal.
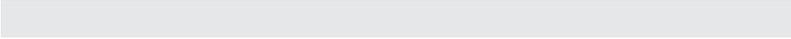
Sarai, a project of CSDS, Delhi, operates on the 'edge' of formal structures in the areas of new media, open source software and city spaces. Sarai works using a variety of approaches including grants and scholarships, community-based learning and sharing initiatives, and alliances and e-groups (about eight of them functioning at present). It is an organisation but in the business of producing contexts which in turn, generate communities of practices.

A brief comparison of features

A comparison of the different features of the groups reviewed assists in describing the characteristics of the sample studied – both their similarities and differences. The dimensions used for comparison are drawn from the facets used in data collection.

Origins

The groups reviewed have come out of a variety of causes and events. While some of the groups have deep roots in political action (APDR), many have come about because of a sense of need for collective action to fight a usually larger problem (Moitree, Nari Shakti). In some cases, such formations came out of planned actions (SVA, APPS, Sarai); some were also occasioned by people coming together for a study (dnrm) or a book (jivika) or to take part in an event.

Two dimensions are striking in most cases:

● The leadership/entrepreneurship role played by a few individuals or organisations;

● The close connections to the setting or environment in which the group was embedded. In some cases, the voluntary spirit for thought and action in a public space is a compelling presence, making a difference to limited development in others.
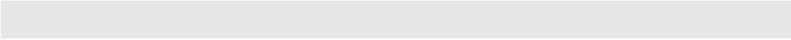
Goals and Domain

The goals and domains of the groups reviewed range from the very specific and functional, to the somewhat more open. However, most groups tend to show a convergence of areas of activities or discussions, even when within a sector – or in some rare instances, across conventional sectors. Some groups have shown willingness to revise their goals, changing the emphasis of their domains at different stages of development. This is observed as a response to the external environment (e.g. APDR), as also for other groups as they evolved in relation to their achievements in the world (Nari Shakti). The cases of dnrm and jivika present a somewhat different take on the domain: the emphasis on the types of sub-themes discussed, and the style in which this is done. The intention of all the groups has not been fixed to any time-frame, implicitly assuming perhaps that interactions will determine the life of the group, which would decide on the next course as it went along.

Membership

Membership shows great variations in size from the large numbers in e-groups, to the somewhat smaller face-to-face groups. One of the striking elements in membership is that while many groups have members from diverse socio-economic (and political) backgrounds that have indeed influenced their 'behaviour' in the group, some of the basic tenets or 'codes' of membership have sought to reduce these differences to focus on the domain at hand. This has of course often been facilitated due to the deft management by the moderators and the respective core groups.

Structure

Most groups show an initial dependence on the leaders and promoters. In the later stages, there are two distinct trends. In one, the initial leaders and promoters have made way for others to take over and run; this has been the case in older formations (APDR, Nari Shakti). The second type of groups are ones where the initial promoters/leaders continue with their pivotal positions because of their commitment and dedication, equally
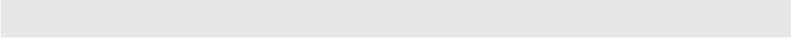
perhaps arising out of a recognition of their competence and charisma by other members.

Process

Face-to-face groups, e-groups and hybrids are all part of our cases. The face-to-face groups have, over time, taken to using a number of communication technologies but have been careful to conduct most of their affairs in physical settings. The e-groups under study have had to grapple with acculturating members into a new style of communication over e-mail, which is not without its problems. This has however opened the opportunities of 'faceless' communication and intense exchanges (as one of the Sarai lists showed in early September 2005 for example). Participation from members is variable and there are a few members who are active in most of the groups, whereas others are willing to either be passive or participate when an event or activity is planned, or are happy with being recipients of updates and alerts.

