



ACFID Communities of Practice Operational Guidelines

This document outlines the key processes regarding the establishment and management of ACFID's Communities of Practice (CoPs) as well as ACFID policies regarding CoP composition, ACFID resourcing, communication, confidentiality and accountability.

1. What is a Community of Practice?

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who come together to share, learn and work together. They are held together by a common interest in a body of knowledge and are driven by a desire to solve problems together and contribute to the development of a body of knowledge. Communities of practice are self-selecting, voluntary, self-managing and collegial.

Communities of Practice are organised and run by and for their members. They're responsible for preparing their own plans, organising their own meetings, communicating with each other and following through on agreed actions.

ACFID's Communities of Practice can form around a wide variety of knowledge domains, including functions such as operations, programs and advocacy, sectors such as shelter and child rights, and geography including countries and regions. They replace the previous ACFID Working Groups.

2. Why are they important?

Knowledge is a core asset of any organisation. "Know-what" – knowledge that can be written down and shared through policies, case studies, guidelines, tools etc. – quickly degrades in value, particularly during periods of rapid and discontinuous change. "Know-how" on the other hand resides in people. It is learned by experts over long periods through observation, imitation, experimentation, reflection, learning and adaptation. This type of knowledge cannot always be stored in guidelines and tools. It circulates through unwritten routines, stories, rules of thumb. This is particularly true for complex tasks which require high levels of improvisation rather than adherence to rule and procedure. Communities of Practice provide a means for tapping into this "know-how" through enabling peers to come together to share and learn from each other, generate new insights, solve problems together and contribute to the development of a body of knowledge.

In addition, CoPs are vehicles for action and change, benefitting the group members themselves, the broader sector and membership and ACFID's secretariat. For ACFID, Communities of Practice will play a vital role in contributing to our broader change agenda and to achieving the outcomes articulated in goal three of the Strategic Plan which sees ACFID members as influential agents of change and leaders in development, humanitarian practice, NGO effectiveness and accountability.

3. Expert Task Groups

Alongside communities of practice, time bound **Expert Task Groups** will be formed by ACFID to help pursue its Strategic Plan. Expert Task groups are management mandated, task orientated, time-bound groups that are resourced by and held accountable to ACFID's Secretariat for the delivery of specific products which are identified through ACFID's operational planning process and/or address needs/opportunities which emerge through the year. In some cases ACFID may approach a Community of Practice or selected experts within a CoP to form an Expert Task Group. For more information on changes to ACFID's architecture under the new Strategic Plan please refer to *Annex 1*.

4. Establishing New Communities of Practice

A new Community of Practice can only be established with ACFID's approval. A new Community should have a clear purpose and a unique focus which cannot be addressed by an existing Community or a sub-group of that Community.

Communities of Practice are member-led. To establish a new Community of Practice you will need at least one convener, preferably two, with the backing of your agency and a critical mass of participants drawn from across several agencies. ACFID can assist with finding participants by promoting the group through the monthly Member Bulletin. *More information on the roles and responsibilities of Co-convenors is found in Section 7 below.*

To establish a new CoP please contact ACFID's [Membership & Stakeholder Coordinator](#). You'll need to supply a brief paragraph on the proposed focus of the CoP¹. If the group meets the criteria, ACFID will seek expressions of interest for participation from across the ACFID membership. Depending on the level of interest ACFID will approve the CoP and set up the enabling infrastructure on *Collaborate*. The final authority on the establishment of a new CoP rests with ACFID's Growth and Effectiveness Manager.

CoP's may find it useful to establish a group Terms of Reference to define their purpose, scope of work and formalise group ways of working. ACFID will provide standard TOR templates on request but it's up to the individual CoP to agree to the particular terms of participation and engagement defined within their TOR.

5. Closing CoPs

CoPs can exist for as long their members wish them to exist. ACFID will periodically check whether CoPs are or intend to continue to function, including through monitoring CoP communication. CoPs which no longer wish to function will be formally closed by ACFID.

