eMSP NBSR
Emerging Ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning Topics in the North and Baltic Sea Regions

Co-funded by the European Union

Policy Brief

Communities of Practice in marine spatial planning across sea basins - making it work

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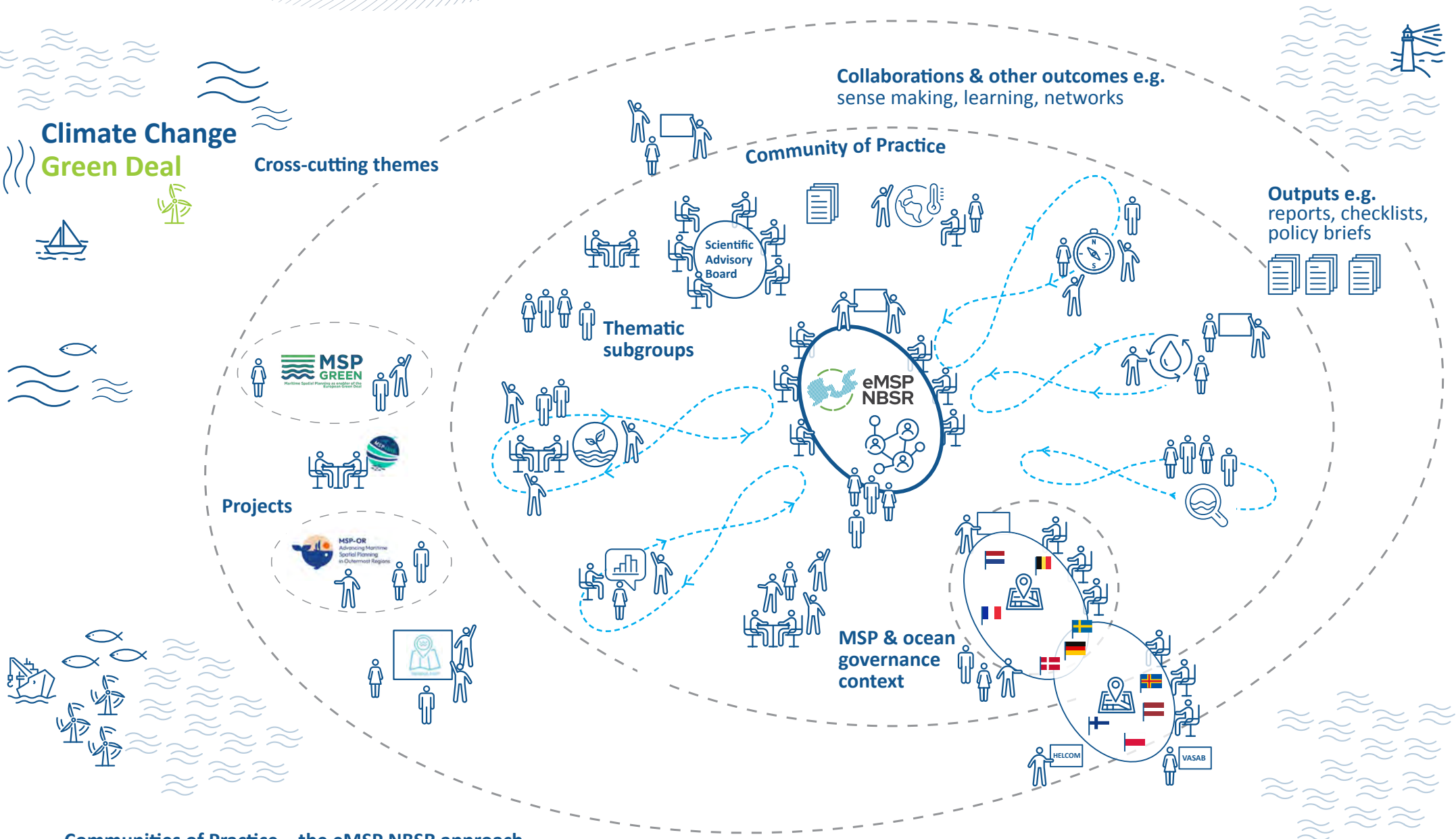


Communities of Practice – the eMSP NBSR approach

Figure 1: The eMSP NBSR project as a community of practice with five thematic CoPs and collaborative activities in various group constellations – embedded in and reaching out to its context of environmental and societal change, projects, processes, societal actors and taking in emerging issues and providing outputs (Source: co-created by the authors, inspired by an illustration on forestry CoPs).