Administration

Administration and management has posed a challenge for most of the groups, being not resourced or funded. In most cases, the critical aspect of administering has not been the availability of financial resources, but the competence, leadership and time required on the part of the moderators or coordinators. In many cases, individuals have contributed highly in terms of their time, if not with money. Except for organised formations like APDR (where this is crucial in the practice) or Sarai (where this is content and by-product), documentation, archiving and retrieval of information and knowledge have not enjoyed priority with many of the groups. The costs for taking such steps may not have been found worthwhile in terms of benefits. The e-groups have the benefit of electronic record keeping although some groups actually started documenting what they were about and what they went through only after a passage of time (sometimes occasioned by studies such as the current one).

Content

In line with the domains and processes of the groups, most of them appear to be satisfied with the breadth and depth of content compared to their original expectations. There are also efforts at self-correction when groups have found their exchanges wanting in quality; moderators and leaders of the groups have played a significant role in shoring up the group. In some cases, the content led some members to withdraw. Some groups have gone ahead with the shared expectation and generosity that as long as the group continued interacting and sharing and providing 'basic services' to members, the 'quality' of content did not matter so much. Many groups have talked about diversifying into newer areas of work or discussions, but have been measured in their enthusiasm, seeking first to protect what was built rather than spreading thin into newer areas quickly.

Outcomes

Most of the groups under this study reported impressive outputs and outcomes, as perceived by moderators or members. Some of the discussion groups find it difficult to quantify what their presence has meant, but are able to clearly list the achievements in bringing benefits to members. Of special importance is that most of these groups have been able to have a tangible impact on the outside world, through the collective force of their members. This underlines the importance of collective action in being able to extract resources embedded in these networks.

Salient features

Each of the groups studied had their salient or distinctive features, some rooted in their areas of work, others in the manner they mobilised and maintained the group. Illustrations of salience are:

- Pioneering and crafting social transformation approaches;

- Transforming into a non-registered organised 'association', utilising voluntary, independence and deep analysis of members;

- Impacting government policy with demonstration on ground;

- Getting farmers to experiment and learn from one another;

- Ability to interlink research to implementation; 'educated' to indigenous people/knowledge in an easy, practical, and adaptable way;

- Maintaining the integrity, principles, and direction of discussions by deft moderation, and helping a group that has 'taken a life of its own';

- Getting practitioners and researchers to bridge two separate domains of practice;

- Bringing individuals, organisations of diverse (and dissimilar) backgrounds to work on areas of shared concern;

- Building solidarity and security in work conditions for women in development;

- Producing generative contexts, within which content and stakeholders can be mobilised.

Most of the groups have used a host of innovative ways to keep up spirits – and fight periods of inactivity and lulls in enthusiasm.

Future sustenance
Almost all groups have concerns that they need to address in the future. Remarkably, except in a small number, most of the groups do not cite the need for financial resources as a major concern for their sustenance in the future. Most concerns were centred on the roles played by the core or the moderator/leaders and the possible alternatives to share their burden or look for succession arrangements. Questions about the manner in which the business of the group is transacted appear to attract a lot of suggestions, but these are aimed at making the group stronger, more vibrant and almost never regarding the basic viability of the group.

The above description shows that even though the groups under study are drawn from disparate settings and are of a diverse nature, they show remarkable similarities in some respects. The lessons that emerge from the study of the above groups are outlined in the following section.

4

What lessons do we learn?

Idealised features of CoPs compared against those studied

Using the features suggested in Table 1, Table 4 summarises the features that are noticeable in the groups studied.

Table 4: Idealised features of CoPs and features of studied groups

Dimension	Idealised feature	Feature in studied groups
What is the **size** of the group?	Open, between 10 and 100, or even more.	Small to large (exceeding 300).
Who is participating? What is the commitment?	Interested professionals, committed by personal professional interest.	Interested academics, researchers, activists, grassroots workers, NGO workers, and donor agencies.
What is the inner **structure** of the group? What roles can be differentiated?	Informal structure, no hierarchy. Core group with owners, experts and facilitator; inner circle with active participants; open for interested people (outer circle).	Most groups have an implicit structure but informal; moderators and facilitators; experts may be members but recognised as any other member; some are closed groups, others are open to some extent.

