SPRING

Sustainable migrant integration:
The role of Communities of Practice

POLICY BRIEF

February 2023

WP n° and title	WP1 – Engaging Communities of Practice with a Participative Approach
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Version	Final

SPRING is a EU-funded project focusing on the integration of recently arrived migrants in the context of the large-scale arrivals of refugees and other migrants since 2014. It aims to develop a toolbox to improve the innovation, effectiveness and sustainability of the work done by Europe's integration stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. The project mobilises significant research, networks and communications capacity and gathers, summarises and shares the best available research and evidence on the effectiveness, innovation, transferability, sustainability and evaluation methods for integration policies and practice.

The SPRING Platform integrationpractices.eu is the main hub to make the project results available to practitioners as well as to the general public.
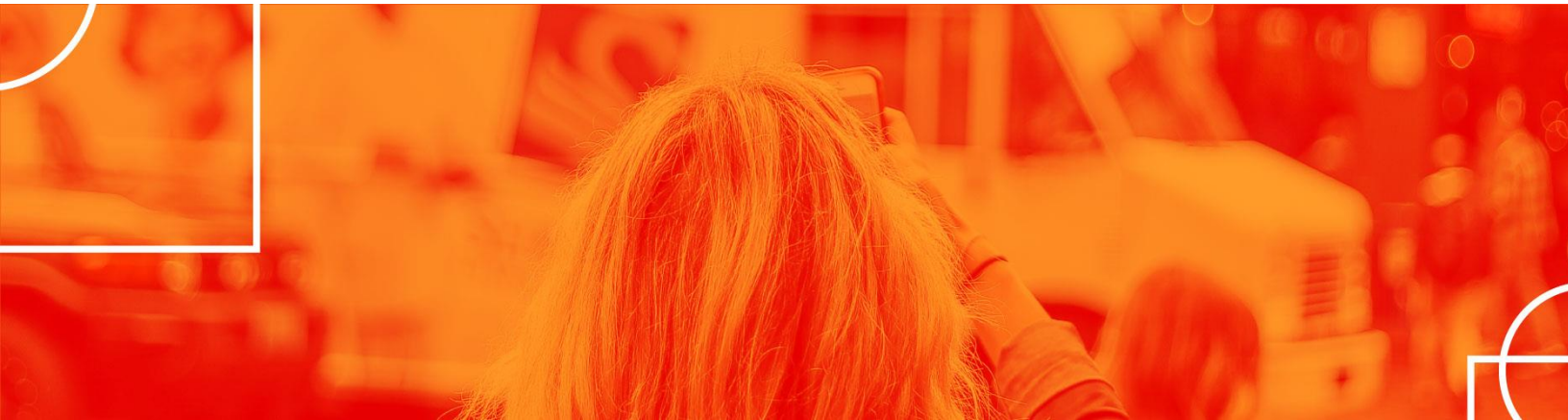
1. Introduction

Following the large-scale inflows of migrants and refugees in 2015/16, integration was increasingly mainstreamed into standard social services with existing integration practices upscaled and a flurry of new initiatives put in place. Additional funding was made available for integration research, leading to the accumulation of ample knowledge on what works and what doesn´t, and under which circumstances. These developments came along with the further diversification of an already highly diverse integration landscape. While integration stakeholders were already engaged in multiple levels of governance across different policy areas from housing to education and labour market integration,[1] a range of new actors, including a large number of voluntary initiatives, entered the integration landscape after 2015/16. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a range of actors have responded to the reception and integration needs of the almost 5 million[2] people from Ukraine registered under the Temporary Protection Directive. New stakeholders have emerged, particularly in Eastern European countries with previously limited integration infrastructure and experience, which are now hosting high numbers of people from Ukraine.[3]

Against this backdrop, facilitating mutual learning and the transfer of the available knowledge among integration stakeholders becomes even more pertinent. Communities of practice can make important contributions to reducing the knowledge gaps of integration stakeholders. They facilitate cooperation among practitioners with a view to knowledge exchange and the co-creation of practical solutions; bridge research and practice in participatory approaches to knowledge production; and bring the lessons from these processes to the attention of policymakers.

The SPRING project aimed to address potential knowledge gaps by gathering, summarising, and sharing the best available research and evidence on integration. This policy brief aims to synthesise findings and policy recommendations on knowledge needs and ways to address them, building upon desk research, project discussions, a stakeholder mapping, a survey on knowledge needs and a qualitative research on communities of practice.