1. About this policy brief

This policy brief has been developed within the European Union EMFAF-financed project Emerging Ecosystem-Based Maritime Spatial Planning topics in the North and Baltic Sea Regions (eMSP NBSR), illustrated in Figure 1. It is intended for a broad audience interested in collaborative approaches, collective learning, and stakeholder involvement, particularly in contexts where multiple stakeholders navigate complex challenges and engage in transboundary collaboration. As our experiences are based in a project focusing on marine or maritime spatial planning (shortly MSP), the policy brief may be particularly relevant for professionals in the fields of marine, coastal, and water planning and management.

This Policy Brief and the included analytical and reflection tool, the so-called Communities of Practice (CoP) flower, has been co-created by researchers and process facilitation experts within the eMSP NBSR project. We warmly thank our project colleagues for their engagement in learning how to do CoPs and for sharing their valuable insights through surveys, interviews, meetings and more informal discussions reflecting on our learning journey together.

1.1 Why communities of practice in MSP in the North and Baltic Sea Regions?

The North and Baltic Sea regions are facing complex challenges arising from a rapidly expanding blue economy, interactions between emerging and established maritime activities, their collective impact on sensitive marine ecosystems, and the growing impacts of climate change. Dealing with these requires long-term thinking and balancing diverging needs, aims and values across institutional levels and sea basins.

Knowledge for decision-making is not concentrated in a single place but spread among many stakeholders. Moreover, what is of use and value to one country or stakeholder in our sea basins may not be for another. Integrative, innovative and adaptive approaches are therefore required that enable collaboration within countries and across borders.

MSP is a cross-cutting spatial approach to develop forward-looking solutions to complex issues facing sea space. In line with the 2014 MSP Directive, most European Union (EU) member states have now completed their first plans. At the same time, new challenges are emerging, forcing planners to consider new patterns of sea use and impacts on marine ecosystems. This requires increasing stakeholder collaboration in the North Sea and Baltic Sea Region.

The eMSP project was designed to explore a number of these important topics in thematic working groups. To build capacity for collaborative learning and integration across sea basins, a CoP-based approach was chosen. Inspired by the Dutch North Sea CoP experience (reviewed by Steins et al. 2021), the aim was to explore how a CoP-based approach can be developed in a cross-basin MSP setting to complement existing formal structures and networks.

1.2 What is a community of practice?

There are various ways to describe a community of practice (e.g. Wenger & Snyder 2000; Hildreth & Kimble 2004). Definitions commonly emphasise a drive to learn together through social interaction, with an aim to improve and innovate current practice by sharing expertise and experiences. We see a CoP as a group

of people and/or platform where professionals and practitioners share analyses, inform and advise each other and develop new practices. A CoP is set apart from projects, task forces or networks in various ways, which will be developed below. It is important that the members are intrinsically motivated and that work is done in a non-hierarchical way. CoPs consist of various interacting dimensions. We have sorted them into six dimensions and related questions to ask graphically illustrated as a flower (Figure 2).

