



Knowledge Brokerage in Communities of Practice

Hands on recommendations

Impressum

This booklet results from the project 'FOODLINKS - Knowledge brokerage to promote sustainable food consumption and production: linking scientists, policymakers and civil society organizations' undertaken by the FOODLINKS partners, with funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme: Theme 'Environment'
Area ENV.2010.4.2.3-3 Brokerage activities to promote sustainable consumption and production patterns
Collaborative Project: grant agreement number 265287
Project duration: January 2011 – December 2013



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The FOODLINKS team would like to thank all people who participated in our knowledge brokerage activities and thereby actively contributed to the successful implementation of the project.

Finally, we wish to thank the members of the FOODLINKS 'Expert Forum' for their inputs, for constructive feedback and inspiring discussions: Bálint Balázs, Elisa Bianco, Julien Custot, Astrid Dahl, Floor de Sera, Erik Kaptein, Jiri Kolman, Christine Marshall, Bent Egberg Mikkelsen, Robert Pederson, Patricia Potter, Henk Renting, Ben Reynolds, Colin Sage, Carolyn Steel, Gudrun Walter.

Pictures for this booklet have been provided by Bettina B. Bock, Asta Donielaite, Femke Hoekstra, Sandra Karner, Heidrun Moschitz and Marie-Chiara Tort.

The content of this booklet does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the authors.

Design: Eva Klein

Publisher: IFZ Graz

ISBN 978-3-9502678-6-0

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Hands on recommendations

Knowledge brokerage in and across Communities of Practice

LINKING SCIENCE, POLICY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FIELD OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

This booklet is based on lessons learned during the FP7 project FOOD-LINKS, which experimented with different tools for knowledge brokerage activities as integrative modalities of linking research to policy making around the issue of sustainable food consumption and production.

»It is a two-way activity, and it is a process that very much refers to social relationships.«

Knowledge brokerage activities were carried out in a collaboration of scientists, policymakers and civil society organisations (CSOs) within and across three Communities of Practice.



Each Community of Practice included participants from different organisations and different countries, and brought together different types of knowledge and experience. Each Community of Practice was initially built around a core group of about 10 FOODLINKS project team members; during the course of the project all Community of Practice expanded by opening up and inviting new members

from outside the project.

Based on our experiences we formulate recommendations for the intentional creation and practical implementation of a specific type of Community of Practice: with an international and geographically spread out membership, which aims at sharing but also co-producing knowledge and that starts off with a stable number of core members. They can serve as a guide for future knowledge brokerage activities between researchers, policymakers, and civil society organisations in various domains of work. The recommendations are not specific for the domain of sustainable food production or consumption but assume that there is a common area of interest that encourages collaboration.



»Knowledge brokerage is a way to link different perspectives, levels of knowledge and understandings.«

KNOWLEDGE BROKERAGE AS INTERACTIVE PROCESS OF KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND CO-PRODUCTION



Knowledge brokerage in FOOD-LINKS was conceptualised as an interactive process of knowledge exchange and co-production that goes along with processes of social learning. It implied on-going interac-



tion between people from different societal sub-systems (research, policy and civil society), all of whom were considered to be both: knowledge producers and knowledge consumers at the same time. In doing so, we aimed at breaking through the usual duality of science as knowledge producers and policymakers and CSO's as knowledge users.

»the sharing of experiences and public procurement episodes are very important in this policy network exchange – here we see policy learning and knowledge exchange – which are vital to knowledge brokerage.«

Instead we started from the standpoint that all three groups had valuable knowledge to offer to the others, and that the mutual exchange of knowledge and experience allowed for the joint production of knowledge that none of the groups could have produced on their own.

»Knowledge brokerage is a way to link different perspectives, levels of knowledge and understandings.«

Communities of Practice: a tool for Knowledge Brokerage

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A Community of Practice is a group that evolves or is created around a common interest in a particular field with the goal of expanding knowledge related to that field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other and have an opportunity to broaden their understanding of the matter (Wenger et al. 2002).