2. Which challenges do integration stakeholders face in addressing knowledge needs?

Most integration stakeholders responding to the SPRING knowledge needs survey[4] indicated that they possess sufficient knowledge in areas directly affecting their work, including knowledge of the target group and thematic expertise. A majority however, indicated that they would benefit from more knowledge on best practices, in their own field of work (50%) and in other related fields of work (71%); on international funding and training opportunities (61% respectively); as well as on actors working in other fields of integration (59%).[5] And indeed, an analysis on trends and key features of transferability in the context of good practice transfers carried out as part of the SPRING project identified a range of challenges to good practice transfers. It showed that the large number of existing initiatives, projects and programmes makes it difficult to identify practices that are suitable for good practice transfers. Misperceptions of the transfer process and specific contexts (e.g., urban vs. rural, national vs. local, etc.) often lead to missed opportunities. At the same time, platforms that aim to facilitate access to good practice examples are often not sufficiently analytical to allow users to assess the added value of practices in the receiving context. The same analysis also highlighted the fact that successful good practice transfers require personal contacts to discuss contextual issues, such as the sociocultural, socioeconomic, institutional, and political conditions needed for the successful transfer of a practice, the adaptations needed to make the practice fit, as well as other factors that may best facilitate transfers. [6]

Despite the benefits of knowledge exchange and mutual learning, there seems to be insufficient exchange on good practices among integration stakeholders. Almost all integration professionals participating in the SPRING survey indicated that their organisations would benefit if knowledge exchange with other entities in the field was further expanded, in particular with peer organisations in other countries (81% fully agree, 17% rather agree) and with (other) NGOs (73% fully agree, 25% rather agree).[7] Certain factors seem to impede an enhanced level of exchange, often causing

stakeholders to work "in silos", rather than reaching out to each other. These factors include the complexity in the integration field, which involves different stakeholders and levels of governance, leading to overlaps in competencies between national, regional, local authorities, and to a patchwork of parallel services.[8] Integration actors are often struggling with a lack of continuity and uncertain and insufficient funding. Consequently, staff often do not have enough time to engage with their peers and worse still, overworking results in high staff turnover and ultimately a loss of institutional knowledge. This is particularly true in crisis situations, in which all available human resources have to be mobilised to address immediate needs. While the EU acknowledged the important role of civil society organisations in supporting people fleeing war in Ukraine by earmarking funds for these stakeholders, new integration stakeholders in particular, still face challenges in accessing funds due to a lack of information or narrow eligibility criteria.[9]

While integration stakeholders are in need of enhanced knowledge exchange and mutual learning, they are also acutely aware of the needs of their target groups, the obstacles to implementing integration policies, and possible solutions. This collective body of knowledge, once brought together and systematized, constitutes a valuable resource for informing policy and the design of research projects. This is particularly relevant in situations of crisis, when the situation on the ground evolves quickly, often leaving researchers and policy-makers detached from the situation on the ground.[10]

3. What are ways to address knowledge gaps and better connect integration practitioners?

Bringing together integration stakeholders in communities of practice (CoPs) is one approach for fostering mutual learning and reducing knowledge gaps. A community of practice[11] is generally built on the following: shared interest(s) and competence(s); regular interactions related to shared interest(s); as well as a shared repertoire of practices addressing common problems.[12] While the difference between CoPs and cooperation networks is fluid, it is safe to say that every CoP can be

characterised as a network, while not every network can be characterised as a CoP. The SPRING project broadly defines CoPs as

> *"a group of professionals informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge".*[13]

Generally, CoPs can take different forms, formal or informal, homogenous or diverse in their composition, and connecting stakeholders within or across organisations and networks. They can also vary significantly with regard to their size, target group, and thematic focus. This diversity among CoPs affects the ways in which they operate and engage with their affiliated organisations.[14] While traditionally, CoPs were bound to specific geographical spaces (and often still are), advances in digitalization and ICT developments have facilitated information exchange and collaborative work through virtual spaces, and hence, the formation of CoPs across locations and topical spaces.[15] This already ongoing process was further accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the 1990s, when migration gained importance as a policy issue in Europe, and even more so after 2015/16, a number of CoPs have formed to address migrant integration. City networks for example, began increasingly taking issues concerning social cohesion and integration into account. Local communities have collaborated to form "humanitarian corridors" that facilitate the resettlement of vulnerable groups, while other CoPs respond to the needs of specific target groups or work to improve the effectiveness of integration support at the local, regional, or national level.[16]