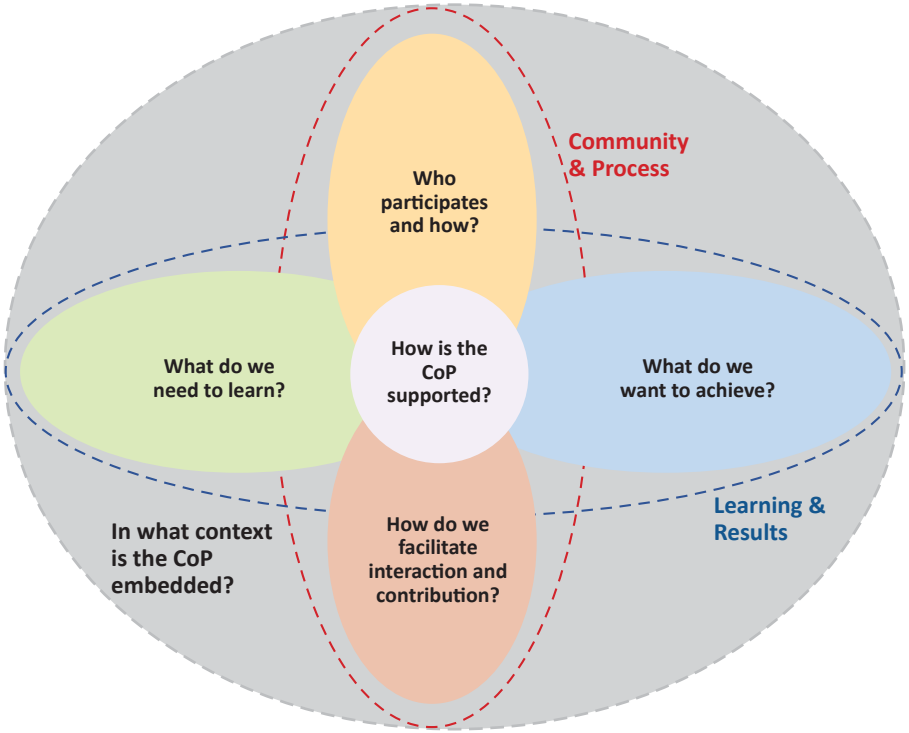


Figure 2: The CoP flower and the key questions to establish a Community of Practice (Source: authors).

The central core is surrounded by four petals, with the flower itself framed by a particular context (grey). The context affects how the CoP works and could be a sea basin, a project, a planning process or any other social-environmental setting. The context includes the institutional context that can lend or withhold support and determines how results and learning can be shared and acquired. As a CoP has a strong focus on social relations and social learning, it also needs to be based on a set of ground rules that foster a safe working environment (Box 1).

Box 1: Ground rules for building a safe space and trust within a Community of Practice

- Respect
- All perspectives are needed
- Listening
- Constructive input
- What stays within/what is shared beyond bases on mutual agreement
- Rules for conflict management

Within its specific context, each CoP then has a specific thematic focus or content (green). It may want to work particular towards specific outputs but will also create intangible outcomes such as learning (blue), the learning and results axis (blue dotted line). To make it work, a CoP needs a supporting function (violet core), as well as participants (yellow) and an agreed, appropriate work mode (red). Many of these dimensions can also be found in projects or networks. What makes CoPs special is the additional vertical yellow-red axis of community and process, held together by the central support function (red dotted line).

1.3 When are CoPs a useful approach?

A CoP-based approach is useful when faced with an urgent and complex issue that cannot be tackled by one party alone. This could be topics that are transboundary, or issues that require various bodies of knowledge, experience, know-how and many stakeholders to come together. As there are no simple answers in such situations, collective learning and joint sense-making are essential. Marine and coastal planning and management processes are exactly such situations. Decision-makers and experts need to work hand-in-hand with multiple stakeholders and sectors, especially given that the complexity of marine planning and management is even increasing: our seas are becoming ever busier and environmental problems are also growing fast and becoming more complex.

1.4 How do CoPs work?

A CoP may emerge "bottom-up" from a problem perceived by marine stakeholders or experts, or more "top-down" as a conscious attempt to create new linkages between disconnected actors. It may also emerge from a mix of both, such as in the eMSP NBSR project where interested partners applied for funding to work together.

Because of their inherent flexibility, CoPs need a dedicated central support function to make them work efficiently and effectively. The support function keeps an eye on the ground rules: It creates a safe space, provides organisational support and ensures an open and equal learning environment where no important insights or knowledge are missed. Working in a CoP might need specialist facilitation skills and prior familiarisation with the CoP approach supported by continuous mentoring and exchange. The participants also need an open mindset as learning and experimenting in a CoP implies another way of working compared to a project group setting (Table 1). Most importantly, participants need to be motivated to contribute, to freely share existing knowledge, insights and experiences and to work without hierarchies based on mutual trust.

