

# Communities of Practice: analysis of approaches and lessons learned

**Jessica Gardner, Consultant, ESCAP Statistics Division**

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## Background

In Asia and the Pacific, the work on statistics is performed in close collaboration with 53 Member States and 9 associate members through consensus building, knowledge/analytical products and technical cooperation. Consensus building is primarily achieved through the UNESCAP Committee on Statistics, a biennial meeting of heads of national statistical organizations (Chief Statisticians). Under the auspices of the Committee on Statistics, regional mechanisms exist, as described below, which provide the Asia-Pacific statistical community with opportunities to meet and exchange ideas, and to develop standards and good practices across all fields of official statistics:

- Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics
- Steering Group for the Regional Programme for the Improvement of Economic Statistics in Asia and the Pacific,
- Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific,
- Expert Group on Disaster-related Statistics in Asia and the Pacific,

- Regional Steering Committee for Asia and the Pacific for the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics,
- Network for the Coordination of Statistical Training in Asia and the Pacific.

While face to face meetings are valuable, online tools can help to shift group communication from meeting once in a while into a continuous interaction, and from email where information is only available to the sender and recipient of the email, to a shared space that provides an ongoing record of interaction and tools so that every group member can contribute. This will improve the functionality of existing regional mechanisms, enhancing coordination, streamlining information sharing, and making their work more efficient.

In 2016, the ESCAP Committee on Statistics at its 5<sup>th</sup> Session (CST-5) endorsed a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community<sup>1</sup> indicating that

*“... by 2030, national statistical systems are enabled and empowered to lead development of and to deliver innovative, trusted and timely products and services for urgently needed and evolving statistical requirements of Agenda 2030.”*

with five action areas agreed as follows:

Action A: Engaging users and investing in statistics

Action B: Assuring quality and instilling trust in statistics

Action C: Integrated statistics for integrated analysis

Action D: Modernizing statistical business processes

Action E: Having requisite skills set

In 2018, the Committee on Statistics at its sixth Session supported a proposal by the Secretariat to form Communities of Practice to cover the four integration dimensions (including process, data, conceptual and disciplinary integration) under Action Area C (see box above). It recommended taking a stepwise approach with the establishment of a Community of Practice on conceptual integration as a possible first step.<sup>2</sup> Later, the Bureau of the Committee on Statistics in its meeting on 11 December 2019, agreed data integration rather than conceptual integration should be considered as the immediate priority.

<sup>1</sup> ESCAP. 2016. Committee on Statistics. Advancing official statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community [https://undocs.org/en/E/ESCAP/CST\(5\)/1/REV.1](https://undocs.org/en/E/ESCAP/CST(5)/1/REV.1)

<sup>2</sup> ESCAP. 2018. Committee on Statistics. Report of the Committee on Statistics on its sixth Session. [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP\\_CST\\_2018\\_6\\_Report\\_of\\_the\\_Committee\\_on\\_Statistics\\_sixth\\_session.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP_CST_2018_6_Report_of_the_Committee_on_Statistics_sixth_session.pdf)

In 2017, the **Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics** was established to oversee the implementation of the Regional Strategy to improve Population and Social Statistics in Asia and the Pacific<sup>3</sup>; to achieve its vision as per *“The countries of Asia and the Pacific have the capacity to produce, disseminate, and use the core set of population and social statistics by 2030.”*

More specifically, the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics shall:

- a) Provide strategic and technical guidance on the implementation of the Regional Strategy, including through advocacy, resource mobilization, facilitating regional and sub-regional cooperation, and developing and disseminating relevant methodological guidelines
- b) In consultation with the Secretariat, identify short-term and long-term priorities and establish milestones for the implementation plan, monitor progress and propose any adjustments to the implementation plan as the needs arise;
- c) Provide strategic and technical guidance to the Secretariat on the day-to-day management of the implementation activities.

The Regional Strategy also spells out three goals: (1) enabling policy environment to maintain demand for population and social statistics; (2) improve availability and quality of disaggregated statistics; and (3) data accessibility, analysis, interpretation and use.

The Regional Strategy vision and goals are in line with the collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community.

In 2019, guided by the decision of the Committee on Statistics, the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics at its second meeting, discussed changing the modality of its working groups into Communities of Practice that:

- i. Aim to facilitate sharing of knowledge and experience;
- ii. Strengthen coordination and follow-up mechanisms;
- iii. Provide cost-effective get-togethers by use of electronic forums;
- iv. Facilitate South-South technical collaboration.

A summary of their decisions, which may be used to guide design and implementation of the Community of Practice, is provided in Annex 1.

ESCAP Statistics Division, as a response to decisions made by both the Committee on Statistics at its sixth Session and the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics at its second meeting, is supporting this initiative to establish Communities of Practice for the Asia-Pacific statistical community.

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<sup>3</sup> ESCAP. 2016. Committee on Statistics. Meeting the data and statistics needs for socially inclusive development for all: proposed implementation plan for the regional strategy to improve population and social statistics in Asia and the Pacific [https://undocs.org/en/E/ESCAP/CST\(5\)/3](https://undocs.org/en/E/ESCAP/CST(5)/3)

## Purpose and methodology

This paper supports both the decision made by the sixth Committee on Statistics and the work of the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics considering the decision to trial the formation of online **Communities of Practice** to complement face-to-face activities and encourage networking and information sharing. The paper is intended to inform decision about the design and implementation of a dynamic framework of Communities of Practice among statisticians in Asia and the Pacific that will initially support regional and national efforts to deliver on action area C: integrated statistics for integrated analysis.

This paper presents findings about existing Communities of Practice being used by the statistical community at global level and another division of ESCAP. It provides analysis of the purpose, resources and timelines typically involved, lessons learned and the strengths and limitations of existing approaches, as well as recommendations for ESCAP Statistics Division. It is an early step in a series of activities that ESCAP Statistics Division will undertake to set up trial Communities of Practice during 2020.