The CoPs active in integration that were interviewed in the framework of the SPRING project[17] also showcased a high level of diversity in their set-up, target groups, thematic scope, and level of formality. While some operated at the local, regional, or national level to address specific local integration issues, others operated at an international level, bringing together relevant stakeholders from across or even beyond Europe. Among the latter category, a distinction can be made between CoPs that are embedded in broader cooperation networks and that were put in place based on a need to address migration and integration issues in the wake of the 2015/16 large-scale inflow of migrants and refugees, and specialised CoPs who address specific topics in the migration and integration domain, such as resettlement and complementary pathways, or the rights of migrant women (box 1).

Box 1: Different types of CoPs identified through the qualitative research

CoPs bringing together integration actors at local, regional, or national level

- With the 2021 Civic Integration Act in the Netherlands, municipalities were given enhanced responsibilities in the context of integration. To support the implementation of the Civic Integration Act 2021, a learning system is being established by bringing those involved in the integration of newcomers together to discuss challenges in the implementation of the law. This is done by putting in place 12 local Communities of Practice (6 started in 2022, beginning with a CoP in Amsterdam, and 6 more will start in 2023).

- Partnership Skåne was established in 2008 in support of regional cooperation on the integration of newly arrived migrants in the region of Skåne in Sweden. The three main methods used include i) a comprehensive programme providing civic orientation and health communication ii) a cooperation network with civil society in order to facilitate social networking and participation, language training and health promotion iii) a support platform for migration and health, aimed at joint knowledge development in cooperation with practitioners and researchers.

- The Consortium of social organisations working for refugees and migrants in Poland was established in 2017 and comprises 10 organisations, with a focus on facilitating experience exchange and cooperation. The cooperation resulted in joint initiatives and projects providing legal counselling and psychological and integration support in Warsaw, Poznań, Lublin, and Wrocław. These activities are complemented by a group of stakeholders, including experts, scientists, trade unions, employers' organisations, and migrants.

CoPs embedded in larger cooperation networks, set up in response to the 2015/16 developments

- The United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is a global network of cities and local, regional, and metropolitan governments and their associations. Within this network, CoPs are created as a space to discuss specific topics. In 2018 a CoP on migration was created within UCLG in a process facilitated by a range of factors, including a "wave of action" on migration initiated in 2016 in response to the 2015/16 large-scale inflows of migrants and refugees in Europe; the extensive work and knowledge of UCLG´s Latin American and African networks in the field of migration; and cooperation with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development and UN-HABITAT, in the framework of the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration project as of 2015.

- [Solidar](#) is a network of civil society organisations working to advance social justice with more than 50 member organizations from the EU and beyond. In response to the 2015/16 large-scale arrivals of migrants and refugees, a task force on migration and inclusion was put in place within Solidar.at the request of its members.

Specialised CoPs with a specific thematic focus, active at EU-level and beyond

- The [SHARE network](#) is an informal network that was established in March 2012 by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) in Europe that supports regions, cities, towns, and rural communities interested in welcoming refugees and migrants. The work of the SHARE network focuses on supporting and connecting local initiatives, sharing best practices, and raising the voice of communities to inspire action and policy change.

- The European Network of Migrant Women ([ENMW](#)) was established in 2012 as a platform that advocates for the rights, freedoms, and dignity of migrant, refugee, and ethnic minority women and girls in Europe. Its 53 members are mainly composed of grassroots migrant women-lead small service providers in over 20 European countries.

The qualitative research found that communities of practice in the integration sphere operate at the crossroads of practice, research, and policy, as they foster cooperation among practitioners, bridge research and practice, and bring relevant conclusions to the attention of policymakers.

Fostering cooperation among practitioners

Facilitating knowledge exchange between those involved in the CoP is at the very centre of CoPs´ work. For this purpose, they apply different approaches (box 2) to knowledge exchange and carry out a **range of different activities**, including multi-stakeholder discussions, workshops, conferences, trainings, study visits, peer learnings, and participation in festivals on migration.