6. Composition of Communities of Practice

¹ This paragraph should include a description of the purpose, scope and focus of work for the group.

Communities are primarily vehicles for staff from ACFID Member agencies to share, learn and collaborate. ACFID does however encourage communities to open their membership to other people such as independent consultants, staff of managing contractors, DFAT staff, and academics from affiliated universities, including [ACFID Affiliate Members](#). The only exception to this general rule is that staff from NGOs or academic institutions that are eligible for ACFID membership are not permitted to join CoPs. The objective of bringing in expertise and perspectives from outside the ACFID Membership is to foster innovation, promote problem solving, spread best practice, contribute to professional development and result in the creation of new knowledge and collaborative partnerships.

ACFID has delegated the authority to approve the participation of non-Member individuals or agencies to the convenor/co-convenor with the backing of the group themselves. To add an external member to the group simply submit the contact details of the individual to ACFID's Membership & Stakeholder Coordinator who then sets up the user access on [Collaborate](#). As noted above, the only exception where ACFID may deny the user access is if the individual is employed by an organisation eligible for ACFID Membership. The convenor of the group is then responsible for introducing and inducting the new participant to the group.

From time to time it may be relevant and beneficial for non-ACFID Member individuals to attend certain meetings or events but not to formally join the group. Again ACFID delegates responsibility to the group itself to manage invitations and attendance of external members in such situations.

Communities also have the authority to refuse non-ACFID member individuals that request permission to participate in their group. Any issues regarding CoP membership which cannot be resolved by the convenors should be referred by the convenors to ACFID.

Non-ACFID Member individuals who were previously granted permission by ACFID to participate in Working Groups will have their permissions carried over to Collaborate in the interim. These permissions were usually granted for 1 year at which time ACFID maintains the authority to review the individuals' participation in the group based on the advice of convenors.

ACFID staff cannot be convenors of a Community of Practice but can participate as members as long their participation is consistent with their role and/or contributes to their professional development.

7. CoP Convenors

CoPs are required to select a member as convenor, or two members to be co-convenors. Convenors must be staff within a Full or Affiliate Member organisation. ACFID strongly recommends that CoPs appoint two co-convenors to share the responsibility and ensure continuity when one convenor is travelling. The convenors of the Community are responsible for:

- Chairing meetings
- facilitating communication within the group
- Managing relationships with external stakeholders;
- Act as the point of contact with the ACFID Secretariat if needed;
- Decide and manage which non-ACFID members can join the group;

- Introduce new members to the work of the group;
- Participate in annual learning event facilitated by ACFID; and
- Risk management- abiding by ACFID standards.

Convenors who resign must notify ACFID's Membership & Stakeholder Coordinator so that our CoP database can be updated accordingly. In the first instance all efforts will be made by the resigning convenor and existing CoP members to find a replacement for the position. In the second instance ACFID may support the process of finding a replacement convenor.

8. CoP Participants

An individual's level of participation and engagement in a CoP is self-selecting and self-managed and hence ACFID recognises and accepts that participation will vary across and within groups.

Individual participation is defined by following characteristics;

- Membership is voluntary;
- Members can belong to more than one CoP;
- Members are accountable to themselves and the group;
- Members can vary their level of participation. Whilst some group members will drive group content and action, others may observe from the sideline. Other participants may choose to engage at different times or on particular initiatives or projects depending on their own workload/capacity.

9. Communication and Confidentiality

Communities of Practice communicate primarily through [Collaborate](#), a custom built online communication and collaboration tool located in the My ACFID section of the website. *Collaborate* provides a platform for ACFID's CoP's to share information and resources, start discussions, organise meetings and events. All the content that is stored within [Collaborate](#) is only visible and accessible to the members of the CoP.

The platform also allows users to create **sub-groups** within the larger CoP, to have side discussions on more specialised issues. The content posted in the sub-group is only visible and accessible to its members.