The Communities of Practice included in this assessment were:

- a) UNECE Statistics Wiki (<https://statswiki.unece.org/>)
- b) United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) online spaces for the Inter-agency Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals (IAEG-SDGs) and other expert groups
- c) ESCAP SDG Community of Practice (<https://sdg-cop.unescap.org>)

These were selected based on relevance. Information was gathered through email and telephone interviews during December 2019 and January 2020 with people responsible for overseeing the Community of Practice.

Thanks goes to Christian Mortelliti, ESCAP ([christian.mortelliti@un.org](mailto:christian.mortelliti@un.org)), Taeke Gjaltema, UNECE ([taeke.gjaltema@un.org](mailto:taeke.gjaltema@un.org)), and Paul Pacheco, UNSD ([pachecop@un.org](mailto:pachecop@un.org)) for their time and for contributing their valuable experience and advice to this process.

Findings were supplemented by a review of journal papers and information about Community of Practice and online communities.

## Types of online communities

**Communities of Practice** are “groups of people who share a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.”<sup>4</sup>

Communities of Practice emerged in the 1990s as a tool for knowledge management.<sup>5</sup> They can serve a variety of purposes:

- Helping community – a forum for members to help each other with everyday questions and needs
- Best Practice community – a place to develop and share best practices and guidelines
- Knowledge stewarding community – organize, manage and steward a body of knowledge
- Innovation community – generate breakthrough ideas and new knowledge and practices.<sup>6</sup>

For statistics in the Asia-Pacific region, Communities of Practice provide an accessible, online space for groups of experts to come together and exchange experiences and ideas about their work.

They can also be workspaces for groups and projects under the Committee on Statistics to manage their communication and work collaboratively.

## Building a successful online community

***“...it is vital these groups are not formed purely because it is easy to do so...”***<sup>7</sup>

Websites and online tools that bring people together to share information and collaborate on projects have been used successfully in many settings. Scientific and academic experts who share a common interest but are distanced by location have typically been at the forefront of using online tools to share and build their expertise.

Statisticians leading national statistical systems are excellent candidates for establishing a vibrant Community of Practice as they share common challenges, have a set of unifying international and regional standards, and can benefit from pooling expertise and working on shareable knowledge products.

Despite the benefits and the relatively low cost of establishing these communities, many of them fail. A clear purpose, careful planning, realistic scope and the dedicated resources are needed to make them work.

Early research by Wegner et al (2002) on how to cultivate a successful Community of Practice provides

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<sup>4</sup> Asian Development Bank. 2008. Building Communities of Practice.

<sup>5</sup> SWOOP Analytics. 2018. Building Online Communities of Practice. [www.swoopanalytics.com/building-online-communities-of-practice/](http://www.swoopanalytics.com/building-online-communities-of-practice/)

<sup>6</sup> Creating Communities of Practice: What is a Community of Practice?  
<http://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

<sup>7</sup> SWOOP Analytics. 2018. Building Online Communities of Practice. [www.swoopanalytics.com/building-online-communities-of-practice/](http://www.swoopanalytics.com/building-online-communities-of-practice/)

seven principles:<sup>8</sup>

### 1. Design for evolution

Communities of Practice are organic and designing them is more like “shepherding their evolution than designing from scratch”. It is valuable to have a vision and a plan but expect this to change as the community develops and grows. Establish the community with the idea of what it could become but allow it to evolve and not be constrained by its design.

### 2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives

“Good community design requires an insider's perspective to lead the discovery of what the community is about. Effective community design is built on the collective experience of community members. Only an insider can appreciate the issues at the heart of the domain, the knowledge that is important to share, the challenges their field faces, and the latent potential in emerging ideas and techniques. Only an insider can know who the real players are and their relationships. This requires more than community "input". It requires a deep understanding of community issues.”

“Good community design brings information from outside the community into the dialogue about what the community could achieve. Sometimes this involves educating community members about the role of communities in other organizations. It might mean bringing an "outsider" into a dialogue with the community leader and core members as they design the community. As a result of this dialogue, the people who understand the issues inside the community and have legitimacy within it are also able to see new possibilities and can effectively act as agents of change.”

### 3. Invite different levels of participation

“Alive communities, whether planned or spontaneous, have a "coordinator" who organizes events and connects community but others in the community also take on leadership roles. There are typically three main levels of community participation:

- a **small core group of people** who actively participate in discussions, even debates, in the public community forum. This group is usually rather small, only 10 to 15 percent of the whole community.
- the next level outside this core is **the active group**. These members attend meetings regularly and participate occasionally in the community forums, but without the regularity or intensity of the core group. The active group is also quite small, another 15 to 20 percent of the community.
- a large portion of community members are **peripheral** and rarely participate. Instead, they keep to the sidelines, watching the interaction of the core and active members. Some remain peripheral because they feel that their observations are not appropriate for the whole or carry no authority. Others do not have the time to contribute more actively.”

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<sup>8</sup> Wegner, E., McDermott, R. and Snyder, W.M. 2002. Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge. <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/cultivating-communities-of-practice-a-guide-to-managing-knowledge-seven-principles-for-cultivating-communities-of-practice>.

#### **4. Develop both public and private community spaces**

“Dynamic communities are rich with connections that happen both in the public places of the community—meetings, Web site—and the private space—the one-on-one networking of community members. Most communities have public events where community members gather—either face-to-face or electronically—to exchange tips, solve problems, or explore new ideas, tools, and techniques.”

“A common mistake in community design is to focus too much on public events. A community coordinator needs to “work” the private space between meetings, dropping in on community members to discuss their current technical problems and linking them with helpful resources, inside or outside the community. These informal, “back channel” discussions actually help orchestrate the public space and are key to successful meetings.”

#### **5. Focus on value**

“Value is key to community life, because participation in most communities is voluntary. But the full value of a community is often not apparent when it is first formed. Moreover, the source of value often changes over the life of the community. Frequently, early value mostly comes from focusing on the current problems and needs of community members. As the community grows, developing a systematic body of knowledge that can be easily accessed becomes more important.”