Box 2: Examples of approaches and methodologies for knowledge exchange and production

Collaborative actions involving different forms of art

The ENMW applies several methods to overcome language barriers in their workshops, through theatre, body movement, or other forms of art. The workshops focus both on relevant policy developments and on listening to members' daily needs and experiences. This approach is the basis for the creation of toolkits, such as the toolkit "draw the line", which collected testimonies of women who experienced violence. These stories were transformed into paintings and became abstract art that was later translated into cards and into a game. This exercise contributed to building relationships among Members through the co-creation of the material.

The peer learning methodology

The peer learning methodology used by UCLG is based on the leadership of one or more cities and very much tailored to their specific contexts. Peer learnings are prepared through background notes that explain key concepts, and are followed up with notes that sum up the methodology and key findings, for broader knowledge-sharing and to inform advocacy. While the methodology was centred around in-person visits with a focus on sharing good practices, it was adapted to the digital space during the COVID-19 pandemic.
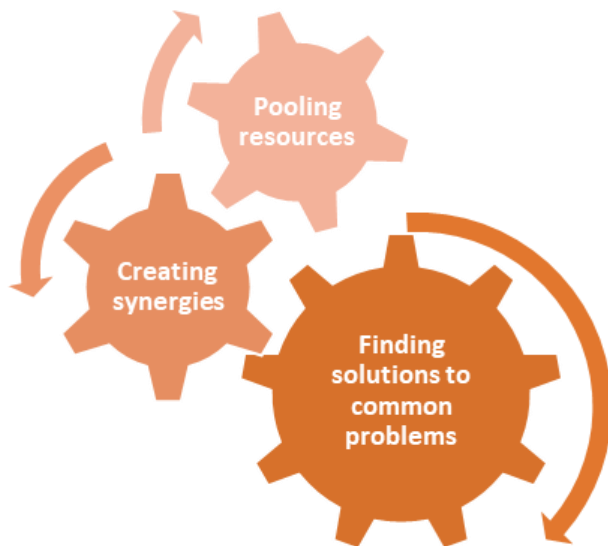
CoPs also play a role in **co-creating practical solutions**, for example by pooling resources, creating synergies, or finding joint solutions to common problems. The SHARE network, for example, is approached by cities that want to work on early integration. It connects them with relevant stakeholders, gets them engaged, and works towards co-creating concrete work programmes. In the case of the CoPs in Amsterdam that form part of a learning system around the new integration law, two out of four thematic groups developed clearly defined experiments on how to improve work processes together.

Bridging research and practice

Beyond the knowledge exchange among practitioners, CoPs also engage with external researchers and experts to produce knowledge based on the needs identified by their members. While in some cases the CoPs dispose of a dedicated budget that allows them to commission research, in other cases these resources are engaged on a pro bono basis. What CoPs have in common, however, is a **participatory approach to knowledge production, ensuring ownership of those involved in the CoP over the topics covered and the content produced**.

The ENMW, for example, prepared a report on migrant women´s mental health and wellbeing with the aim to develop a uniform and low-cost methodology for member organisations to deal with mental health and trauma in migrant women, based on a wide range of conversations with members. The Partnership Skåne also engages in practice-based research by looking, for example, at how topics concerning the health of migrants could be better integrated in its civic orientation program. Another example is Solidar, which involves its members in the production of all its publications, such as the Social Rights Monitor. In turn, members use the information they receive from this process for their advocacy work at the national level.
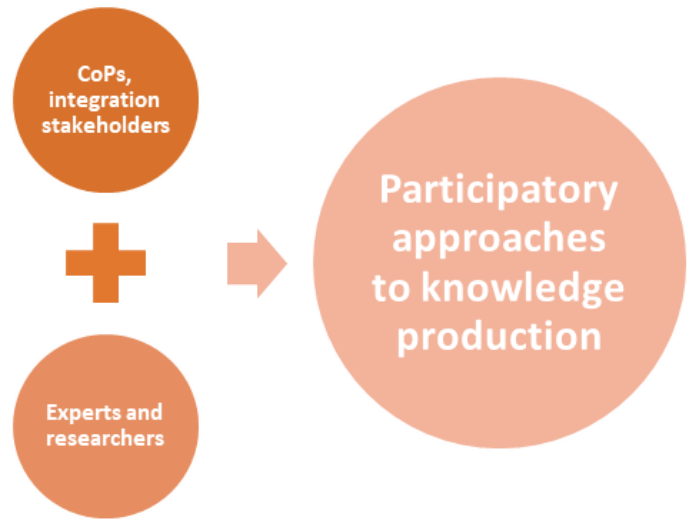
Bridging policy, research, and practice

Over and above knowledge exchange and production, CoPs also apply different strategies to bridging policy, research, and practice. In doing so, they feed the knowledge generated within the CoPs into the policy cycle, use it to advocate for improved integration policies and make it available to integration stakeholders beyond the CoPs. For this purpose, CoPs systematise the knowledge generated within the CoPs and translate practitioners´ experiences into policy recommendations and advocacy messages for the purposes of facilitating integration processes and meeting the needs of integration practitioners.

