

# Engaging Communities of Practice for the Development of the Sustainable Blue Bioeconomy



## Key Messages

- ✓ **Communities of Practice (CoPs) in Blue Bioeconomy are essential** for stakeholder engagement, knowledge exchange, and collaborative learning.
- ✓ Effective CoPs should **set clear objectives, engage participants effectively, and design an inclusive agenda** to co-create blue bioeconomy strategies.
- ✓ **CoPs play a crucial role in identifying opportunities and challenges**, sharing best practices, promoting innovative approaches, and enhancing sustainable marine resource management.
- ✓ **CoPs can vary in structure, size, location, and formal recognition**, allowing them to adapt to diverse contexts and needs.
- ✓ The experiences from various CoPs highlight the **importance of strategic planning, inclusive engagement, and effective communication** in enhancing the impact and success of CoPs in the blue bioeconomy sector.

*This policy brief explores the establishment and operation of Communities of Practice (CoPs) for the blue bioeconomy. It discusses the role of CoPs in fostering stakeholder engagement, knowledge exchange, and collaborative learning. Case studies and regional experiences from specific CoPs are showcased, highlighting strategies for success tailored to local cultures. Practical tips based on regional experiences are provided, addressing challenges such as diverse opinion consolidation and participant motivation.*

## What is a Community of Practice (CoP)?

CoPs are increasingly utilised for broad stakeholder engagement. They are informal, collaborative groups that unite individuals

**Communities of Practice (CoPs)** are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.<sup>1</sup>

with shared interests but with different perspectives and angles to exchange knowledge and learn from each other, developing a common vision over a certain process or common asset.

By creating a learning environment in an open, non-contentious and non-political setting, CoPs foster a culture of cooperation. Furthermore, CoPs offer a platform for knowledge co-production, allowing members to share their insights and experience and

<sup>1</sup> Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) *An introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses.* Available from authors at <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice>.

get collaborative projects off the ground.

CoPs can vary in structure: they can be known by different names like learning networks or tech clubs, vary in size from small to large, and may be local or global. Some CoPs meet mainly in person, others online. They can exist within one organisation or span across multiple, and their formal recognition also varies, with some being officially supported and others operating informally. This flexibility allows CoPs to adapt to diverse contexts and needs. It is, however, important to highlight the three distinct elements that define a CoP and differentiate it from other groups. These elements are 1) the domain, i.e., the topic or asset around which the CoP has gathered; 2) the community, i.e., the competencies and resources the CoP members bring to the table; and 3) the practice, i.e., how the CoP gathers and shares knowledge. By developing these three elements in parallel, stakeholders cultivate a community of practice.

## How can CoPs support the blue bioeconomy?

Given its technical and scientific basis and socioeconomic and cultural impacts, the blue bioeconomy benefits from solid research and stakeholder engagement. The blue bioeconomy encompasses converting aquatic biomass (such as microorganism, algae, fish and various invertebrates) into a wide array of innovative products and high-value applications like food, feed, nutraceuticals, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and renewable energy. The sector is rapidly developing in Europe with strong support from the EU. In the blue bioeconomy, CoPs can play an essential role in identifying



**The BlueBioClusters (BBC) project brings together 12 organisations who work collectively on creating blue visions in 9 European regions located respectively in Belgium, Estonia, France, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Scotland. BBC will empower blue bioeconomy players with innovative business development tools and methods to create a long-lasting impact by engaging directly with hundreds of regional actors to stimulate collaboration and positive change.**

opportunities and challenges towards creating a regional blue vision. They facilitate sharing best practices, promote innovative approaches, and enhance understanding of sustainable marine resource management. CoPs' collaborative approach ensures wider dissemination of knowledge and expertise, enabling stakeholders to make informed decisions and implement effective strategies to revitalise local communities.



## What do Blue Bioeconomy CoPs look like in practice?

Drawing from BBC partner experiences, we showcase the diversity in CoP formation and highlight lessons learnt. Each example has provided unique insights, which we have distilled into effective strategies for establishing and managing CoPs. CoPs have proven to be an effective and cost-effective method for community engagement. The findings presented below can be instrumental in ensuring their success.