“Many of the most valuable community activities are the small, everyday interactions—informal discussions to solve a problem, or one-on-one exchanges of information about a tool, supplier, approach, or database. The real value of these exchanges may not be evident immediately. When someone shares an insight, they often don't know how useful it was until the recipient reports how the idea was applied. The impact of applying an idea can take months to be realized. Thus, tracing the impact of a shared idea takes time and attention.”

#### **6. Combine familiarity and excitement**

“As communities mature, they often settle into a pattern of regular meetings, teleconferences, projects, Web site use, and other ongoing activities. The familiarity of these events creates a comfort level that invites candid discussions.”

“Lively communities combine both familiar and exciting events so community members can develop the relationships they need to be well connected as well as generate the excitement they need to be fully engaged. Routine activities provide the stability for relationship-building connections; exciting events provide a sense of common adventure.”

#### **7. Create a rhythm for the community**

“Vibrant Communities of Practice also have a rhythm. At the heart of a community is a web of enduring relationships among members, but the tempo of their interactions is greatly influenced by the rhythm of community events. Regular meetings, teleconferences, Web site activity, and informal lunches ebb and flow along with the heartbeat of the community. When that beat is strong and rhythmic, the community has a sense of movement and liveliness.”

“The rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its aliveness. There are many rhythms in a community—the syncopation of familiar and exciting events, the frequency of private interactions, the ebb and flow of people from the sidelines into active participation, and the pace of the community's overall evolution.”

General best practices for building online communities, recommended by IT giant Oracle, are below.<sup>9</sup> More on why each of them is important is provided in Annex 2.

- 1. Start small** – focus on one specific goal, such as preparing a publication or for an expert group meeting. Expand the community by adding more functions incrementally.
- 2. Design with Potential Members in Mind** – consider your potential members’ motivations and interests as you build spaces for interaction. Don’t neglect members’ desires to express themselves and to find useful content.
- 3. Prevent Anonymity** – require people to register and log in before participating in the conversation.
- 4. Focus on First Impressions** – seed the community with members, groups, activities, and content before launching. Draw your first members from employees, partners, and strong voices from the statistical community who are willing to participate.
- 5. Get Early Buy-in from Internal Influencers** – recruit a sponsor who can influence the success of the community, maintain key relationships, and secure resources.
- 6. Designate a Full-Time Community Manager** – this person should handle member engagement and moderation as well as provide ongoing training and support opportunities.
- 7. Plan for Growth** – identify the mechanisms (in both process and technology) that will enable the community to expand smoothly. For example, designate a team to respond to member questions and make sure your platform can evolve painlessly.
- 8. Evolve Organically** – leave room for unintended positive developments, such as member groups that emerge from the ground up. Let members take leadership roles as appropriate and let them contribute to community development.
- 9. Make It Easy to Register** – make the commitment small—don’t ask for too much personal information up-front. You can always ask for additional information later (for a limited community event, for instance).
- 10. Connect to the Outside World** – link to related sites and articles, and keep members informed about conferences and events.

## Tools to support online communities

It is important that technology does not drive how the Community of Practice operates but that it is flexible to adapt to the needs of the community as it evolves. Members should not feel constrained by software and should be able to use different tools for different purposes. For example, groups might break away from their online space and link to a Google Forms when that proves to be the best solution, as has been done by the UNSD led group for IAEG-SDGs members.

There are many tools that support Communities of Practice and online collaboration. The choice of software platform will depend on what the group needs to be able to do, what represents the best value for money, and is efficient to maintain.

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Oracle. 2012. Best Practices for Building Online Communities.  
<http://www.oracle.com/us/products/applications/building-online-communities-1639568.pdf>



The systems used by ESCAP (Mighty Networks) and UNECE and UNSD (Confluence) offer a wide range of features, with the ones emphasised on their respective websites summarised below.

### **Mighty Networks**

*“A new kind of website builder that grows with you”*

- A tool for building websites that are easy to maintain
- Tools for managing communities and memberships
- Member categories and profiles to support networking
- Direct messaging and group chat
- Ability to offer online courses and receive payments for them
- Polls and questions
- Events including video calls

### **Confluence**

*“Your workspace, your way”*

- Create and share pages (text, images, GIFs, video, etc.)
- Templates and macros for dynamic content (polls, messaging, etc.)
- Group pages together in an infinite number of dedicated spaces
- Powerful search features
- Feedback and in line comments (like in Microsoft Word)
- Integration with many other apps (Team calendars, Trello, Google Drive, Dropbox)
- Version control (can roll back to any earlier version)
- Strong security features
- Hosted in the Cloud or on your own server

