



Vumelana

ADVISORY FUND

Building a Community of Practice

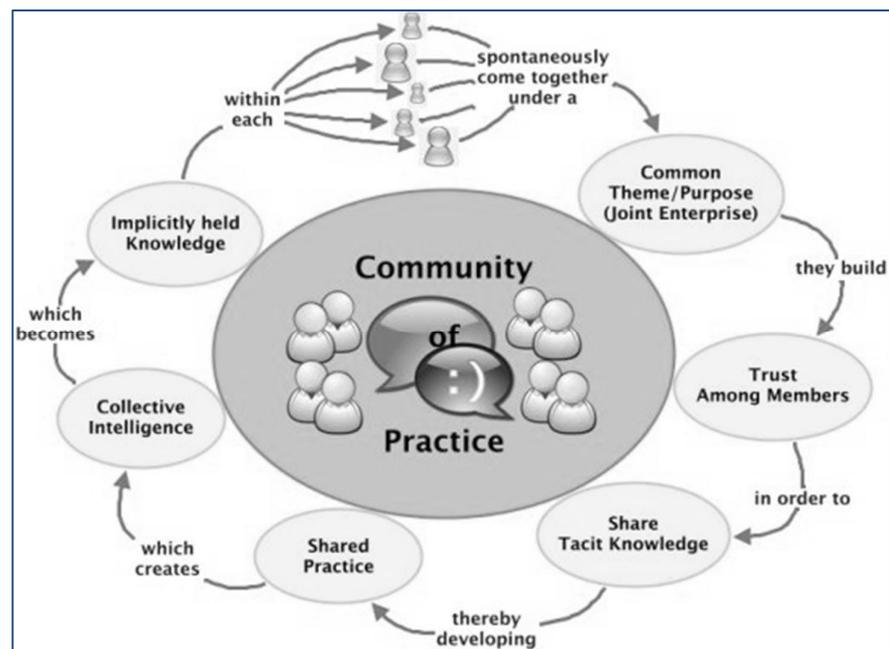
Report	Building a Community of Practice
Date	01 March 2015
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Encouraging a Community of Practice

The idea

What is a Community of Practice?

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a craft or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain, or it can be created with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally¹.



The idea of a community of land reform practitioners

The idea of a community of practice of individuals and organisations working to support the land reform process emerged at a Vumelana workshop hosted by Vumelana in March 2013. The workshop focussed on the challenge of building viable Communal Property Institutions (CPIs). There were three inputs to the conversation: Background on Vumelana and its thinking about CPI support; A description of the challenge by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform; and presentations from 6 organisations working with land holding communities. The individuals and organisations from inside and outside Government all showed a high level of commitment and skill. The conversation underscored the difficulties associated with work in this area especially for those wanting to do more than present a critical analysis of the many policy and institutional shortcomings.

¹ Communities of practice are not new phenomena: this type of learning practice has existed for as long as people have been learning and sharing their experiences through storytelling. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined the phrase in their 1991 book, 'Situated learning' (Lave & Wenger 1991), and Wenger then significantly expanded on the concept in his 1998 book, 'Communities of Practice' (Wenger 1998) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice

Purpose and membership

Purpose

While Communities of Practice (CoP) may serve different purposes from building relations to working together and producing new knowledge, Vumelana's initial purpose in trying to initiate a land reform CoP is to enhance learning and the development of good practice. Following the ideas developed by Darren Cambridge et al we hope that this can be done by building relationships and helping practitioners to learn together, act together and share knowledge.

The members of the community

The CoP will be open to all who have an interest in a fair and productive land dispensation. We hope that in particular practitioners (inside and outside Government) will participate. We also hope that as communities begin to manage their property portfolios they will find this useful and that researchers and academics will share their insights.

We realise that communities of practice are dynamic social structures that require "cultivation". We will try to foster and support this. But ultimately, the members of the community will define and sustain it over time².

Building relationships

We hope to encourage relationships of trust, mutual respect and reciprocity among members and a willingness to share ideas and information. We realise this is not easily done. Some practitioners in private practice will want to protect their intellectual property rather than share it. Government officials are bound to be cautious about sharing ideas that might have policy or political consequences. But our experience to date has been that even the most basic information required for developing sound partnerships could be shared. This might include information on:

- building relationships with communities;
- learning how to put communities at the centre of the decision making process in negotiating CPPs with investors;
- creating a good RFP for investors;
- negotiating a sound contract; and
- extracting value for communities in terms of jobs, enterprise training opportunities and share holding.

Learning, sharing and acting together

Learning and developing good practice

We will support the development of good practice by producing documents and tools like the CPI assessment tool and specimen agreements such as co-operation agreements with communities, terms of reference for Community Bid Evaluation Committees, RFPs for investors and CPP frameworks. We will also set up information exchanges and learning experiences such as the Communal Property Institution workshop held in 2013 and the 2014 Community of Practice meeting.

² Community of Practice Design guide: Darren Cambridge, Soren Kaplan, and Vicki Suter

Sharing perspective s on new knowledge and approaches

While the focus will be on practice and especially practice related to Community Private Partnerships, the CoP programme will also contribute to enhanced understanding of the ideas and policies that drive the land reform process. Officials are often required to craft state policy that will have a direct impact on communities, investors and the land development market without the benefit of a collegial context in which ideas can be tested with colleagues who operate in the worlds affected by their actions.

Similarly private practitioners are starved of access to information on state policy and thinking. For example there has been a flurry of concerned comment about policy proposals that have emerged over the last two years, but little opportunity for the drafters of the ideas to engage with private practitioners on their intentions. At a practical level even seasoned practitioners find it difficult to understand public procedures, for example, when seeking to support development on communal land.

Acting together

Vumelana will continue to enable practitioners to act together. Over the last two years Vumelana has started to work with increasing numbers of transaction advisors and CPI support teams.

We would like to find opportunities for advisors with different skills to work more with one another in the future and for experienced advisors to take less experienced advisors into their teams to widen knowledge and skills.

