

what keeps a community alive?


POLLICY

Lessons from 8 Years of Communities of Practice

In 2018, just a year after Pollicy was founded, we came to fully embrace the collaborative design philosophy of "build with, not for" as was championed by many civic tech initiatives at the time. Our work needed communities. We wanted to bring together people from different sectors, different countries, different skill levels, but working towards the same thing. Digital rights. Feminist technology. Gender-responsive governance.

We didn't want to implement projects in isolation because our team was too small to achieve the reach and impact we were after on our own. At Pollicy, we shared the belief that if we brought likeminded practitioners together, we'd create something richer than we could alone. We'd build ownership and that would create a ripple effect.

Eight years later, we've convened communities of practice across multiple projects. We've even changed the configuration a few times to working groups or support networks, and over time, we've learned hard lessons and celebrated interesting breakthroughs. Now, we're building the next iteration with a sharper understanding of what actually works.

Part of that understanding has been the recognition that we have been holding three distinct kinds of community, each requiring a different approach and care. Communities of Practice (CoPs) are structured and deliberate, built around a shared domain of practice where members grow knowledge together over time.

Working Groups are smaller and time bound, gathering specific expertise to shape a particular process and produce defined outputs. Support networks are fluid and relational, holding space for solidarity and mutual care, with membership as a choice that evolves with what members need.

With that in mind, we have written this reflection piece for civil society organisations thinking about convening communities, building movements, or creating spaces for practitioners to learn together. It's an honest account of where we've succeeded and where we've stumbled, and what we're doing differently now.



what is a community of practice?

A community of practice (CoP), as we at Pollicy understand it, is a deliberate gathering of practitioners from different organisations and sectors who share a commitment to the same goal. These practitioners meet three criteria: they are passionate about the issues, they are already doing the work and they will directly or indirectly benefit from the joint outcomes. A community of practice has structure, a level of accountability, and ideally, some mutual care.

The tricky part with CoPs is defining that shared goal. Do you set it, or do they? At Pollicy, we've mostly set the broader vision. The communities then worked out the details. Having a clear direction from the start was efficient, but sometimes left communities constrained. We learnt over time that the communities that thrived were the ones that felt true ownership over both the structure/process and the intended outcome.

irl & fully funded



Our first investment in CoPs was the Digital Human Rights Lab, a GIZ-funded project that ran from 2018 to 2021. All the CoPs were based in Uganda, working across four thematic areas: Digital Inclusion, Cyber Legislation, Land Rights, and Digital Rights.

In terms of what worked well, we started the entire project with a needs assessment. Rather than announcing the communities and hoping people showed up, we listened first and then presented the findings to stakeholders. Then we co-created the communities together. We firmly believe that because people shaped what these spaces would be, they showed up and invested in them fully.

There was also a well-defined structure governing the project and CoPs. Each community had a dedicated liaison person. The CoPs then decided upon communication channels, selected their own leaders, welfare coordinators and activity managers. The project gave each CoP small funds to run activities. The money wasn't huge, but for some members it was the first funding they had ever received to carry out activities and it seemed enough to motivate people to do things together.

Everything was in-person as this was still pre-COVID, and when COVID hit, we transitioned to a mix of physical and remote convenings. It is undeniable that there's something about being in a room together that builds lasting relationships in a way video calls may not. People who would never have met from across vastly different sectors were suddenly collaborating. Women, persons with disabilities, rural communities who were usually left out of "digital rights" conversations suddenly had a seat at the table.

By year three, we had embedded relationships and a substantial amount of documentation, blog posts, small research outputs etc.

The Digital Inclusion community was doing meaningful work on accessibility. The Cyber Legislation community was informing policy conversations. The communities felt alive.

Then the project came to a close and the funding ended.

Together with our German partners, we unfortunately had not spent enough time discussing the shape of the project after its closure and had not built sufficient structures that could sustain themselves beyond the funding period. While some of the Whatsapp groups still exist till today, they are far less vibrant than they once were. What we had held up with resources and attention had fallen once we ourselves could no longer prop it up. As a young organization then, we were still in survival mode which meant we had to immediately shift gears and bring on other projects with different demands. We ran into issues whereby funders wanted to fund innovation, rather than sustaining existing initiatives.