## Analysis of existing examples

### UNECE Statistics Wikis (Confluence)

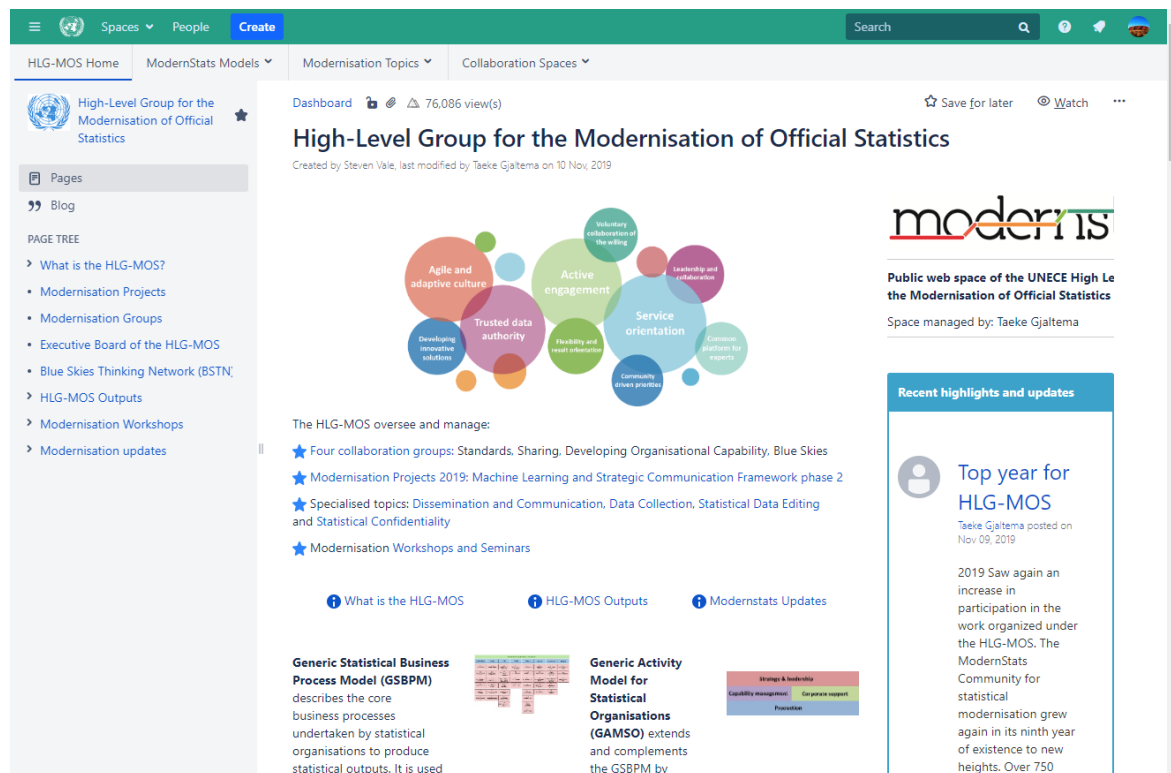
***“A Community of Practice will work if people have a need to go there and to go there frequently.”***

UNECE Statistics Division has been using online collaborative spaces to manage the work of their groups of experts for more than 10 years. Today, the system has around 90 different group pages and hundreds of members.

Confluence allows a great deal of flexibility in how the pages and groups are managed. Groups can be closed to particular members or open, so they are visible to the public. Closed groups are used by UNECE as spaces for teamwork where expert group members can share information and work together on a document, for example. Open wikis are used more like websites and content often graduates from a closed group into a public one once the work is completed. The advantage of the Confluence pages over UNECE's corporate website is that UNECE's Statistics Division has more control over the style and content, and members from the statistical community can contribute as well.

There are a wide range of features and flexibility to the wiki pages, so they are easily customizable to the needs of the group. Taeke Gjaltema, who manages the online spaces associated with the High-Level Group on the Modernisation of Official Statistics shared his experiences and lessons learned.

Figure 1 Screenshot of the UNECE High-level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics home page on the UNECE Statistics Wiki (<https://statswiki.unece.org/display/hlqbas>)



## Resources and costs

Costs are minimal. The software is provided free of charge by Atlassian on a Community License for non-profit organizations (<https://www.atlassian.com/software/views/community-license-request>). It was a slight challenge to secure this because the usual evidence of being a ‘non-profit charitable organization’ is not available to United Nations organizations as they are not registered with a national authority for these purposes. There are some small payments for macros that are purchased as add-ons to the Confluence platform.

Hardware costs include a server on which to run the site and assistance from the UNECE Information Technology Unit (ITU) for the server maintenance.

Staff time for maintaining the wikis varies and is difficult to quantify. When a group is functioning successfully time usually spent on email and teleconferences can be saved. The online system also provides a way to manage expert group communication and coordination providing benefits for UNECE staff members in charge of that work.

## Lessons Learned

1. Need to have a purpose for going there (forced use).
2. Participants at UNECE meetings and workshops often request an online medium where they can share examples (for example, sticker voting on priorities for the future typically results in online information sharing being the most popular idea) but open platforms for information sharing have not worked. People like the idea but unless the online space is attached to a workshop or some reason for people to do it, only a small number of people contribute.

3. Groups that have high frequency members, e.g. visiting once a week are more successful. Frequent visits allow members to become familiar and comfortable with using the space and it becomes easier for them. They can remember how to do things and worth investing time in how to use it
4. Groups that include IT savvy people, such as statisticians working on modernization or ICT-related issues, tend to be more active.
5. Groups that do not work have been those involving higher-level managers who need to use the space infrequently (e.g. Steering Committee)
6. Allow members to use features that are fit for their purpose – no need to constrain members to the online space. For example, sometimes a group will use Google Docs to work on a collaborative document – separate to the UNECE Statistics Wiki - because it has the features they want.
7. Need to refresh the content.
8. Need to have an active leader to manage the spaces
9. The UNECE modernization group approach is to separate content into (a) spaces for information sharing within the group and (b) another set of webpages for knowledge products that are ready to publish or are things group members have been asked to use, such as meeting registration forms.
10. For some audiences, the online community might work and for others not. Failure with one group does not mean total failure – time and place matters and success can be variable.

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using a wiki provides a great deal of flexibility to create web pages and control the content. As opposed to a corporate website where everything looks the same and fits branding, wikis can differ from group to group and the focus is on the content</li> <li>• Forced usage has acted as a key to getting members there and keeping them there.</li> <li>• When people have to use the system, some have been quickly converted to ‘super users’</li> <li>• System allows use of the whole screen (landscape and not portrait)</li> <li>• Scale to mobile devices</li> <li>• Rights management (people only see what they have the rights to see), granular management of pages</li> <li>• Using online spaces for group work helped to cut down on email traffic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No backup is being made – would need to fund a second server</li> <li>• There have been some IT issues – people using macros they shouldn’t have used; nested add-ons; conflicts created. Need to have people in the team who are capable of learning how to manage the system.</li> <li>• Some functionality of Confluence, such as macros that provide certain features, may become unsupported.<sup>10</sup> This requires UNECE staff to spend time to find an alternative and update the page.</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> Confluence is open source software and macros providing features (e.g. a tool to show workshop photos as a slideshow in the page) are designed by multiple contributors active in the Confluence community of users.