What is the **domain** of concern (theme, topic)? Who defines it?	A clearly defined domain (= thematic field), defined by owners and active participants.	Most of the (core) groups have determined their own domain and thematic areas. These are refined from time to time as need arises.
What is the **aim** of the interaction?	Increase the quality standard of the professional work through access to relevant information, knowledge and experience.	Ranges from receiving information, to campaigning/ lobbying, to taking concrete actions – knowledge and experience sharing, and professional enhancement form a part but not the whole of interactions.
To what extent motivation and interest are personal and to what extent **mandated** by the institution?	Personal interest is predominant. The institutions declare their interest in general terms.	Personal interest in most cases. In a few cases, organisations have anchored or supported/enabled groups. Some networks join organisations for collaborative exchanges in learning alliances.
What kinds of results are expected? Who defines them?	No strict planning of activities and results. Often concrete results are the outcome of a process, not planned, but happening by chance.	Some of the activities are targeted in most groups, but outputs and outcomes are not planned or known. Many instances of serendipitous results. Some groups exist to achieve specific policy and on-ground objectives.
What is the planned **duration** of the interaction?	Open, depending on funding. Reviews prove the value (outcome and	Very few groups dependent on funding and hence, most of them have an open time frame. Different phases of

	concrete results) of a CoP. A CoP exists as long as it serves the members and member organisations. Without concrete results, a CoP is to be closed down.	growth discernible in some groups.
How is the working of the group?	A high commitment by the members is very typical for a CoP.	Mixed. Usually the core has greater commitment.
Which **source** does the information/ knowledge/ experience come from?	Mainly by the active participants (inner circle and core group); external experts may be consulted.	A number of sources of information are tapped. Most groups use the input of information from outside the group. A large number of groups process information, internally using discussion and debate.
What are the working **tools** of the group?	Networking, workshops, peer exchange, peer review, joint projects, joint evaluations, joint planning, etc.	Variety of face-to-face and virtual methods depending on the group.
How is the group **financed**? Who has an interest in its financing?	Financing through interested organisations (funds and working time).	A few 'funded' but most groups resourced by members.

As is evident from Table 4, most of the groups studied show some common features but differ from the idealisation of CoPs in not being uniformly communities of *professional* practitioners or peers. The second major difference is in the *ways of learning and sharing* that the groups demonstrate.

Emerging issues and perspectives

The framework of CoPs has been lauded on many grounds (Adolph, 2005):

- It enables learning through shared experience, thus creating knowledge that is held socially.

- Members of a CoP have different knowledge and expertise: each person is knowledgeable about his/her own sphere of existing expertise and at the same time not so proficient about others' realms of expertise.

- CoPs provide a structure and allow people to propose new ideas for comments before putting them into practice.

- CoPs assist rapid problem solving by drawing on the wide range of expertise available within the group; they help to develop and transfer best/good practices, and they foster professional skills in those who have less experience.

However, CoPs have also been criticised on the grounds that they comprise peer practitioners (people from similar backgrounds) thus losing out the potential offered by diverse members and their experiences and perspectives.[4] Similar to CoPs are 'Learning Alliances' (LAs) i.e., alliances between organisations and individuals but of *different* backgrounds, capabilities, and functions. These are partnerships between practitioners, communities, experts, etc., who come together not merely to accomplish a project, but develop or deepen a body of knowledge, experience and practice. LAs however have other shortcomings similar to CoPs such as

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4   Beer and others have stressed the criticality of diversity within formations to be adequate enough to address the complexity that the real world is characterised by (Beer, 1969).
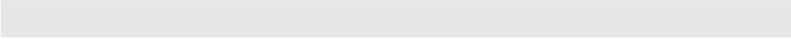
differentials in experiences, priorities and access to resources (e.g., computers and internet) (Adolph, 2005). Depending on the purpose at hand, a choice between a CoP or an LA approach can be made.