1.5 How is a CoP different from a project group?

The CoP approach strengthens the process and community part of working together. More resources and time will be spent on this compared to a purely goal-oriented approach (Table 1). While a CoP can easily create tangible outputs, it is the intangibles that are most important. Working within a CoP can enhance the intrinsic motivation of participants (maintain their interest, co-create meaning, increase identification with a topic, have fun co-creating) and promote outcomes such as pride, trust, networks, readiness to collaborate in future and willingness to become ambassadors for a topic.

Table 1: Key differences between a CoP approach and a regular project group

Characteristics	
Community of Practice	**Project group**
Open and free-form process, various roles can be taken at different times.	Rules, roles and agreements are often set beforehand and the roles rarely change.
Equality as a central principle – the CoP lead does not have formal power.	The project lead has the power to direct the group.
The CoP is led by the needs and questions put forward by the participants.	The project works towards aims that have been agreed beforehand.
Participants contribute a diversity of knowledge and experience as needed; they are driven by passion and their intrinsic interest in the topic.	Participants contribute according to set roles and based on agreed project content.
Participants co-develop products that have not necessarily been planned from the beginning.	Project members mostly contribute to products agreed upon beforehand.

2. Our journey and experiences

2.1 The eMSP NBSR approach

The eMSP NBSR project tackled a broad set of interlinked and challenging MSP topics that were of particular interest to the national MSP agencies and knowledge actors partnering in the project (Figure 1). Effectively, the entire project can be seen as a nested CoP. Three cross cutting themes (climate change and the implementation of the European Green Deal in MSP and the CoP approach) were addressed across the project by five thematic learning groups, or thematic CoPs, when working on their specific topics: Data and Knowledge Sharing, Ecosystem Based Approach, Monitoring and Evaluation, Ocean Governance, and Sustainable Blue Economy. True to the principles of CoP work, each thematic CoP chose its own learning journey and way of working towards the final project goals. The project team responded to the emerging needs of the thematic CoPs and tried to be flexible in how it worked with partners, other projects and stakeholders across topics and borders. At the same time, eMSP did have dedicated work packages (WPs) that gave an overarching structure to the project and led to agreed project outputs (Figure 3). Two work packages organised the learning process within the CoPs and the content (WPs 2 and 3). One WP provided overall leadership (WP1), and another internal sharing and external communication (WP5). WP4 was responsible for the science-policy interface, including the Scientific Advisory Board and CoP mentoring.