## UNSD online spaces for the IAEG-SDGs and other expert groups (Confluence)

***“The best thing is being able to control what we put online, from anywhere, at any time.”***

UNSD also uses Confluence to manage online Communities of Practice, but as closed groups with content visible to members only. Paul Pacheco shared his experience managing the online spaces for the IAEG-SDGs, which is mandated to meet face-to-face twice a year and uses WebEx meetings to progress the work in between (around once a month).

The main purpose of the UNSD Communities of Practice is as a repository of shared materials. They use the space to share papers, presentations and other online resources that are for discussion within the group and not open to the public. The system allows them to upload content from anywhere and at any time, an advantage over their main UNSD website, which is maintained by a site administrator.

Currently, not all members log in and use the space, so he maintains a dual system. He adds the files to their online space and then emails all group members with the link to download as well as including attachments to the email, or vice versa. He would prefer to use the online space only in the future to remove this duplication of effort.

Paul is self-taught and only uses limited functionality of Confluence, which he finds relatively easy and user friendly. Adding new features would need a little trial and error to see what works. It is easy enough to learn by doing and, with many solutions available online, it is possible to manage with no web designer background or previous experience.

### Resources and costs

Paul is unsure what UNSD is paying to maintain their version of Confluence, if anything. Minimal staff time is spent to prepare for the IAEG-SDGs Webex meetings once a month. Adding the agenda, presentations, and meeting notes takes less than an hour per month. Setting up a new group space takes a while but then maintaining is straightforward. He has had no need to use IT support so far but understands it is available.

### Lessons learned

1. It would be good to find a way to force people to use the collaboration platform so we can avoid having to maintain two systems (people revert to using email).
2. It is worth highlighting the benefits so the group is aware of how the online platform can save them time and make their work more efficient (e.g. more visible record than limiting communication to email; people can connect from anywhere; ability to leave questions and comments on the wiki space).
3. Important to test how the system works on mobiles and tablets because a lot of people work from these devices.

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can control what goes on it right away and from anywhere (our web people are responsive, but they are not always there)</li><li>• Everything is traceable; history of everything; can rollback</li><li>• Can have a few people contribute to it – can give access to almost anyone</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not the only way they communicate so there is a bit of duplication</li><li>• When members need to reset password, they click on a link to request that and someone at UNSD has to do it (better if this was automated, which may be possible to change)</li></ul>

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2-3 levels of rights (view spaces; edit spaces; administrator)</li> <li>• Analytics are available and information such as who has logged on (can see some have never logged on). The analytics information is useful but not something they monitor much at this stage.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If using a free version there might be some limited features</li> </ul>

## ESCAP Sustainable Development Goal Community of Practice (Mighty Networks)

***“Strengths outweigh the weaknesses, however, getting people to actually engage is a significant issue.”***

ESCAP established an SDG Community of Practice in 2018 as an informal space to link people to resources and create peer learning groups about the SDGs. It aims to reach a broad audience of people involved in sustainable development and was designed with the Asia-Pacific region in mind, but membership is open to all. The Community of Practice operates on a spirit of inclusivity.

According to the description on the site, the SDG Community of Practice offers members the opportunity to:

- “Experience content and conversations around the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Connect with people who share your interests, who work in your area or care about the same topics.
- Share and exchange stories, experiences, and ideas around our shared mission.
- Find inspiration, thought-provoking conversations, and expert perspective each and every day.”<sup>11</sup>

There are now 1,200 members and growing. More than half (60%) of users were recruited by other members. To facilitate this, the Community of Practice uses a referral system where members encourage others to join and get recognized for successful referrals (Ambassador Bronze, Silver, and Gold level). The referral system has caused exponential growth in the number of members.

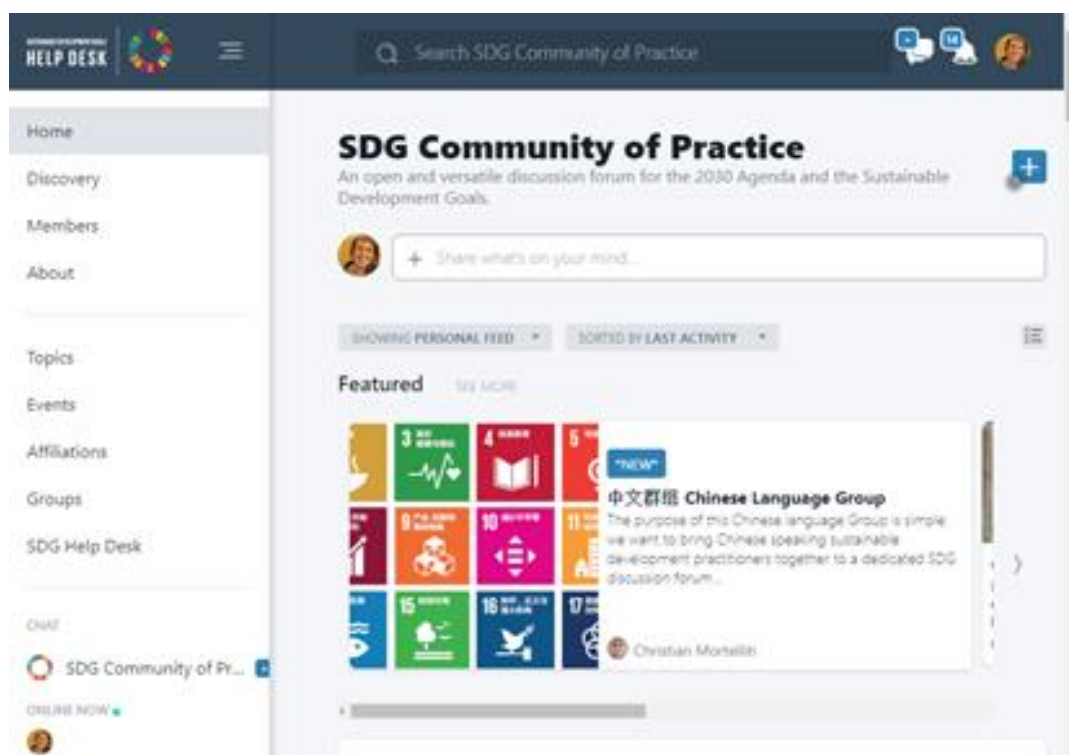
Modes of exchange include ‘Questions’, ‘Events’, ‘Quick Posts’, ‘Closed Groups’ (visible only to members), ‘Private Groups’ (publicly visible but need to request to join) and ‘Open Groups’. The Community of Practice is run on **Mighty Networks** – a customisable social media platform. They were chosen based on the value for money (price vs service provided). A summary of the evaluation done of potential service providers (Mighty Networks, Vanilla Forums, Hoop.la, Zoho Connect) is in Annex 3.