### Insights from BBC CoP experiences

► **CoP Objectives:** Successful CoPs are characterised by clear, well-defined objectives that meet the needs of the blue bioeconomy. CoPs in BBC have several objectives: Firstly, to **ensure efficient engagement of all relevant stakeholders**, including public authorities, SMEs, NGOs, and knowledge providers, through robust and transparent communication. Second, **to provide evidence-based feedback to project goals**, such as regional blue bioeconomy visions and plans. Thirdly, **to increase the awareness and competence of stakeholders in blue bioeconomy-related matters**, fostering mutual learning.



## Blue Bio Match

**BlueBioMatch** ([bluebiomatch.eu](http://bluebiomatch.eu)), the Blue Bioeconomy Hub, is a collaborative platform designed to support progress within the blue bioeconomy. BlueBioMatch functions as a matchmaking community for diverse stakeholders, ranging from startups and SMEs to researchers, policymakers, and funders. On BlueBioMatch, users can showcase their projects and products, find and offer mentoring and share opportunities in the blue bioeconomy.

And finally, **to identify ways to overcome regulatory barriers**. These objectives emphasise the importance of effective communication, stakeholder involvement, knowledge enhancement and strategic problem-solving within the CoPs (Figure 1). It is essential that participants understand and support these objectives, ensuring a results-oriented approach and fostering ownership of the activities within the CoP.

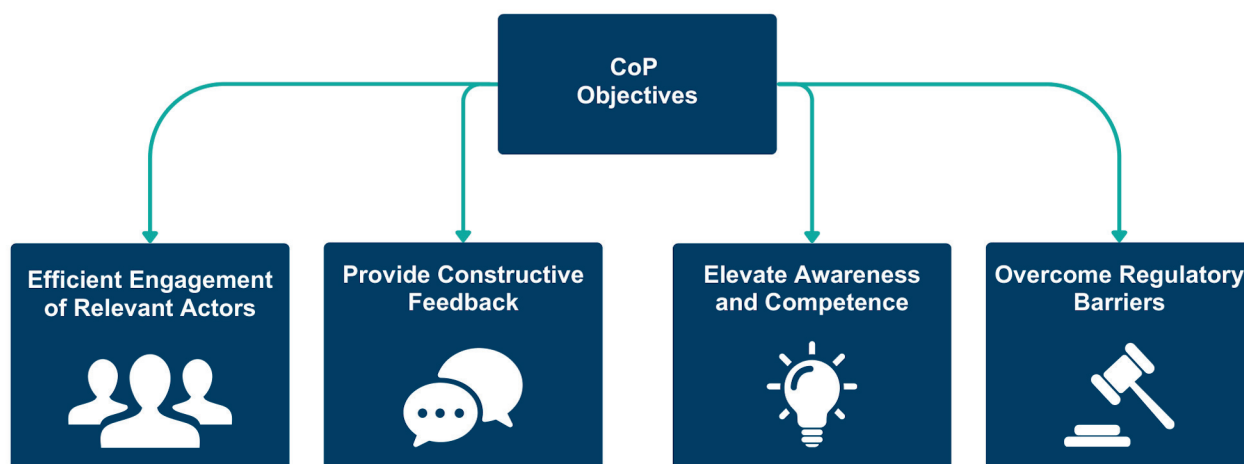


Figure 1. Schematic overview of CoP objectives in BlueBioClusters project.

### ► **Participant Engagement & Motivation:**

Around 20 engaged participants are usually ideal for a successful CoP, balancing familiarity and diversity. However, size can vary depending on factors such as the CoP's scope, regional specificities and topic. Some CoPs may have as few as 10 members, while others may have more than 50. Participants are usually selected for their eagerness to engage in the blue bioeconomy and their expertise, which should align with the CoP's objectives. When recruiting members, it is essential to clearly specify the CoP's goals and focus, as overly general topics may limit participation, and to prioritise stakeholders who can add value to the discussions. Effective recruitment strategies include multiple tailored communication methods, personalised invitations for initial meetings, and direct outreach via email and phone calls. Inviting a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, SMEs, start-ups and community representatives, is also necessary to represent different perspectives. In BBC's CoP in Norway, for example, a local bank was included. Organising a CoP alongside other relevant activities or events can also increase participant motivation. Challenges may arise, such as the dominance of certain members or attempts to lobby for a vested interest. To mitigate these, it is important to set common goals and clear rules of procedure. A good facilitator will help keep the discussion on track and ensure that everyone has a chance to express their views, leading to a more balanced conversation. In larger CoPs, forming smaller breakout groups can encourage more meaningful conversations. A key factor in engaging participants is

