

Assessing the CBA community of practice

‘Communities of practice’ have been hailed as a way to spread knowledge and innovation, but we still know little about their real impacts, or even how to evaluate these. A good example to learn from is IIED’s conference series on community-based adaptation. The meetings have nurtured networks of practitioners that ‘fit the bill’ as a community of practice: filtering information, amplifying lesser-known ideas, convening, facilitating, community building and investing. This briefing looks at the ‘what, who and how’ of forming communities of practice, then looks ahead to an evaluation of whether, and how, why and when, such a community achieves better policies and practice to support local climate adaptation.

Policy pointers

- **If governments and organisations** are to foster communities of practice for generating knowledge and implementing community-based adaptation, they need evidence of how these communities improve policy and practice.
- **Monitoring and evaluation** approaches have focused mainly on explaining how communities of practice develop and function. To capture their impacts on individuals, groups and organisations, pluralist and multi-perspective approaches are needed.
- **As we start to look at actual impacts**, ‘realist’ evaluation is useful. This approach considers the context — how, why and when communities improve practice — rather than measuring simple inputs and outputs.

How effective are communities of practice?

A ‘community of practice’ is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise on this area by interacting on a recurrent basis.¹ Such groups are now widespread, fostered by agencies and organisations in many different sectors as a means for sharing knowledge and developing innovations. Responding to climate change is particularly suited to community of practice approaches as we need to learn and share knowledge quickly over many different circumstances.

Yet few studies have measured and evaluated the performance or impacts of communities of practice. Most published reports focus on describing a community’s establishment or activities.^{2,3} If national organisations and development partners are to nurture communities of practice for their value in knowledge generation and implementation, they need to better understand how these communities improve practice.³

This briefing explores whether and how a community

of practice has been established through the IIED’s community-based adaptation (CBA) conferences and its current functions. We then consider the next steps in evaluating the community’s effectiveness.

Case study: the Community-Based Adaptation conferences

This community of practice has emerged from six annual meetings focused on community-based adaptation — a climate and development approach that is still evolving. CBA recognises that environmental knowledge, vulnerability and resilience to climate change impacts are embedded in societies and cultures. It places the community at the heart of discussions and adopts a bottom-up approach to determine how best to respond to climate change. Rather than remaining passive, communities are empowered to think forward and take action based on their own decision-making processes.

The CBA conferences have captured learning about this new concept and have provided a dynamic forum for dialogue and debate as well as a safe space for exploring fresh ideas. The meetings cut across sectoral lines, uniting and nurturing practitioners from a

wide range of organisations with a shared interest in understanding CBA practices and innovations. The conference itself also evolves each year, adjusting as participants seek to explore new themes and meet changing needs.

Knowing in action: what a community of practice looks like

Communities of practice are distinct from communities of interest, as their members are practitioners and their aim is to put the knowledge gained into practice.^{1,5} With this in mind, the umbrella term ‘knowing in action’ is used to describe the different forms that these communities can take. Many communities of practice can be described as communitarian (dependent upon strong interpersonal ties), but the community around CBA belongs in a different category — ‘high creativity collaboration’.⁶ This type of group is marked by a strong loyalty to a shared problem or approach. Other major characteristics of communities of practice³ that can also be applied to the CBA community include:

Membership and practice

- Membership is determined through shared practice.
- The community helps members establish professional identity.
- Members have a common goal or purpose.
- Membership often crosses geographical, professional and organisational boundaries.
- Membership group and size are not fixed.
- The group’s focus may vary over time.

Activities and communication methods

- Members exchange knowledge through formal and informal processes. Formal methods of interaction include face-to-face meetings (conferences) and virtual methods such as email or blogs.
- Social interaction, in person or through the use of communications technology, is an important feature of the community’s identity.

Origin

- Groups can arise spontaneously or be established as a project initiative.
- Communities of practice have five stages of development: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship and transformation.

Enabling factors

- Committed facilitator(s)
- Shared purpose
- Commitment and enthusiasm from the members
- Community of practice endorsed by key actors and alignment of the community’s objectives with the goals of its members’ organisations
- Self-selected membership
- Regular communication with, and interaction between members
- Developing relationships through face-to-face interactions
- Infrastructure to support the group’s work by easing access to knowledge or evidence

Clearly, these conferences have started to build a knowledge network around CBA. So can it yet be described as a community of practice? Communities of practice develop gradually, and the initial stages are often not recognised as such. The CBA conferences are a good example of this. Over the six meetings, the formation of a community of practice was not necessarily apparent to those attending, and the group that attends today did not actively seek to become a community. Yet the current community does reflect the ‘knowing in action’ that characterises a community of practice (see Knowing in action: what a community of practice looks like). Moreover, the group’s activities match six typical functions of a community of practice: serving as filters, amplifiers, conveners, facilitators, community builders, and investors and providers⁴ (Table 1).