Some of the indicators of success include the member retention rate (% of members visited in last 30 days and returned again), an engagement point system (measures how active members are relative to others), and graphs of people’s posting history. Like with all analytics the measures provide a broad

<sup>11</sup> SDG Community of Practice: New to the community? Start here! [https://sdg-cop.unescap.org/posts/2169707?utm\\_source=manual](https://sdg-cop.unescap.org/posts/2169707?utm_source=manual).

idea of activity levels and what works. One of the most successful aspects of the Community of Practice has been the introductory question, which people are asked to answer when they first join.

Figure 2 Screenshot of the ESCAP SDG Community of Practice Home Page for members (<https://sdg-cop.unescap.org/>)



## Resources and costs

The ESCAP SDG Community of Practice is run on a costly plan, which is \$468 USD per year. The staff time spent to oversee the community started out as 1-2 hours a week and now 3-5 hours per week (mainly done by one person (Christian Mortelliti) with colleagues pitching in). The time taken from planning to launch took about three months. Part of the process was to get approval from IMCTS for which they needed to provide the estimated number of users, pricing, privacy protections, expected duration of the Community of Practice, and who would use it.

## Lessons learned

1. Need to have a thorough assessment of demand – who will use it and how? Good to have targeted interest.
2. Be familiar with the procurement process – it is complicated and time consuming.
3. Engagement issues – hard to get people interested. Even though people sign up they don't necessarily engage. They address that by intervening directly to comment on things and generate content.
4. New members should have an onboarding process – a couple of questions when they join that you can use to engage with them (e.g. What do you want to get out of the Community of Practice? – this is the most responded to part of the platform). This onboarding is a good way to get new members familiar with the community guidelines.
5. Frequently engage people by asking questions (these have the most response).

6. Initially there were too many notifications (two per day) and this was driving people away – this was an issue early on, but it has been resolved.
7. Establish a posting schedule that sets up a framework for engagement (use analytics to find out what days and times members are most active and use this time to post).
8. Maintaining interest within the ESCAP team can be a challenge. People have good ideas but don't always have the time to follow up on them.
9. Not having a dedicated moderator makes it a challenge to maintain a Community of Practice.
10. Recommend establishing a management structure with clear workflow, roles and responsibilities for those involved in maintaining the Community of Practice
11. Not having a launch was a lost opportunity.
12. Had some issues with people not following guidelines (soliciting; promoting). Some of these were easy to deal by blocking them as it was clear they were spammers. One member was difficult to handle. He was doing mildly self-promotional posts, but as inclusivity is an aim it was hard to deal with him. The advice is to be firm up front as he turned out to become increasingly difficult. It can be toxic to the community to have even one problem contributor.

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System is intuitive – easy to learn how to set up and maintain</li> <li>• Customisable</li> <li>• Good and responsive technical support</li> <li>• Clean design</li> <li>• Ambassador system – members can invite others and they get recognition (medals for referrals; incentive)</li> <li>• Diverse range of content (quick post, articles, events, questions, polls)</li> <li>• Easy to change roles (moderators; specific sub-communities) and good degree of granularity</li> <li>• Mighty Networks App is good but not sure how many Community of Practice members are using the app versus using the space through a web browser</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependent on the external provider</li> <li>• Uncertainty on the future of the platform</li> <li>• Need to keep a close eye on Community of Practice activity to monitor and respond to comments and questions and ensure ethical use of the space</li> <li>• Some of the features are clunky (can't put a hyperlink on quick posts for example)</li> <li>• The Community of Practice is designed similarly to a social media platform. This makes it difficult to show value beyond other mainstream social media channels such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, etc. where many people are already active.</li> </ul>

## Conclusions and recommendations

Identifying a clear purpose for the Community of Practice is essential. A general space for ‘information sharing’ is more likely to fail than a space that is designed to support a specific purpose. ESCAP Statistics Division should consider using online communities as a workspace for existing groups and projects to have a combination of face-to-face and online interactions. This will give the group a clear sense of purpose. As they must meet and work together anyway, the online community becomes an online space that can help organize their work and make it more efficient. The intended Communities of Practice can build from that as working together online becomes more familiar.

The investment in setting up an online community will primarily be in staff time. This may be considerable, as shown by the ESCAP Community of Practice that took three months to establish and requires a half day to a day per week to maintain. Software costs may be avoided by negotiating a not-for-profit license as has been done by UNECE. Administrative costs may go beyond ESCAP Statistics Division to include support from IT services or other parts of ESCAP that need to be involved.

An overarching framework that sets out a vision, objectives, roles and responsibilities, and a costed action plan, will help manage the implementation with limited resources. It should be designed in a way that allows ESCAP Statistics Division to start small and scale up as lessons are learned.

At the time of COVID-19 pandemic that face to face events cannot take place or are limited in scope, the need for using Communities of Practice has been highlighted.

## Recommendations

### 1. Start small and experiment with different approaches

Establishing effective Communities of Practice as envisaged by the Committee on Statistics and Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics discussions will take time. Online communities should be allowed to evolve as community members use it, see where the benefits lie and the best way to realise them.

It is recommended that ESCAP Statistics Division start to use an online collaborative system like Confluence to facilitate existing expert group work (so members have a clear reason to go there) and then use this as a platform to experiment with different approaches to learning, sharing and technical collaboration.