»Working together is so important!«

SOCIAL LEARNING AS CENTRAL ELEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE BROKERAGE

Social learning in FOODLINKS referred to the learning content (the social relevance of sustainable consumption and production of food), the learning process (learning through social interactions), as well as the learning context (social environment of the learning individuals and the communities of practice).



»I am on a very steep learning curve.«

Communities of practice are a valuable tool for organising knowledge brokerage between scientists, policymakers and civil society organisations.

CULTIVATION OF NEW COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE ENTAILS EFFORTS AT THREE LEVELS

- I. Negotiating a *shared domain* – the joint enterprise: What topics and issues do we really care about in our CoP? What are the open questions and leading edge of our domain? What kind of influence do we want to have?
- II. Organising and nurturing *the community* and mutual en-gagement: What roles are people going to play in the CoP? How often will the community meet and how will its members connect on an on-going basis? What kinds of activities will generate energy and develop trust?
- III. Develop some kind of *shared practice* over time: What kind of knowledge brokerage and learning activities to organise in the CoP? The shared repertoire of resources can be: experiences, stories, strategies, policy tools, ways of addressing sustainability problems; ways of KB, learning activities.



CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

While starting the initial core Community of Practice we learnt that building a Community of Practice is actually a process of cultivation: the community has to be developed and to grow and this requires considerable amount of care, attention and proper facilitation.

PROCESS DESIGN AND PLANNING

Future members should be involved in the design of the communities at an early stage to assure a sense of ownership that supports equal participation.

»All different stakeholder groups involved in FOODLINKS can learn, that it's important to involve CSO / all non-research stakeholder groups - already in the project design. The EU should offer funds for this work. Certainly, it would not be easy to design a project together.«

EQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES IS A BASIC CONDITION FOR EQUAL PARTICIPATION.

Knowledge brokerage is time consuming, and needs adequate resources in order to nurture an on-going long-term process of knowledge exchange and co-production.

Funds for setting up a knowledge brokerage community can support also groups with few resources to engage in the community design. Participation in Communities of Practice usually competes with other activities. It is, therefore, crucial to make participation easy and well fitting into participants' working routines.



CLEAR DEFINITION OF THE AIM AND MISSION

Communities of Practice need to invest time in a problem defining phase, where goals and objectives are clarified and a decision is made on the priority of knowledge brokerage and the issue at hand (e.g. sustainable food systems). It is important to define and contextualise problems before starting the knowledge brokerage process, and to create a common understanding of the aim within the group.

Collaboration needs a purpose and a plan of action as guidance and encouragement of active participation.

»My expectations were that putting policy makers, practitioners and researchers together would be challenging, but giving the subject matter each of those groups would really find some interesting ways to bring things to the table.«



A community action plan should accommodate the variety in cultural and organisational background and different working routines.

Communities of Practice should be organised around an issue of mutual concern that requires collaboration between the different group members to be adequately addressed.

TANGIBLE OUTCOMES

Collaboration should result in tangible outcomes as they give direction to community activities and encourage contributions especially when the products support the members' work outside the community.



»A joint 'product' gives the exchanged knowledge a kind of "face", which makes it easier to see that knowledge brokerage has taken place.«

Producing tangible outcomes provides an instrument for recognising and integrating the variety of knowledge and experience present in the Community of Practice.

VALUE CREATION

Participation in communities of practice should create value for their members on the short and longer term. Since communities thrive on the value that they deliver, it is important to make value visible through regular reflections.

»I can really see it beginning to come together in a way that I don't think I have seen before.«

Membership and enrolment

DIVERSITY

Diversity in membership and the participation of key actors enhances the relevance of knowledge brokerage. An ex ante stakeholder mapping helps to identify the key actors.

»Of particular value were the different experiences and backgrounds of the other CoP participants in this discussion and their different interests in if, why and how to change the urban food situation.«

The participation of stakeholders should be balanced in terms of roles and numbers to assure equality among community members.

»The whole project has a scientific approach, layout, logic; it was not easy to give other perspectives a lot of space in the CoP activities.«



At the start of the Communities of Practice work it is important to encourage the members to explore each other's viewpoints as it raises awareness of the added value of diversity in the group and allows members to link their different life worlds, interests and perspectives.