The network of CBA conference participants thus seems to represent a bona fide community of practice. But this is not enough to justify its existence. We also need to evaluate its effects.

Measuring and evaluating a community of practice

Most of the available evidence about the CBA community of practice has to do with the relationship between the conferences and the participants — how the meetings have helped to create the community and how the community has co-evolved with the conference. In other words, we can explore the what, who and how of community of practice formation (see Figure 1).

What were the themes? The number of themes addressed in the CBA conferences has grown significantly over the six-year period — from just six themes at the first conference to 18 at the sixth. New and emerging themes include ‘vulnerable and indigenous communities’ and ‘mainstreaming CBA into policymaking’, while other key themes (including the local effects of climate change, case studies of community-based adaptation and how to assess vulnerability to climate change) have been present throughout all six conferences.

Who participated? Over the conference series, the number and diversity of people engaging with the emerging community of practice on CBA has risen sharply. Both size and diversity are important in amplifying impact and in building a sustainable community. The first conference had 90 participants, whereas the fifth had 389 and the sixth had 315. Figure 2 shows how the representation of different sectors became more balanced over the years.

How did the conference format support the community of practice? The first five CBA conferences all relied on the same structure: a series of plenary sessions that both open and close a day of parallel sessions. But these formal sessions often provided too little time for

discussion, debate and in-depth analysis, and their panel formats offered little room for creativity. The emerging community of practice needed to learn in a less rigid format, and at the sixth conference ‘out of the box’ sessions were introduced. PowerPoint was banished, and instead interactive sessions to maximise learning and discussion provided the basis for dialogue around a particular theme.

In addition, two new informal forums (weADAPT and CBA-X) have been used to complement the yearly CBA conferences. The Community-Based Adaptation Exchange (CBA-X) is a shared online resource designed to bring the CBA community together and help it grow. Here participants can exchange the most recent information on CBA, including news, events, case-studies, workshop announcements, tools, policy resources and videos. The weADAPT Google Earth Community-Based Adaptation Layer was launched during the third CBA conference as a space to share adaptation projects and let others know about ongoing initiatives. The Global Initiative for Community-Based Adaptation (GICBA) was initiated at CBA5 and is now at a preliminary stage. It is a focus through which to bring in funding for CBA action and is made up of working groups on specific sub-topics of CBA including innovative financing.

Future steps: a ‘realist’ evaluation

As with most communities of practice, the main evaluation challenge still lies ahead. The CBA community is reaching a stage of maturity where measurable influence on practice can be expected. Although there are no well-established methods for evaluating such impacts, the available literature stresses that such groups have complex effects on individuals, groups and organisations.

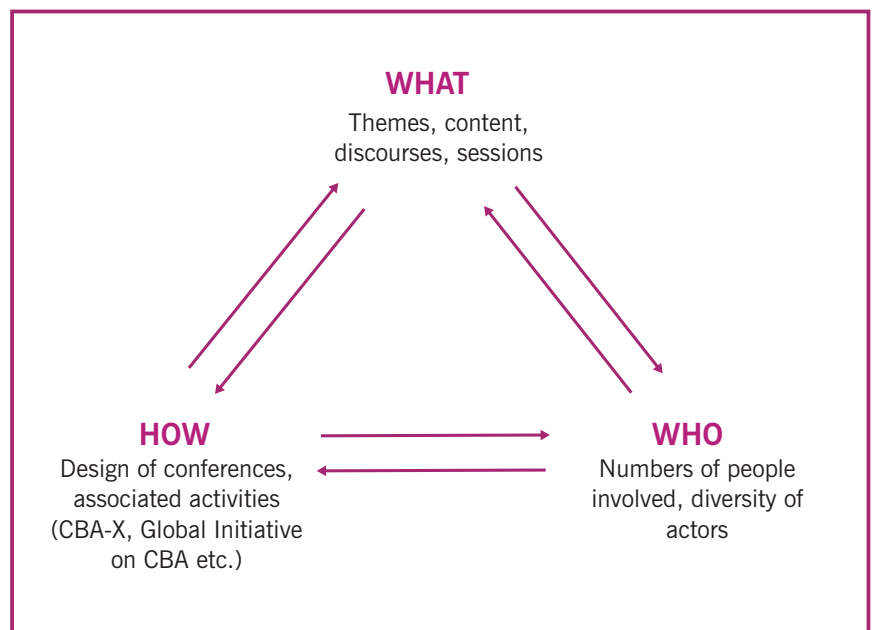
Capturing these requires a pluralistic and multi-perspective approach,⁷ such as ‘realist’ evaluation³ that recognises that the ‘implementation context’ determines the outcomes of an intervention. In other words, a realist evaluation looks beyond simple inputs and outputs. Rather, it explores what is too often a ‘black box’, the territory where planned interventions interact with the real world and real people – in this case, in the community of practice. It aims to establish which particular conditions or contexts are needed within a community of practice for it to yield a particular outcome.³ A realist evaluation approach seeks to answer questions of how, why, and when will an intervention work?⁸