### 2. Select fit-for-purpose software

The technology used should be intuitive and functional so that it does not become a barrier to access. If the website is too slow, or the features take too much time to learn, members will be less likely to engage. The software must be manageable for ESCAP Statistics Division and come with the level of support needed to run the system efficiently.

Confluence seems like a good option as it is free, highly customizable and is being used successfully by UNSD and UNECE Statistics Divisions. Those people in the Asia-Pacific Statistical Community who are already participating in groups managed by UNSD and UNECE Statistics Divisions will be familiar with the system.



### **3. Have the Communities of Practice work on a product**

Members need a reason to use the Community of Practice. Simply coming together to ‘share knowledge and experiences’ is unlikely to work. Following years of experience with their system, UNECE found that, despite best intentions, online collaboration without a clear purpose or product attached almost always fail.

Communities of Practice should have a common product and time-bound commitments to work towards, such as preparing a collection of good practices to be presented at a meeting or writing a paper to be published in a journal or as part of the ESCAP Statistics Division Working Paper series.

As an example, the Communities of Practice could be used to facilitate workplan tasks agreed at the meeting of Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics in July 2019, such as:

- Developing case studies of countries applying EPIC (Goal 1)
- Stocktaking of innovative Population Census practices (Goal 1)
- Developing generic guidelines on data integration (Goal 2)
- Develop a training course on data integration (Goal 2)

### **4. Require frequent interactions**

Members need to have a reason to visit the online space regularly; every day or at least every week. If members are there frequently, they get used to how the space works and feel more comfortable interacting online. It is recommended to design the Communities of Practice with a purpose that requires frequent visits. Focusing on a time-bound product, as suggested in Recommendation 3, would help to achieve this.

### **5. Clarify roles and responsibilities of leaders, facilitators, moderators, members**

There will be several people involved in setting up and maintaining the Communities of Practice from leaders who will make decisions and guide development of the Communities of Practice, facilitators of the online spaces, moderators to contribute content and encourage interaction, and the members who will participate and observe. The roles of all involved – managers, administrators, moderators and members – should be clearly defined and documented.

The communities should be maintained and facilitated by people from the ESCAP Statistics Division as the Secretariat who are already coordinating regional collaboration activities. Their role could be to set up the space, add content and use the space as an additional or alternative tool for existing and future communication and collaboration. The moderator(s) for each space, preferably being country representatives, can play a different role; leading by example and encouraging community interaction.

### **6. Select moderators with the right skill set**

People who are IT savvy and have the time to invest in teaching themselves how to add content and maintain an online space are more likely to have success. Moderators should be interested in the topic, motivated for the Community of Practice to succeed and have the time to spend on the role.

## **7. Use the Community of Practice platform to support preparation for meetings and workshops**

Forcing people to use the system will get them familiar and increase the likelihood they will engage in the future. UNECE have used their Statistics Wiki to get their meeting participants register for the event and to submit their abstracts, papers and presentations. Engagement is more likely if the community is linked to face-to-face meetings and existing work groups. Self-driven engagement of community members is what makes an online community work. Some consider this the most critical aspect of a successful community.<sup>12</sup> High quality content drives engagement in online communities with the best content being generated from ideas shared by people in the community – both online and face-to-face.<sup>13</sup> A community that supports both modalities is more likely to have high engagement.

For ESCAP Statistics Division, one suggestion for an initial trial of Communities of Practice could be using the available online platform to facilitate organizing large events. For example, participants of Asia-Pacific Statistics Week can use the platform to register, submit their abstracts, papers and presentations and access relevant links and documents. Also, members of Committee on Statistics can use it to access the Session's documents, to have initial consultations and discussions, and submit statements.

### Next steps

The next step is to develop a design and implementation framework for Communities of Practice to support regional and national efforts to deliver on action area C: integrated statistics for integrated analysis. The framework is to articulate the purpose of Communities of Practice, intended benefits, linkage to the collective vision and framework for action, and relationship with the ESCAP Committee on Statistics governance architecture (Regional Steering Groups, Bureau of the Committee on Statistics, Regional Programmes, etc).

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<sup>12</sup> Rivera, G and Cox, A.M. 2016. A Practice-Based Approach to Understanding Participation in Online Communities. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12148>.

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF. 2015. Knowledge Exchange Toolbox: Group methods for sharing, discovery and co-creation. [https://www.unicef.org/knowledge-exchange/files/UNICEF\\_Knowledge\\_Exchange\\_Toolbox.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/knowledge-exchange/files/UNICEF_Knowledge_Exchange_Toolbox.pdf).

## Annex 1: Decisions by the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics on Communities of Practice

At its meeting in 2019, the Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics discussed and made decisions on the purpose and direction their Communities of Practice should take.<sup>14</sup>

**Four Communities of Practice** will be established:

- i. *Community of Practice A: Enable policy environment and maintain demand and support* (initial focus: application of EPIC tool)
- ii. *Community of Practice B: Improve availability and quality of disaggregated statistics* (initial focus: data integration)
- iii. *Community of Practice C: Enhance data accessibility, analysis, interpretation and use*
- iv. *Community of Practice D: Population Census and Civil Registration and Vital Statistics innovations*

**Purpose:** *learning, sharing of knowledge and experience, and technical collaboration* and not a forum for decision making and/or financial collaboration.

**Objective:** *identify and share good practices, as well as identify challenges and lessons learned in addressing challenges.*

There will be **one or more moderator per Community of Practice** who:

- should be a member of Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics and to the extent possible, be a country not a development partner.
- should champion the Community of Practice among all Asia-Pacific countries and development partners, who will in turn encourage, recognise and support their staff to participate and contribute to the Community of Practice.
- provide strategic direction and identify opportunities (e.g. speakers, projects) for the Community of Practice.
- support members to promote the Community of Practice to other interested parties through electronic communication channels.
- participate in the Community of Practice activities, as appropriate.