»I learned a lot about novel tools for knowledge brokering and about dealing with people from very different backgrounds and different viewpoints/interests. Both government colleagues and researchers in [country] have been learning from my experiences.«



PLAYING WITH BOUNDARY SETTINGS RESHUFFLES POSITIONS

Boundaries between involved actor groups (e.g. policymakers vs. researchers) are unintentionally reconfirmed when choosing actors according to stakeholder categories; it is advisable to 'play' with boundary settings regularly and regroup members according to new criteria. This reshuffles positions and opens up new views.

»I'm very much struggling with this objectivity of science. And to find people who are open enough to listen to different perspectives, but also to say this is what I think is right and good, [...]. Working with FOODLINKS I had the impression that it is possible, so it has given me hope.«



Community members need to be willing to cross the borders of their own domain and working culture; they need to be ready to develop a new language and common understanding of the purpose of their collaboration. This requires empathy and patience as well as curiosity and creativity, and is in particular supported by face to face interaction.

»We began to exchange our different visions on short food chains and I saw that there were different approaches between the countries and between the different actors.«

GROUP SIZE

In order to ensure that the communication process does not rely on a few key individuals, Communities of Practice need to include a considerable number of participants. The minimum number increases significantly when communication takes place mainly online.

»The decision of creating an "open" or "close" group can change substantially the type of activity and the output.«

An active core group of people keeps the larger community alive and discussions on-going.

Facilitation: a crucial factor for successful Knowledge Brokerage

CAPACITY BUILDING

Knowledge brokerage needs capacity building and training for all participants; besides it needs a facilitator experienced in organising knowledge brokerage and in managing group dynamics.

FACILITATION

Communities of Practice need Leadership and facilitation especially in the beginning to engage members in regular communication and provide a sense of direction.

It is best to appoint one person as facilitator and leader who initiates activities and provides guidance throughout the process of collaboration.



»One particular challenge for facilitators was to build connections among CoP members and encourage everybody's participation without imposing rules in an hierarchical manner [...] another challenge was to "build the rhythm" [...] and] to find an equilibrium between face to face and online activities, as they are both important to guarantee the vitality of the CoP.«

ROTATION

Once Communities of Practice are up and running and members have gained experience in organising communication, facilitation may also be rotated as long as there is a facilitator in charge at any moment. Allowing for rotating facilitation ensures a broader spectrum of skills and expertise and allows for a variation in leadership styles.

In order to encourage a sense of ownership within the community it is important to regularly assign specific tasks and responsibilities to community members.

FACILITATION SKILLS

A good facilitator needs experience in managing group dynamics and in organising knowledge brokerage online and face-to-face. S/he needs to understand the different languages spoken among the community members and to be ca-

pable of bridging the differences in background. A facilitator needs to be able to dedicate considerable time to the management of the community. Online communication needs daily maintenance.

LANGUAGE

In international communities it is important to deal with language barriers and to regularly employ tools that do not rely on language proficiency.

»Also, the differing levels of ability to articulate in the English language have inhibited the fuller contribution of peoples' knowledge and experience to the collective learning. It would be helpful if some were able to contribute rather than receive or take - in order to get more knowledge of their local experiences and knowledge etc. into the collective CoP experience.«

In professionally mixed communities it is important to prevent the use of jargon that impedes effective communication.

It is important to regularly check if language barriers hamper communication. The facilitator should assure that speakers do not talk too fast or use specific jargon, and should regularly ask if everything is clear. Organising communication in smaller group settings can be helpful.

Planning budget for interpretation and translation (e.g. for disseminating results) helps to overcome language barriers.

The circulation of detailed minutes for comments helps those with less distinct verbal skills to catch up with the outcomes of activities.



»obstacles can be positive – we have all learned to work together and accommodate difference to make something innovative«

On-line and off-line interaction

Face to face activities are important for developing trust and a sense of community and affinity, and to nurture the willingness to remain actively involved.

Online interaction builds on face to face processes and has a clear complementary purpose especially in the starting phase of the community.

Face to face activities are essential for developing trust and a sense of community.