Consolidating knowledge generated within CoPs

Systematise and contextualise learnings

Translate practitioners' experiences in policy recommendations/ advocacy messages
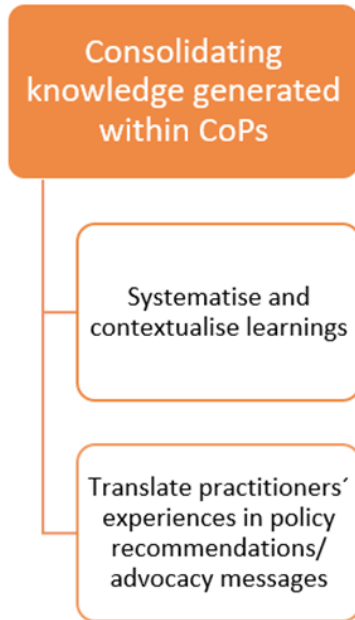
Formulating positions and advocacy messages in consultation with the members of the CoPs can however prove challenging, particularly for CoPs that bring together highly diverse organisations. Solidar, for example, reported that it was crucial but challenging to find a common angle from which to address the issue of integration, which is relevant to, but not at the core of the work of its member organisations. Finding common ground by addressing the issue from the angle of "inclusion", a common concern for all Solidar members, was a lengthy process. Bridging the grassroots level and the EU policy level was another challenge that was reported, for example by the ENMW. Grassroots organisations often lack both an understanding of the EU-level policy discussions and the time to focus on policy work. At the same time, it can be challenging to translate local needs and experiences into key policy messages. One strategy to address these issues is the organisation of workshops for members to explain the complexity of EU bureaucracy and decision-making processes, and how they can be influenced through advocacy work.

As a next step, CoPs in the integration field use different approaches for bringing the knowledge generated within the CoPs to the attention of policymakers. Particularly the **CoPs active at EU-level and beyond have a strong focus on advocacy work.** In doing so, they participate in relevant EU expert groups and policy consultations and engage with Parliamentarians. The SHARE network, for example, was invited to speak at the EU solidarity platform and provided comments to the Integration Action Plan, while the ENMW wrote a response to the EU´s Migration Pact through from the perspective of migrant women. The UCLG´s CoP on migration feeds evidence of the local needs in the context of integration to the UCLG, which uses this evidence to draft key messages for advocacy work, connecting it to the goals of the Global Compact for Migration and Sustainable Development Goals, for example in the context of the international migration review forum. Another example is the Consortium of social organisations working for refugees and migrants in Poland, which has been active in consultations regarding the national legislation on migration and integration. They have proposed their own vision of local integration measures as well as communicating the needs of local stakeholders to international donors. Solidar aims to involve policymakers in all its activities.

Feed learnings into the policy cycle

Report needs and possible solutions to policy-makers

Participate in expert groups and policy consultations, engage with Parliamentarians

The **CoPs that connect integration stakeholders at the local, regional, or national level gather findings and feed them back to into the policy cycle**. DIVOSA, for example, (which coordinates the 12 CoPs that will form a learning system in support of the implementation of the new integration act in the Netherlands) systematises the knowledge gathered from this process by bringing together the coordinators of the individual CoPs and channels the findings both to other interested municipalities and to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. While at the time of writing the process was still in an initial phase, the Dutch integration law will be evaluated in four years and the inputs received from the learning process will feed into this evaluation. The County Administrative Board that coordinates Partnership Skåne closely cooperates with research to evaluate which approaches are working. It then uses all channels available to report back to the government on what is needed and which solutions work under which conditions. However, due to diverging political priorities, evidence is not always taken up in the process of policymaking.