**Other guiding decisions:**

- a) Membership of the Community of Practice should be voluntary and open to all Asia-Pacific countries, development partners, and NGOs
- b) at country level, the NSO is the focal point and is responsible for intra-country coordination
- c) The technology should include:
  - interactive features (e.g. feedback), repository feature, and easy access

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<sup>14</sup> ESCAP. 2019. Second Meeting of Regional Steering Group on Population and Social Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok, 17-19 July 2019. Meeting Report. <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/RSG-PSS%20meeting%20report.pdf>

- formal online meetings every six months in addition to regular interactions
- use of existing platforms and tools (e.g. WIKI, and SLACK)

## Annex 2: Best Practices for Building Online Communities (adapted from Oracle 2012)<sup>15</sup>

- 1. Start small** – focus on one specific goal, such as preparing a publication or for an expert group meeting. Expand the community by adding more functions incrementally.

Why it's important: New communities with overreaching scopes fail to give new members a driving sense of purpose, take longer to launch, often sacrifice quality for quantity, and risk losing internal support before they begin.

- 2. Design with Potential Members in Mind** – consider your potential members' motivations and interests as you build spaces for interaction. Don't neglect members' desires to express themselves and to find useful content.

Why it's important: If members find your community uninteresting, manipulative, or difficult to navigate, they simply won't engage—and the community will flounder.

- 3. Prevent Anonymity** – require people to register and log in before participating in the conversation.

Why it's important: Anonymous posts stifle trust among members and can open the door to trolls (people who post inflammatory messages to provoke an emotional response) and flaming (posting of hostile messages).

- 4. Focus on First Impressions** – seed the community with members, groups, activities, and content before launching. Draw your first members from employees, partners, and strong voices from the statistical community who are willing to participate.

Why it's important: Visitors know an empty community when they see one, and they won't waste their time with a community that can't offer them information or networking opportunities.

- 5. Get Early Buy-in from Internal Influencers** – recruit a sponsor who can influence the success of the community, maintain key relationships, and secure resources.

Why it's important: Every community needs an influential cheerleader to make sure that top executives and other stakeholders recognize the community's value and continue to support it with funding and other resources.

- 6. Designate a Full-Time Community Manager** – this person should handle member engagement and moderation as well as provide ongoing training and support opportunities.

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<sup>15</sup> Oracle. 2012. Best Practices for Building Online Communities.  
<http://www.oracle.com/us/products/applications/building-online-communities-1639568.pdf>

Why it's important: A community requires enough attention to warrant having a full-time employee dedicated to it. Tracking, technical support, member engagement, and community program and event planning are just a few of the tasks involved.

- 7. Plan for Growth** – identify the mechanisms (in both process and technology) that will enable the community to expand smoothly. For example, designate a team to respond to member questions and make sure your platform can evolve painlessly.

Why it's important: If your community succeeds, growth will be inevitable. If a sudden spike in traffic strains servers, for example—or if you haven't adopted the latest community tools—members may leave the community for good.

- 8. Evolve Organically** – leave room for unintended positive developments, such as member groups that emerge from the ground up. Let members take leadership roles as appropriate and let them contribute to community development.

Why it's important: The best parts of a community emerge from the complex, dynamic interplay among members. Stifling those natural interactions tends to impede progress and growth.

- 9. Make It Easy to Register** – make the commitment small—don't ask for too much personal information up-front. You can always ask for additional information later (for a limited community event, for instance).

Why it's important: People shy away from lengthy forms, and they don't like to divulge a lot of personal information—especially if they don't see the immediate value of doing so.

- 10. Connect to the Outside World** – link to related sites and articles, and keep members informed about conferences and events.

Why it's important: Making yourself an indispensable source of information is the best way to keep members coming back.

## Annex 3: Evaluation Matrix of Potential Service Providers for the SDG Help Desk Community of Practice

Provided by Christian Mortelliti, ESCAP

Service provider	Description	Features					Pricing/year	Score (1 = lowest, 5 = highest)
		Content	Online courses	Community	Integration	Admin		
<b>Mighty Networks</b>	Mighty Networks is the fastest, easiest, and most powerful platform available today for creating a community-powered brand.	Page, blogs, articles, social media (photos, videos, files), topics, questions, polls, featured posts, search and sorting	Member subscription, courses, instructors, features per course, lessons and content	Custom invite, contact import, member profile, locations, instant messaging, dashboard, leader board, member categories, events, groups and sub-groups, referrals	Phone app, Facebook and LinkedIn groups, invite, video integration	Download member email and data, analytics on all activities, custom navigation and links, custom questions when members join	\$468 (2 months free if billed annually, unlimited users)	5
<b>Vanilla Forums</b>	Vanilla provides a modern community platform to organizations who want to improve customer service, increase advocacy, and strengthen brand loyalty.	Forums, questions, polls, tagging, search	Not available	Categories, private messaging, groups, profiles, badges and rank	Social media, sharing across platforms, wordpress	Moderation, flags, warnings, reporting, roles	\$3,600 (0 to 600k users)	2

Service provider	Description	Features					Pricing/year	Score (1 = lowest, 5 = highest)
		Content	Online courses	Community	Integration	Admin		
<b>Hoop.la</b>	Hoop.la is an enterprise, feature-rich SaaS platform for branded online communities. It provides a cohesive environment for people to share, interact, provide feedback, and converse.	Blogs, clips, discussion forum	Not available	Calendar, survey, chat rooms, events, private messaging, streams	Social media, moderators, social media registration	Registration moderation and banning, content, basic stats, google analytics and advanced analytics, forum management	\$4,950 (0 to 10M users)	2
<b>Zoho Connect</b>	Zoho Connect is a team collaboration software that brings people and the resources they need to one place, making it easier to get work done.	Feeds, forums	Not available	Public and private groups, channels, tasks and boards, events, file storage	File storage, custom domain and CSS custom profile fields, analytics, data export and integration with third party apps	Multiple admins, network and group analytics	\$995 (Unlimited users)	3