Looking back, we realised we had never had a real conversation with communities about what would keep them going. We assumed that if the work was good enough, people would keep going, perhaps fundraising together or coordinating joint initiatives. There were some exceptions. A few communities kept running, but that was reliant on one person's commitment and perhaps not real sustainability. What happens when that person burns out and moves on?



online & across Africa



Five years later, in 2023, we facilitated CoPs across seven countries for a project focused on media, freedom of expression, and human rights. The learning from DHRLab should have made us more careful. In some ways, it did. In other ways, we repeated our mistakes.

We were more intentional this time about formation. We physically went into all the countries where we intended to launch CoPs and conducted needs assessments as well as identified and mentored CoP leads before launch. We recognised that different contexts needed different approaches so we didn't try to impose the same model across all seven countries. Across Uganda, Kenya, Cameroon, DRC, Tanzania, Senegal, and Mozambique, each CoP had between 15 and 30 members. These were media practitioners, filmmakers, journalists, human rights defenders and they set their own governance structures, agreed on their own goals, formed WhatsApp groups etc..

In this iteration of working with communities, the funding provided to CoPs was attached to activities. We allocated resources, and CoPs were able to carry out activities. Some of the challenges we ran into were around the composition of the CoPs. As an organisation with a physical office only in Uganda at the time, we could not fully grasp the context and networks of the other six countries and relied on the community knowledge of our partners on the ground. This meant that we were limited in how discerning we could be about the people who joined the CoPs. We had a number of members whose participation was driven by personal interest or convenience rather than deep commitment to the goals of the CoP.



Three or four communities formed working groups within the larger CoPs. They self-selected into smaller, tighter groups of people they actually wanted to work with. This was adaptive and made sense, but it also fragmented the community. We also realised that there was a difference in the skill sets of the different members, which is to be expected, but the CoP coordinators felt pressure to be an equaliser and to make sure everyone felt included. This meant compromising on ideas, slowing down decisions and diluting impact. In the end, all project objectives were met and we learned many lessons along the way.

Unsurprisingly, when the resources slowed down, engagement also dropped. Communities that started with 30 active members were down to 8 or 10. The coordinators told us that even when they reached out asking if people wanted to organise self-sustaining activities, the energy wasn't there. People asked for internet funding or transport allowance or some form of compensation for participation.

The CoPs that have continued on since the project ended can largely be attributed to the CoP lead. In one country, the on-the-ground partner and CoP lead had mapped out who should be in the room based on both interest and realistic capacity and were intentional about composition. That community is still active today and continues to collaborate on different initiatives.

In another country, the CoP is still running, but with requests for ongoing support. The lead is willing and capable, but the financial and physical burden of coordinating is a real barrier.

When we look back at our evaluation of the entire project and process, we know we have achieved our project outputs. But did people in the CoPs feel like they belonged? Were they learning from each other? Were their relationships translating into real collaboration beyond our resources and engagement? We had some insights, but we now realise we could have done much more here to understand what was actually working.

women leaders & support networks



By 2024, we were thinking differently about what the structures of CoPs could be. Our VOTE:Women project shifted to calling our community focused work ‘support networks’ rather than communities of practice. The name reflected a shift in that we weren’t trying to build expert communities but rather spaces where women activists, researchers, and organisers could support each other through difficult work. This meant less formalities in member engagements and protected but open spaces for any person that aligns with the network cause. The evolution to support networks meant platforms for individual/ collective solidarity and resilience building among members rather than external structural change making.

We zeroed in on fewer countries and were more intentional about composition from the start. In one country, our partner mapped out who should be invited based on alignment with objectives and realistic capacity. This approach has worked well as is evident from a still thriving network with cohesion.

In the second country, we are still learning. We have realised that return on participation matters. If someone shows up to meetings and nothing comes of it, they stop showing up. If the network isn’t advancing their actual work or interests, they lose faith.

We have also learnt that physical space still matters enormously. When we shifted to virtual engagement, participation dropped. Virtual feels efficient from an organisational perspective but could feel extractive from a participant perspective because cultural connection, storytelling, trust-building that makes networks actually work often happens face to face.