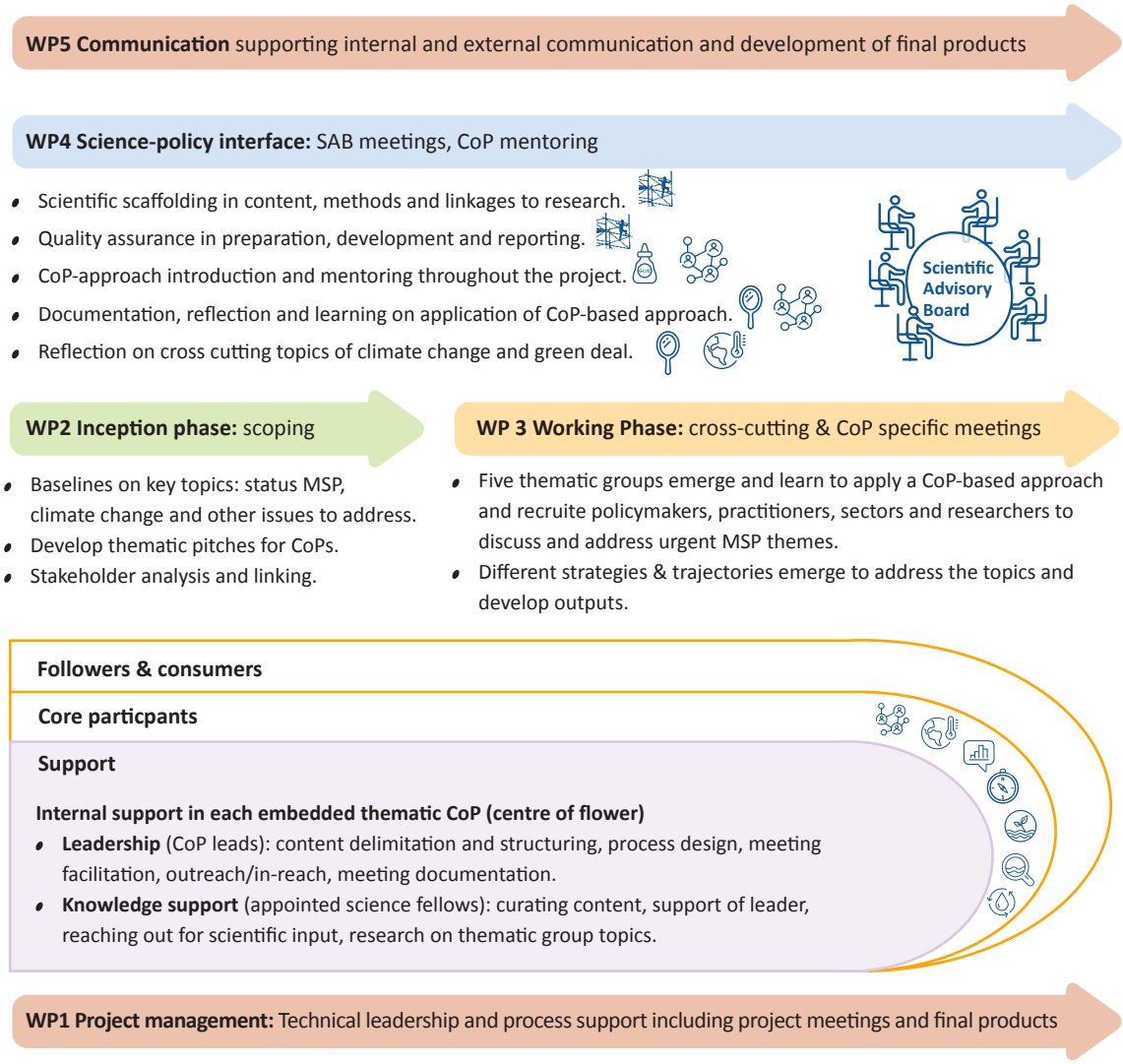


Figure 3: Project trajectory and support functions at project and thematic CoP level (Source: authors)

2.1 Enabling embedded CoP-based work – organisation, structure and mentoring

The eMSP NBSR project provided central support functions for the thematic CoPs and the project as a whole (Figure 3). An important part was to build the capacity within the project to enable the support function of each of the thematic CoPs. For this purpose, a mentoring programme was organised that focused on coaching, facilitation skills, process-based co-creation and other CoP leadership tools. The Scientific Advisory Board, which was composed of science fellows and the respective CoP leads, acted as a forum for knowledge support and reflection across the various CoPs. Important enablers were regular project meetings (providing opportunities for reflection across topics and CoPs), documentation, co-creation and facilitation, as well as dedicated follow-up by the mentors and on-boarding of new participants.

2.3 Key challenges

Various challenges emerged when applying a CoP-based approach to the different themes in the eMSP project context. Below, we list some of the key challenges. Further insights can be found in the eMSP CoP report and in coming scientific publications (https://www.emspproject.eu/results/).

Combining project work and CoP work - a potentially creative contrast

Many participants experienced a tension between the pre-defined goals and outputs of the eMSP NBSR project and the co-creative, flexible CoP mindset that responds to emerging needs and priorities. We found that too strong a focus on deliverables can restrict a CoP's openness and limit the group's ability to listen to various perspectives. At the same time, the tension between CoP work (vertical red axis in the CoP flower) and project work (horizontal blue axis) can be put to good use by skilled facilitators. We found that set project goals provided focal points for the CoPs and contributed to a sense of progress, while the fixed deliverables were important for anchoring the project within the wider context of the participating organisations, beyond the network that has evolved within the project CoPs.