ACFID will also continue to provide access to teleconference facilities with each CoP entitled to 4 per year. Access to teleconferences will be managed by ACFID's [Membership & Stakeholder Coordinator](#).

Communities may choose to hold face-to-face meetings on occasion but ACFID funding is not available to support these. CoPs are welcome to use ACFID's boardroom for meetings, subject to availability.

Information not readily available in the public domain and any intelligence gathered through communication within the CoP, including agenda and minutes, is shared on a confidential basis. Information can be shared if permission is given by the relevant member(s).

10. ACFID Secretariat Role

ACFID will continue to support and engage Communities in a number of ways.

Enable

- ACFID sees CoPs as a key part of ACFID's architecture and is committed to enabling CoPs to function effectively through providing enabling infrastructure (Collaborate and teleconference facilities), building capacity, sharing lessons and facilitating linkages.

Inform and Consult

- ACFID recognises that much of the sectors expertise in both policy and practice is located within the Communities and therefore will consult with CoPs on an as needed basis.

Managing Risk

- ACFID encourages CoPs to communicate with ACFID about their work, particularly where it may involve sensitive or controversial issues. In such cases, ACFID may work with an individual CoP to institute communication protocols which are specific to that CoP or to specific pieces of that CoP's work.

Work with to deliver

- ACFID may ask a CoP or some members of a CoP to undertake a specific piece of work on ACFID's behalf. In such cases, ACFID will provide additional support to the CoP, including either staff time or budget or both.

Promote

- ACFID can promote the work of CoPs through its public communication platforms. This can include posting a blog written by a CoP, sharing tools and other resources developed by CoPs via the Code Good Practice Toolkit and ACFID Resource Library, profiling and engaging expert practitioners from CoPs through Ask an Expert etc.

ACFID's Growth and Effectiveness Team (GET) will take the overarching responsibility for managing CoPs.

- The Learning and Development Coordinator will take overall responsibility for the management of CoPs as well as specific responsibility for the conceptual framework, guidelines for developing and maintaining CoPs, ToRs for convenors and participants, bi-annual learning workshops for convenors etc.
- The Membership and Stakeholder Coordinator will act as the first point of contact for CoPs and has responsibility for maintaining an overview of CoPs, promoting CoPs to the wider membership and development community, establishing new CoPs, registering/deregistering participants in CoPs on the Collaborate platform and acting as the gatekeeper for communication between individual CoPs and the secretariat.
- The Information Management Officer will take responsibility for the enabling technology/functionality of the web-based Collaborate platform and providing training to convenors/participants when relevant.
- ACFID staff will still be able to join one or more CoP if participation contributes to the delivery of their job and/or contributes to their professional development. Staff can only join as a participant, not as a convener.

11. Accountability and Branding

Unlike with the previous Working Group model where groups were accountable to ACFID's CEO, CoPs are essentially only accountable to themselves, allowing for greater group autonomy, flexibility and to encourage CoPs to be creative, energetic and take initiative.

As individual groups and in aggregate, CoPs will be branded under ACFID's name e.g. 'ACFID's Communities of Practice' & the 'ACFID Child Protection CoP'. However for any external facing work undertaken by a CoP such as letters to DFAT, case studies/guidelines for external distribution, events etc, CoP's cannot use ACFID's name unless explicitly requested/approved by ACFID's CEO or his/her delegate.

Permission to use ACFID's name will only be granted for work which aligns with ACFID's strategic/operational priorities. This includes for any formal correspondence to Government and other external stakeholders as well as less formal correspondence at meetings and events.

ACFID may ask a CoP to undertake a particular piece of work in ACFID's name i.e. to function as an Expert Task Group. If so, the CoP or a sub-set of members from the CoP will receive additional resources from ACFID to complete that task.

All requests to use ACFID's name will be managed by ACFID's [Membership & Stakeholder Coordinator](#). ACFID encourages CoPs to retain an open communication with ACFID on exciting initiatives and activities that they're undertaking.