Whether it is CoPs, or LAs, or other such groups wanting to learn, the question of generating, capturing and sharing knowledge, especially 'tacit' or 'soft' knowledge, poses major challenges. Knowledge Management practitioners have gone back to unpackaging the different types of knowledge that need to be exchanged in order to assess the design of the best institutional mechanisms to do so most effectively. One of the emerging approaches for instance is to look at the *type* of knowledge that characterises the sector or sub-sector under consideration, and devising appropriate institutional approaches to promoting learning. This involves the examination of the specific or dominant form of knowledge that is sought to be gathered, processed, and shared. Hence, tacit or 'encoded' knowledge (codified and externalised and available for anyone to use) is differentiated from that which is 'embedded' (in systems and processes); 'encultured' (in social norms and world views and hence not available for capture and use easily), and 'embrained' knowledge (meta or abstract knowledge) (Blackler, 1995, cited in Adolph, 2005). Hence, KM scholars recommend understanding the type of knowledge to determine approaches and techniques for knowledge gathering and sharing.

This paper ends with a challenging example from Latin America, to stimulate thought on the future developments of CoPs. Following from scholars debating and dissecting the nature of knowledge, Escobar (forthcoming) suggests that knowledge is 'constitutive of social reality' and is increasingly created by non-academic knowledge producers such as people's movements (e.g., World Social Forum). He cites the example of knowledge production by a network of organisations in Colombia, a part of a peoples' movement to protect their ecosystems, territory and culture against the onslaught of 'development' projects. There are many potential lessons here that could be pertinent to the Indian context.

Box 8: Knowledge production in a peoples' movement

The knowledge production by the PCN Process of Black Communities (PCN, Proceso de Comunidades Negras), can be said to have the following features:

- It is *conjunctural* (it brings together information from a combination of events) – to a certain degree it is cumulative and progressively refined.

- It is developed 'on the run', so to speak; there is not much time to pause and think, although the internal discussions and debates never stop. There is a rich, intense and at times conflictual internal conversation among activists at the national and regional levels that never stops on conceptual, political, and pragmatic issues.

- It is *pragmatic* without being just utilitarian or functional to the struggle; knowledge is seen as crucial to the political strategy. It is geared towards the articulation of demands, but always with a sense of the long run goal, namely, the defense of the historical life project of the communities. In this way, it has a powerful vision of the future.

- It is *recursive* (constantly referring back to itself) to the extent that the same themes (territory, identity, biodiversity, cultural practices, etc.) are worked on, and worked out, at many levels, in different ways, from the local to the global.

- It is *'epistemologically dirty'* – that is, it grabs what it can and from whatever sources are at hand. It cares little or nothing about disciplines, and proceeds more through building from different sources as appropriate than drawing on systematic theory. There is, however, a significant knowledge build up. Needless to say, the grabbing of expert forms of knowledge, even if reconfigured, has consequences (not always felicitous) for the frameworks constructed.

- It is profoundly *'interdisciplinary'* by necessity, although disciplinary forms of knowledge have been important at particular times (e.g., anthropology at the moment of the formulation of the cultural and territorial rights law; geography and landscape ecology in negotiations

at the interior of conservation projects, elaboration of river maps, etc.; gender studies in negotiations about strategies for black women). This material enters into the construction of the politics of truth by the movement. Conversely, while movement practice tends to confound the disciplines, at times this proves very dynamic, fostering a retrenchment of the disciplines into conservative positions and the redrawing of disciplinary boundaries (e.g., conservation biology, anthropology in some cases), thus leading to new conflict areas (e.g., around the use of local knowledge by taxonomists, or conceptions of culture or ethnic identity).

Source: Escobar (forthcoming)

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