Ingredients for a Successful Community of Practice
November 2024 Coastal Inundation COP Workshop

This document synthesizes insights from group discussions on fostering effective inundation Communities of Practices from the Coastal Inundation Community of Practice Workshop on 11/13/2024 with ~90 coastal flooding practitioners. The conversation focused on four key themes or "ingredients" critical to CoP success: **Audience and Purpose**, **Coordination and Sustained Leadership**, **Equitable Participation and Knowledge Sharing**, and **Trust and Relationship Building**.

1. Audience and Purpose

A clear, shared purpose is the cornerstone of a successful CoP. Participants emphasized the need to define the community's goals, challenges, and shared language to describe who they are and what they aim to achieve. Establishing a balance between inclusivity and specificity is essential; the community must be small enough for meaningful interaction while leveraging larger networks for regional collaboration.

Key considerations include identifying the target audience, understanding who is underrepresented, and ensuring engagement with diverse demographics, including youth. Members need clarity on what they can gain from participation and must co-develop a statement of purpose early on to foster buy-in and accountability. Regular evaluations, transparent communication, and a focus on outcomes are vital to ensure alignment and adaptability.

Challenges:

- Balancing broad and specific needs to avoid scope creep. Overly broad objectives can dilute the CoP's impact, while overly specific goals risk excluding members whose priorities differ. To avoid scope creep, CoPs should establish clear boundaries and revisit them periodically, ensuring alignment with the shared purpose.
- Addressing differences among members while maintaining cohesion.
- Ensuring equitable representation and participation across varied capacities.

Strategies:

- Conduct surveys to prioritize needs and measure representation.
- Maintain transparency about roles and deliverables.
- Articulate purpose frequently and remain flexible for evolution.
- Allow this work to be motivated by joy, share climate art work, think about the people and places we do this work for.
- Remember, flooding is a problem that likely happens once or twice a year for most communities, but access to jobs, housing, and food are everyday problems. If you want widespread buy-in you need to demonstrate how addressing flooding aligns with and supports these daily priorities, ensuring that resilience efforts feel relevant and beneficial to the community's immediate needs.

2. Coordination and Sustained Leadership

Effective coordination relies on strong, consistent leadership. Participants stressed the importance of securing dedicated staff time, resources, and training programs to support CoP activities. Leadership must foster inclusivity, provide early wins to build momentum, and align CoP goals with organizational priorities to ensure longevity. Staff turnover, burnout, and limited capacity pose significant challenges to success, however documented protocols and horizontal leadership structures can help maintain continuity. Additionally, standing organization leadership in one or two agencies will help ensure longevity, even with staff turnover.

Challenges:

- Limited capacity for coordination and organizational support.
- Risk of burnout among a few individuals handling most tasks.
- Equity issues in balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches.
  - Centralizing leadership within one or two agencies can provide stability and ensure long-term organizational continuity. However, this approach risks sidelining community voices, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

Strategies:

- When applying for grants, build in budget lines for building capacity through staff roles, gatherings, and participant compensation.
- Establish a standing leadership organization with rotating advisory committees.
    - Allocate resources, staff time, and IT systems to support CoP.
- Emphasize open knowledge retention to mitigate impacts of staff turnover.
    - Mentor / mentee relationships can help build the next generation of leaders.

3. Equitable Participation and Knowledge Sharing

Equity in participation and knowledge sharing is fundamental. CoPs must address power imbalances, compensate participants for their time, and provide multiple modes of engagement to ensure inclusivity. Early involvement of community leaders and recognition of diverse knowledge systems are essential for buy-in and sustained trust. Participants discussed the need for creative communication approaches—using art, storytelling, and accessible mediums to engage different audiences. Clear shared agreements on norms and facilitation can help bridge gaps across cultural and capacity divides.

Challenges:

- While early and often engagement is good, be careful of engagement fatigue among underrepresented groups, especially Tribes. Strategies to address this could include designing long-term partnerships with fewer demands on participants, increasing financial and logistical support, and prioritizing meaningful engagement rather than performative inclusion.
- Limited resources, staffing, funds, and language barriers can serve as barriers for rural or less-resourced communities to be engaged in CoP.
- Western frameworks overshadowing Indigenous knowledge systems. Important to think about how knowledge can coexist together.

Strategies:

- Facilitate interagency coordination to streamline community engagement, ensuring that communities are consulted collectively rather than being approached multiple times by different agencies with similar questions.
- Provide travel stipends, childcare, and other compensations to reduce barriers.

- Use surveys to assess partner needs and co-create inclusive goals. Transparent sharing of survey results further builds trust and accountability, ensuring participants see their input reflected in decisions.
- Protect sensitive knowledge while sharing actionable insights widely. Create data sharing memorandum of understanding prior to beginning work.

4. Trust and Relationship Building

Building and sustaining trust is a long-term process requiring transparency, vulnerability, and consistency. Participants highlighted the importance of listening with curiosity, welcoming dissenting views, and fostering human connections within the CoP. In-person gatherings are crucial to ensure relationship building and it's important to remember that "relationships are built at the speed of trust." Celebrating small successes, following through on commitments, and addressing historical injustices help deepen trust.

Challenges:

- Navigating bureaucracy and red tape. Institutional processes can slow progress and complicate efforts to having meaningful community engagement.
- Bridging differences among members. Diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, and perspectives can create both challenges and strengths.
- For communities with geographic or resource constraints, in-person gatherings may be impractical. Using online communication or tools like story maps and virtual meetings can foster connections. However, while virtual meetings can provide access to a wider range of audiences, it can also be challenging to foster meaningful relationship-building. Be strategic about when you prioritize one over the other.

Strategies:

- Begin with small objectives to generate early wins.
- Encourage "radical candor" - encourage open and honest communication while maintaining respect and inclusivity.
- Work from the bottom up, integrating local priorities with broader goals. Recognize and address power imbalances, acknowledge historical inequities, and actively involve underrepresented voices in decision-making processes. Even better, instead

of merely acknowledging the imbalance between top-down and bottom-up approaches, try to create co-governance structures or shared decision-making processes that actively redistribute power.
- Create space for connection. Dedicate informal time for members to share stories and celebrate achievements to strengthen bonds within the group.

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
ADAPTATION PROFESSIONALS

Sea Grant