12. Engaging with DFAT

ACFID will continue to facilitate consultation between DFAT and our members via CoPs. As in the past, when ACFID received requests from DFAT to consult with a particular group or members interested in a particular issue, we will continue to link DFAT staff with the relevant CoP. However, ACFID will only provide additional support (such as organising logistics, running pre-meeting telecons, and coordinating input/feedback from group members) where the consultation aligns with our strategic and operational priorities. In cases where there is no alignment, it will be up to the CoP convenors or volunteers from the group to take on these roles as required.

ACFID will allocate staff from its Policy and Advocacy team to participate in CoPs relevant to their individual and team work. As participants these staff members will be responsible for monitoring the group's engagement with DFAT and identifying opportunities for collaboration on work that aligns with ACFID's strategic priorities.

Annex 1:

Six changes to ACFID's ways of working

The Strategic Plan

After extensive consultation with ACFID CEOs, Committees and staff, a new ACFID Strategic Plan has been produced that will guide the organisation for the next five years – 2015-2020. The plan sets out four strategic goals that are focused on the public, Government and members. They set out longer term outcomes for our work, name specific changes we want to make and spell out what success looks like. The Plan also includes thematic focus areas that define where we want to create change in the next five years, namely: sustainable and inclusive development, peace and human security, and civil society. A human rights based approach and gender equity lens will be applied across our work.

A changing organisation

As a result of ACFID's Strategic Planning process, ACFID is making changes to its governance structures and ways of working with members. We are doing this to help improve our ways of working and achieve the goals of our new strategic plan.

Over the past 50 years, our committees and working groups have been a major strength of ACFID and its members, and have achieved significant outcomes.

However we have accumulated habits and formalities which make us creaky at times and impose sometimes unnecessary transaction costs upon the Excom and Secretariat which can make it harder to achieve strategic outcomes.

Several reviews have been undertaken to advise Excom on how ACFID could improve its governance structures and ways of working. As a result, Excom has decided to make some changes to ACFID's governance and ways of working. The purpose of this paper is to explain these changes to our members before they are implemented.

We think the changes are sensible and will help lighten the reporting and risk management load of the Secretariat and Excom which will, in turn help ACFID remain focused on our Strategic Goals. They are not radical changes, but all will require some changes in ways of working.

So what are the changes?

Change 1. Excom will become a Board and reaffirm its focus on governance matters and strategy. Terms will change from the current two years which are uncapped, to a maximum of two three year terms followed by a break before one can re-nominate.

Change 2. The Executive Director will become a CEO and focus on leading the organisation with accountability to the Board. This is consistent with common terminology in relation to a Board and their CEO.

Change 3. The number of governance committees reporting to the Board will be reduced from seven to three: the Code of Conduct, Finance and Audit and Membership Admissions Committees. The Council and Excom will continue to have the ability to create committees as required, but the preference will be for any new committees to be accountable to the CEO.

Change 4. Expert advisory committees will be formed in alignment with one or more of the goals and/or focus areas in our new Strategic Plan, and will be accountable to the CEO. The existing Development Practice Committee and Humanitarian Reference Group will continue but with evolving focus and membership over time. The existing Advocacy and Public Policy Committee will cease as ACFID invests further in the new Australian Aid Campaign. ACFID will also continue to engage with media, communications and policy staff through more informal structures such as the current media and communications group. The ACFID University Network Committee will become an independent committee and will form a partnership with ACFID.

Change 5. Working groups will be able to evolve into member-led **communities of practice** supported by the CFID Secretariat through an enhanced web communication platform, training for convenors and periodic learning events. Communities of practice will provide members with greater freedom to share experience, surface best practice, and pursue their own objectives outside of the ACFID brand and strategic priorities.

Change 6. Alongside communities of practice, time bound **expert task groups** will be formed by ACFID to help pursue its Strategic Plan, accountable to the CEO. Task groups could be specially convened or formed out of an existing community of practice or established as a new group.