Online interaction needs to be encouraged on a daily basis. Online interaction offers an uncostly opportunity to follow up on face-to-face meeting, maintain regular interaction, and to expand participation and membership. Communities of Practice that rely heavily on on-line communication need to choose an online platform that is easy to

use, and accessible for all community members (check firewall limitations).

Choosing the right software is decisive: freeware is easily accessible, but not always easy to manage; various software might be blocked by firewalls of institutes.

»Technologies - we had to test several before taking.«

In order to ensure continuity and long term persistence it is important to create a durable online platform for communication.

Community members often need assistance and training in getting familiar with on-line communication.

Fixing a date and time for concerted online activities supports active participation.

»ICT seems to offer an easy way of building communities through online communication but it works only among a certain group of people who are used to communicating in this way with relative 'strangers.' It also suits those who can fit it easily into their regular working day. This, it seems, fits very badly into a regular policy-maker's day who spends little time at a desk and more in meetings.«



Knowledge Brokerage Tools

CHOICE OF KNOWLEDGE BROKERAGE TOOLS

When selecting specific knowledge brokerage tools it is important to consider the pleasure derived from their application. The 'Fun factor' of knowledge brokerage tools acts as an important driver of effective knowledge exchange.

The tool needs to be tailored to the actors engaged; especially experimental designs may cause irritation. The use of methods needs to be flexible in order to adapt to the participants' needs.

»I don't feel confident about using these tools but I'm determined to make an effort!«



It is important to use the right tool at the right time - the tool needs to fit to the goal and activity and to the actors engaged.

When offering a pool of tools for facilitation it is important to explain how the tools work and which specific added value can be expected from their application.

Using different tools produces cumulative value as the outcome of one tool can feed into another tool. When selecting knowledge brokerage tools their iterative use should be considered. Learning enhances with the right combination and sequence of tools.

»I thought a lot about civil society involvement and what tools could be used to involve them and why, so I have a lot of new ideas.«

The right mix of tools is important to achieve different goals at individual, group and topic level - the sequence of tools should be strategically planned for achieving good results in knowledge brokering.

Some tools need preparation for effective application, and some need participant training.

In international communities it is important to choose tools that do not require language proficiency and help overcoming linguistic barriers (for instance visualisation tools such as mind mapping).

Some tools help overcoming linguistic barriers better than others.



CONNECT PROCESS AND CONTENT

Tools work better when connected to and resulting in a concrete output or task.

The process of knowledge brokerage should always be directly linked to the content that is being discussed.

»I do admit that there is some tension and even confusion on how to proceed, balancing between content and knowledge brokerage processes.«

Active participation in knowledge brokerage activities is supported when assigning specific tasks to all participants.

Tools work better when they can be integrated into the daily life or work practices of participants.

THE EMOTIONAL ASPECT IS IMPORTANT

Setting and working methods are crucial for creating an enabling environment, in which people feel comfortable enough to share their ideas, experience and knowledge.

Consciously plan and facilitate the progress - the progress of knowledge brokerage needs to be organised and managed while allowing for flexibility and change during time.


»emotions - necessary to create willingness to participate, face-to-face meetings have been deemed irreplaceable on this regard.«

The emotional aspects of knowledge brokerage methods are important because social learning is often experiential. People need to 'feel like' participating, i.e. they should be rewarded by having fun when engaging in a particular KB activity. The emotional incentive for using particular KB tools needs regular 'fuelling'.

In particular online interaction needs good incentives for participation, including fun.

Compilation of tools and methods

The FOODLINKS project compiled a number of tools to be used for diverse knowledge brokerage activities. This 'Compilation of tools and methods for Knowledge Brokerage' and a 'Synthesis report on results from monitoring and evaluation' as well as comprehensive reports from the three Communities of Practice on their experiences with knowledge brokerage can be downloaded from the project webpage: www.foodlinkscommunity.net



The FOODLINKS consortium consisted of 14 partners from 9 European countries: research organizations, public authorities and civil society organizations.

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Further Details about the FOODLINKS project
and downloadable materials are available at:

<http://www.foodlinkscommunity.net>