The challenge is that in-person convenings require significant resources. It requires travel, venue, time, catering, transport facilitation etc. It’s not scalable in the way funders want scalability. But scaling relationships is the hard work that needs to happen.

five lessons learned



1. Convener Clarity and Capacity Is Everything

The strongest communities we've seen have had a clear convener with capacity in terms of financial systems, technical skills, convening power, trust, energy, willingness and investment in outcomes. When coordination falls to someone who doesn't have the bandwidth, or when it's unclear who's actually responsible for keeping the community alive, things fall apart quickly. This then means you sometimes can't scale communities in the way you want to. You can't convene three communities well if you only have capacity to hold two. We have often tried to do too much with too little, and it showed in the outcomes.

2. Funding Solves the Problem Until It Doesn't



Money works as a motivator. When you have a budget to support activities, people show up. When the budget ends, they often leave. This isn't being cynical but rather being realistic in understanding that people have real constraints. Unpaid work is a privilege few can afford. But it also means communities built on funding alone don't last beyond the funding cycle.

The sustainability conversation needs to happen at the beginning, not at the end. We need to ask: what happens when the money runs out? Are people connected to something deeper than the funding? Do they have relationships and commitments that matter beyond the project timeline? What would make them keep showing up? We haven't figured out how to ask this question without making it sound like we're setting communities up to fail, however asking it early might actually improve outcomes.

3. Shared Identity Might Be Stronger Than Shared Problem



The media practitioners in our second round of CoPs had a shared identity. They were media practitioners that shared a common language and knew what each other's work felt like. Our first round of CoPs was deliberately intersectional. Land rights activists, persons with disability, women, youth. They didn't necessarily share an industry or professional identity. What held them together was commitment to a thematic concept. Both CoPs worked for a time. However, when we look at which relationships actually lasted, which communities kept going, it's often the ones where people had professional or cultural identity in common. They are also more likely to be in the same rooms in the future.

This is worth thinking about if you are designing communities. Are you bringing people together because they share a problem they're working on, or because they share an identity and a problem?



4. Evaluation Helps You Know How You're Doing

We have conducted ongoing evaluations but looking back, we realise we could have done much more. We didn't do simple, structured reflection. We didn't ask people systematically to tell us what was working and what wasn't. We didn't document the stories of why relationships formed or why they broke down.

As a result, we have good instincts about what worked, but not clear data. With our current work, we are building feminist M&E into the communities from day one. We're going to know, not just assume.



5. Community Endings Are Not Failure

We have previously viewed the end of a community as a failure with the assumption that a community that didn't sustain meant we hadn't built it well enough. But eight years in, perhaps this is the wrong frame.

Relationships built in communities continue long after the formal structure ends. They just continue in ways that are hard to measure or attribute. People run into each other at conferences. They collaborate on new initiatives. They text each other for advice. They show up for each other in movements they care about. These connections are deeply important, even if we can't quantify them or claim credit for them.

This suggests a different way of thinking about communities. Rather than building every community to last forever, we might design some with a clear lifecycle. A community could come together for a set time with a defined purpose, build synergistic relationships and produce outputs, and then have an intentional ending such as a celebration or some form of acknowledgement of what was built.

After that, the community flows as is most natural. Some relationships formalise into ongoing collaborations while others may fade into the background. Some evolve into something different entirely and though it may feel like it at the time, none of this is failure. It's just how relationships actually work.

This frame of mind releases us from the pressure to sustain something indefinitely while at the same time, honors what was actually built, even if it doesn't last in the form we created it.

Finally, it acknowledges that the real impact of a community can happen in spaces we can't see or measure.

practical observations for other practitioners

If you're thinking about convening communities, here are some of our learnings over the past years:

Start with a real needs assessment. Don't assume you know what people need. Listen first. Let that listening shape the structure.

Be clear about what you're convening. Is this a working group with specific tasks? A community of practice where people are doing similar work and learning from each other? A support network for solidarity and collective care? The names matter because they shape what people expect and how they'll engage.

Think about composition deliberately. Not everyone who cares about an issue is ready to show up as a practitioner. There's a difference between passion, capacity, and shared identity. Be intentional about who's in the room and why.

Invest in at least one strong convener. Don't try to hold multiple communities with divided attention. It won't work. One person holding one community well is better than one person half-holding three.