Challenges and opportunities in the context of recent developments

While CoPs play a distinct role in contributing to improved integration outcomes, they are faced with a range of challenges. For example, both CoPs in the field of integration and affiliated integration stakeholders often lack stable and long-term funding sources. This makes it difficult to advance the work of the CoP or to make space for contributions in a CoP already overburdened with addressing local integration needs. This vulnerability was exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in losses of membership fees for some CoPs. The current cost of living crisis additionally affects the budgets of CoPs and their members, with budgets set up before prices started to rise not being adapted to actual costs. In some cases, the target groups of affiliated organisations were strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a significant increase in workload to address the needs of these groups. The ENMW, for example, reported an increase in undocumented women following the lockdowns because of the loss of housing and employment. Four groups; domestic workers, women exploited in prostitution, women victims of domestic violence, and women whose asylum application was in process, were at extreme risk of losing documented status in the context of COVID lockdowns.
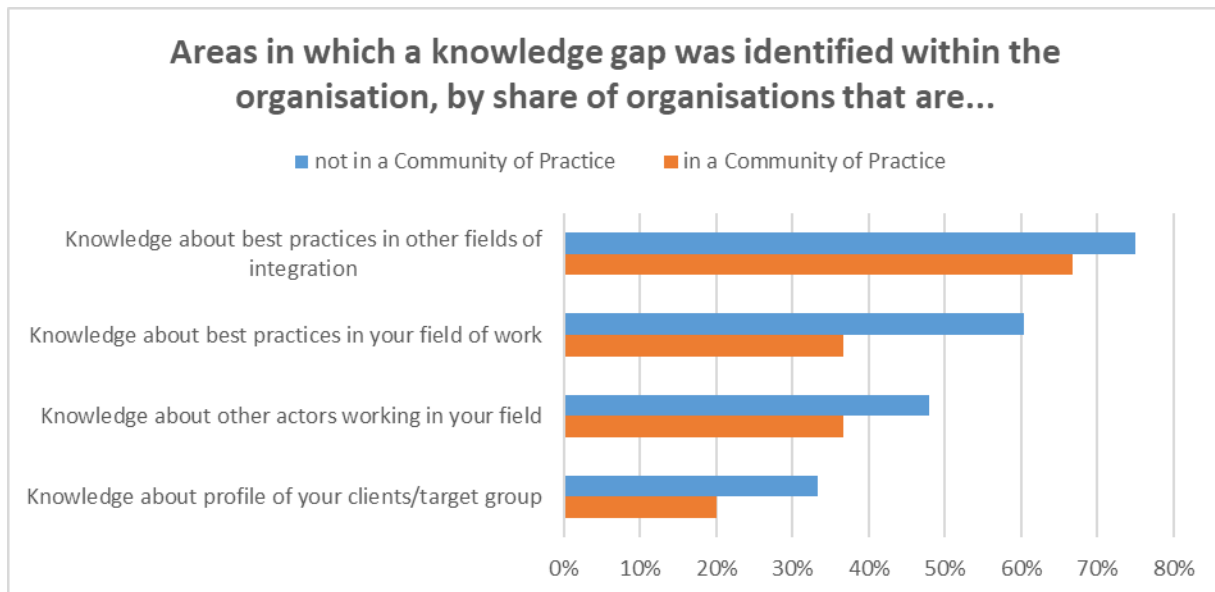
At the same time, crisis situations can create a window of opportunity in some localities. For example in Poland, the displacement crisis stimulated the emergence of new platforms and led to the consolidation of existing ones. Despite being on the defensive due to Poland's present political climate, NGOs and the CoPs they formed have become vital elements of assistance systems across the country, and their long-term expertise has become valued in debates. The bargaining position of these organizations, particularly with local authorities, has been significantly improved and thus the effectiveness of their advocacy activities.

In the context of their advocacy work, CoPs are often faced with lengthy policy discussions in which political priorities sometimes outweigh the evidence they provide. Since a multitude of stakeholders are involved in policy debates, even where policy recommendations are taken up, it is difficult to attribute this achievement to the advocacy work of a specific CoP. However, the SHARE network, for example, reported that many of its activities have been translated into national programmes and for instance, financed in the national programmes of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