We plan to test several hypotheses as part of a realist evaluation of the CBA community of practice. We are focusing on the effects of ‘deliberative platforms’ — that is where diverse stakeholders bring their knowledge and expertise into a level playing field dialogue. The hypotheses include:

Table 1 Functions of communities of practice,⁴ and how the CBA conferences fulfil these.

Filter	CBA conferences present information, sort through it and decide what is worth paying attention to. They then organise large amounts of information for the emergent Community of Practice and put it into the public domain.
Amplify	CBA conferences provide space where little-known or poorly understood experiences, ideas and concepts can be heard, and made more widely understood and available.
Convene	The CBA conferences are the principle event, but they are also a process that brings practitioners and other interested parties together in an iterative way.
Facilitate	The conferences establish a basis for thematic networks of CBA practitioners and other interested parties, and these generate and share information and advice, helping network members ‘in practice’.
Community building	The CBA conferences, and those who have shaped them, have promoted and sustained certain values and standards of CBA practice that has become a Community.
Invest and provide	The CBA conferences let people meet, and have subsidised the costs for those most needing support.

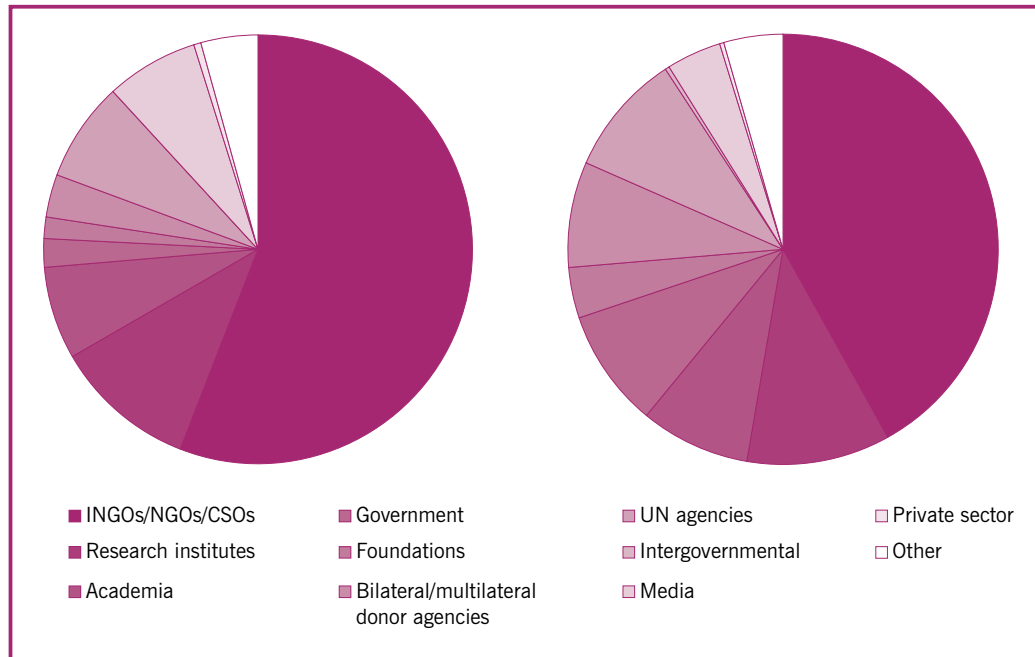
Figure 1. So far, evaluations of the CBA conferences have asked questions of what, who and how.



- The CBA conference series, by creating deliberative platforms, has helped establish a diverse community of practice on CBA.
- This diversity has helped to make the discourse on CBA much more inclusive.
- A ‘deliberative’ community is better suited to generating policy-relevant knowledge in the context of the high risk and high uncertainty posed by climate change.

Over the next two CBA conferences, the realist evaluation will address the key questions:

Figure 2. Comparing participants at CBA1 with those attending CBA6 shows how conference participation has become noticeably more diverse.



- What outcomes are the community of practice achieving in community-based adaptation?
- Do these outcomes lead to improved practice?
- What are the contexts and mechanisms by which the community improves practice?

As the evidence comes in on the impacts of the CBA network — and on the role of ‘context’ (for example the importance of ‘deliberative platforms’) — the CBA community of practice should offer a clearer view of how

other such communities can be effectively deployed to help reach many different development goals.

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Notes

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