Have the sustainability conversation at the start, not the end. Ask people: what would it take for this to keep going? What are we building that matters beyond this funding cycle? What relationships would we actually keep? What's the real return on your participation?

Pay attention to place. Virtual can work for some things. But for building relationships, for creating culture, for the kind of solidarity that lasts, you may need physical space. Budget for it as an investment.

Do real evaluation. Use approaches that align with your values. But also ask simple questions systematically. Why do you come? What have you learnt? What's missing? What would make you want to keep going? Document the stories. You'll understand what you've actually built, not what you hoped you built.

Watch for signs that it's not working. Consistent low attendance. People only showing up when there's payment. Lack of self-generated ideas. This data tells you whether the CoPs are meeting a need.

It's okay for communities to end. We've treated endings as failures. Sometimes they're just transitions. Sometimes a community has done what it needed to do and people are ready to move on.

The Feminist Technology Communities of Practice

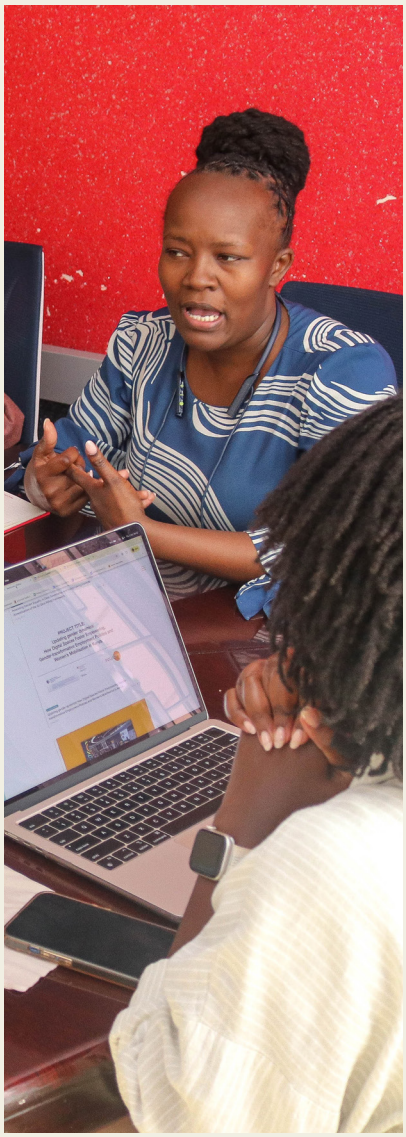
what we're building now

Pollicy is convening Feminist Technology Communities of Practice across four regions in Africa: East Africa, Central Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa. These are regional collaboration spaces bringing together activists, technologists, researchers, creatives, and policymakers working on digital rights, technology governance, and feminist movements.

Who is this for? Feminist practitioners with at least two years of experience working in digital rights, feminist technology design, online safety, data governance, or digital justice. We're prioritising women-led and feminist organisations, and we're looking for people who are ready to commit fully to the work.

What's different about these CoPs? We've learnt from eight years of community-building. These communities have clear expectations: 80% participation over 18 months, subgranting to members, quarterly collaborative outputs, and deliberate composition based on both alignment and realistic capacity. We're offering real value: access to Pollicy initiatives, funding opportunities to run joint projects, amplification at events, and long-term alliance building. We're building feminist M&E into the work from day one so we actually know what's working.

Why regional structure? It creates natural peer learning within contexts that share similar digital governance challenges. It's also manageable. We learnt the hard way that you can't hold too many communities at once.



an invitation



We are eight years into working with communities and we are very much still learning. We are launching new communities now with the lessons learned. However, we won't pretend that we have all the answers.

If you're building communities, working groups, support networks, sandboxes or any iteration of spaces where practitioners come together, we're interested in what you are learning. What works in your context? What doesn't? What surprised you? What would you do differently next time?

We plan to keep documenting our learnings as part of our contribution to feminist knowledge. We want to better understand how sustained movements anchored in trust and shared commitment get built. Communities matter and they can be a nurturing space for isolated practitioners to feel grounded in a larger movement. They are where real collaboration happens and where feminist technology and digital rights work gets stronger.

We just need to be honest about what it takes to build them, hold space for them and be willing to keep learning.

If you'd like to share your own learning about building communities and movements in your work, please reach out. We want to learn from you.