empowering them to see their role in the future scenarios discussed, thus building motivation for personal connection and investment. Ensuring that each team member feels valued and that their contribution is important is crucial for a successful and motivated CoP.

### ► **Designing the CoP Agenda and Organizing Meetings:**

The agenda of a CoP is central to its effectiveness. It should include a mix of presentations, focus groups, workshops, site visits and other activities that reflect the group's interests. Variety helps to maintain engagement and ensures that each session contributes to the overall goals of the CoP. Regular open interaction between members fosters a collaborative learning environment. For example, in Portugal, half-day sessions with inspiring presentations and icebreakers have proved effective in fostering cohesiveness in the group.

Time management is crucial, as seen in Sweden, where sending out invitations well in advance (around three months) facilitated wider participation. Clearly articulating the benefits of participation, both short and long-term, motivates stakeholders. A well-structured agenda and effective facilitation are essential to keep discussions focused and productive. Expert facilitation is crucial to achieving the objectives of the meeting and ensuring valuable outcomes. Open communication and transparency are vital to avoiding conflict, while actively moderating discussions promotes equal participation. Practical aspects such as room layout can significantly impact the dynamics of CoP meetings. A spacious room allows for smaller group discussions without interference.

- ▶ **Surprise CoP members:** Informal activities such as lunches, dinners, or unique experiences like sauna gatherings, as tested in Estonia, should not be underestimated. They build trust and create bonds between members, encouraging active participation and strengthening the community, thereby greatly enhancing success and engagement within CoPs.
- ▶ **Visionary Collaboration:** Drawing lessons from the Swedish experience, inspiring participants to 'dream' and collaboratively shape a future goal is crucial. Recognising and uniting around common objectives can motivate ongoing progress towards these aims. Understanding different ways to reach these shared goals can significantly improve the CoP process.
- ▶ **Find Synergies and Enhance Results:** Clearly defining the goals of the CoP helps in identifying potential partners who share similar objectives, creating opportunities for collaboration with a greater impact. For example, linking with similar projects or study programmes can pool resources, improving results for everyone involved. It is also important to make sure that key players in the CoP are informed about, and ideally supportive of, the planned activities.
- ▶ **Avoid stakeholder fatigue:** A sound engagement strategy can avoid stakeholder fatigue. For example, keeping members interested in innovative activities, coordinating efforts with other projects and initiatives, and having a clear, agreed-upon goal can be effective. These approaches help maintain member motivation and involvement, reducing the likelihood of disengagement. Understanding and adapting stakeholder management to the local culture is also essential.

## Case 1: Boosting Blue Bioeconomy Awareness in Saaremaa, Estonia

As a first step, the Saaremaa CoP, consisting of about 10 members from universities, government and local businesses, focused on raising awareness of the blue bioeconomy and its potential among a diverse group of local residents. To achieve this, the CoP organised a seminar in Saaremaa. The seminar showcased local blue bioeconomy companies and covered the topics of offshore fish farming and seaweed valorisation. The event attracted almost 100 participants, from schoolchildren to pensioners. They enjoyed local seafood delicacies and listened to presentations by a nature photographer and the Minister of the Environment. The event successfully showcased what blue visions are about in practice and how they can impact residents' lives.

## Case 2: Shaping the Future in West Sweden

To develop a vision for the future of the blue bioeconomy in the Västra Götaland region, a CoP workshop was held, hosting discussions between different stakeholders. Facilitators helped to keep the discussions focused on future opportunities rather than current problems. The programme included a presentation by a futurist, i.e., an expert in methodologies for designing future scenarios. A graphic facilitator captured the results of the discussions and created a visual poster wall for idea contributions. This approach was designed to get everyone working together to create a shared vision for the community's future and encourage its growth. The future narrative was designed to be relatable, balanced, emotional and evolving.