The contribution of CoPs to reducing knowledge gaps

While it is difficult to measure the impact of CoPs, both the results from the qualitative research and the results of the SPRING survey suggest that CoPs contribute to reducing knowledge gaps and to fostering coordination among practitioners. The survey respondents whose organisation was part of a CoP (ca 40% of the overall sample) seemed to be better informed on best practices in the field of integration and on the profile of their target groups than those who were not involved in a CoP. They also appeared to be better connected, with greater knowledge of other actors working in their field. This seems particularly relevant for NGOs, since most CoPs in the SPRING sample consisted primarily of NGOs (70%), followed by public bodies (33%) and grassroots (volunteer based organisations), as well as diaspora organisations (24% respectively).[18]

Several approaches taken by CoPs contribute to their success in addressing knowledge needs, including i) identifying the most pressing knowledge needs among those involved in the CoPs ii) taking concrete and targeted approaches to knowledge exchange iii) contextualising, contrasting different opinions and interpreting why practices work in certain contexts and how they can be adapted to others. Furthermore, trust-building was highlighted as a precondition for an open exchange, particularly when sharing difficulties faced in one´s area of work. However, building trust and knowledge requires long-term engagement.

Areas in which a knowledge gap was identified within the organisation, by share of organisations that are...

■ not in a Community of Practice ■ in a Community of Practice

Knowledge about best practices in other fields of integration

Knowledge about best practices in your field of work

Knowledge about other actors working in your field

Knowledge about profile of your clients/target group

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80%

4. Approaches for improved knowledge exchange in migrant integration

In order to better harness the contributions of CoPs to improved integration outcomes, a range of approaches can be applied, as outlined below:

- **Build sustainable integration infrastructures and empower civil society, including migrant and diaspora organisations.** While successful integration outcomes require expertise, building expertise takes time and resources. Stable funding sources can help integration practitioners, who form CoPs, to build their capacities and create a long-term vision while avoiding the loss of knowledge through high staff turnover among integration practitioners.

- **Acknowledge the role of communities of practice in facilitating knowledge exchange and reflect it in funding schemes.** CoPs bring significant added value as they connect different types of integration practitioners while facilitating knowledge-exchange and sense-making. Funding schemes for integration actors should allow for HR costs to reflect the time needed to engage in knowledge exchange with a CoP. Dedicated funds should be made available to support the establishment and maintenance of relevant CoPs.

- **Encourage participatory approaches to knowledge production and foster the research-practice nexus.** Participatory approaches to knowledge production harnesses the first-hand knowledge of integration practitioners of the needs, obstacles, and possible solutions in the context of integration, while enhancing both the relevance of research and the interest of practitioners in the results. In this context, CoPs can play a specific role in fostering the research-practice nexus by bringing together researchers and practitioners. This approach, however, requires funding schemes that encourage the involvement of practitioners at all stages of the research cycle and provide for sufficient flexibility to react to emerging needs of the practitioners.

- **Strengthen the take-up of knowledge generated by COPs during policy cycles**. Practitioners dispense first-hand knowledge on local integration needs, obstacles to the implementation of integration policies, as well as solutions for improved integration outcomes. Communities of practice play an important role in systematising this knowledge and bringing different perspectives together. These lessons constitute valuable insights that should be taken up in policy-making processes. Regular meetings between the CoPs and relevant ministries, or involvement of CoPs in relevant expert groups and policy consultations can make sure that CoPs are heard.

5. Conclusions

The SPRING research shows that CoPs make significant contributions in the integration field by i) fostering cooperation among integration practitioners, with a view to knowledge exchange and co-creating practical solutions ii) engaging in participatory approaches to knowledge production in cooperation with researchers and experts and iii) systematising the knowledge of integration stakeholders on local integration needs, obstacles to the implementation of integration policies and possible solutions, and using them as inputs for policy-making processes. These multi-layered approaches strengthen the policy-practice-research nexus and ultimately contribute to improved integration outcomes. The contributions of CoPs should be recognized and investments made in support of their work.

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[3] ICMPD (February 2023), 'SPRING stakeholder mapping report', https://integrationpractices.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SPRING_D1.1_Stakeholder-mapping-@M4_30-06-2021.pdf.

[4] This survey was open to integration stakeholders who registered to the Join-us campaign on the SPRING platform, and it was promoted through project activities and newsletters. A total of 107 integration stakeholders responded to the survey between December 2021 and January 2023.

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[10] Slootjes, J. and Zanzuchi, M. B., 'Promoting Evidence-Informed Immigrant Integration Policymaking'.

[11] While there is no single valid definition of a community of practice, different definitions go back to a concept that was coined by Etienne Wenger: Wenger, E. (1998), *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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