### Case 3: Peniche, Portugal - Valuing Local Bioresources

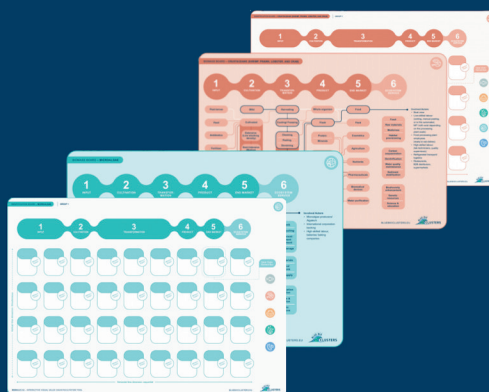
In Peniche, influential local personalities were engaged to enthuse others for the project. The initiative showcased two concrete R&D projects from the region, focusing on marine bioresources, to highlight the area's potential and innovative methods. Highlighting a clear roadmap and giving confidence in the community, those projects also showed the hurdles and challenges a collaborative and dedicated regional network can solve.

The aim was to create a vision for the region's future in the blue economy, incorporating the views of different stakeholders and setting specific targets for key local industries. Key players, including companies, start-ups, researchers and local development groups, used BBC's Value Chain Facilitation tool to assess the challenges and opportunities within the local fish and seaweed industries, considering their sustainability and significance for Peniche. These sessions highlighted the value of recognising each participant's contribution, which in turn increased community engagement and support.

### Case 4: Møre and Romsdal CoP in Norway - Aligning with Local Strategies and Enhancing Circularity

In Norway, the CoP plans to align its activities with the revision of the county's R&D and innovation strategy. By presenting the CoP's goals and vision, the aim is to take advantage of the county's upcoming focus on the development of the bio-economy. This strategy emphasises the importance of creating synergies with local projects. The CoP will work with both blue and green value

chains, promoting a circular and holistic approach. This collaboration will benefit both the local communities and the strategy developers: local insights will contribute to the development of the strategy, while decision-makers will gain specific, on-the-ground knowledge, enriching the overall planning process.



The **Interactive Visual Value Chain Facilitation Tool** is designed to assess local value chains in the blue bioeconomy. It identifies key stages and actors, and highlights areas for improvement and opportunities for collaboration. This tool is essential for the transition to sustainable, circular value chains, making it valuable for stakeholders seeking to optimise efficiency and sustainability in the bioeconomy sector.

### Case 5: Icelandic Blue CoP – Connecting Blue Bioeconomy Stakeholders and Building Trust

The first Icelandic Blue CoP was hosted by the Icelandic Ocean Cluster, with 40 invited participants. The event was designed as an informal Christmas get-together, with a light lunch, drinks and an open room layout. Although many participants already knew each other, the event provided a unique setting for networking, learning about the BlueBioClusters project, and discussing their

roles in shaping the future of Iceland's blue bioeconomy. The session aimed to lay the groundwork for future discussions, introduce a diverse mix of people and build trust. New and innovative blue economy startups had the opportunity to present their pitches and share their annual highlights and challenges, which were then discussed collectively. The

meeting facilitated a collective discussion of these challenges and laid a solid foundation for the next CoP meeting, which will invite the same group. Where necessary, additional efforts will be made to include additional stakeholders in future meetings, e.g., research community members.



## Policy Recommendations

- ▶ **Clear Communication and Engagement:** CoPs should clearly communicate their objectives and engage diverse stakeholders.
- ▶ **Effective Meeting Organization:** Plan diverse activities and manage time efficiently for productive discussions.
- ▶ **Fostering Collaboration and Vision:** Encourage members to contribute to a future vision and recognize common goals.
- ▶ **Identifying Synergies:** Collaborate with partners having similar goals for greater impact.
- ▶ **Local Engagement and Strategy Alignment:** Align CoP activities with local strategies and promote circularity in bioeconomy development.