Participating in a CoP requires extra commitment

People's ability to become involved in the CoPs was affected by a lack of resources and time. This means the core teams and the wider CoPs had to work hard to keep up levels of engagement. Staff changes at the core of some thematic CoPs have been a special challenge. While resource and staffing issues also affect project teams, CoPs are even more dependent on personal commitment and voluntary contributions as there are no contracts or formal assignments. If the aim is to initiate a new CoP within a project such as eMSP NBSR, it can be difficult to secure ongoing commitment as this is a different mode of working compared to working towards a pre-defined goal. This particularly applies in the initial explorative phase of a CoP.

Working as a CoP requires faith in the approach - which comes with experience

The lack of experience with a CoP-based approach also represented a challenge, especially at the start of the project. Some project members were more sceptical than others about the approach,

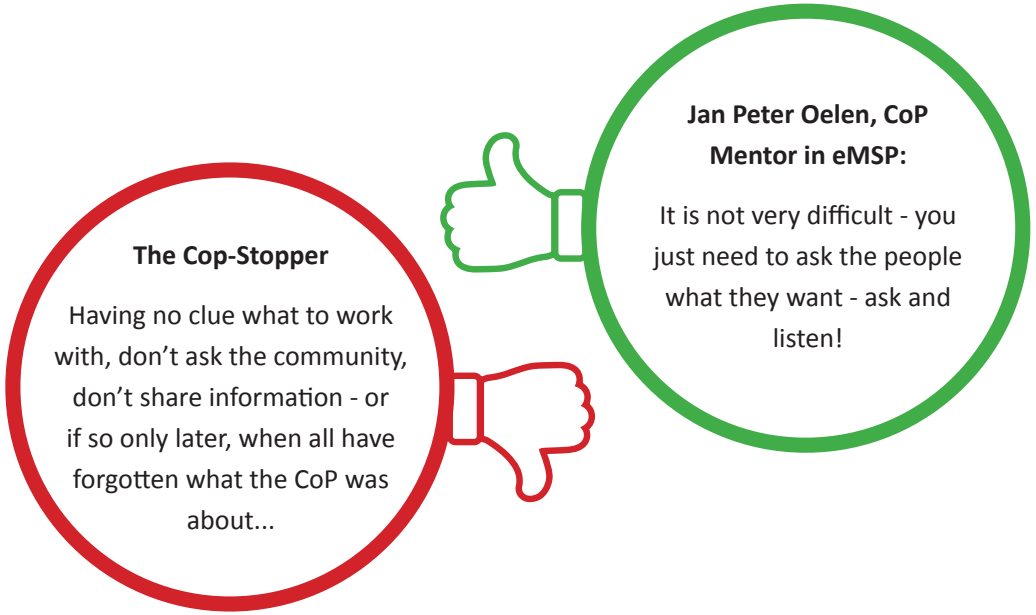
others needed additional support. We had to learn on the go and continuously reflect about what was appropriate, especially given that five thematic CoPs evolving and working in parallel. Once the CoPs were up and running, commitment was easier to maintain and participants began to understand and value the CoP way of working. One CoP lead said: "A CoP is a great way to share knowledge, work with people you would not otherwise meet and being able to learn from more experienced colleagues in other countries." Some participants developed a close relationship with their CoP, as another CoP lead observed: "It feels really strange at the end of the project to have to leave our community and not see them again."

The hidden value of intangibles needs to be made explicit

Coming from the more usual project contexts, it was difficult to find ways to address the thematic complexities and diverse perspectives of the participants while learning to trust the more open and flexible CoP mode of working. This was even more challenging because the needs of a CoP continue to change. Core teams and participants needed a high awareness of the intangible dimensions of CoP work and their value (such as learning, enjoying working on joint products, being a well-organised team) while working towards the more usual project deliverables. Promoting this added value is an important aspect of CoP work, and becomes easier the more experience the group gains with the CoP method.

Combining online and in-person work requires good planning and skilled facilitation

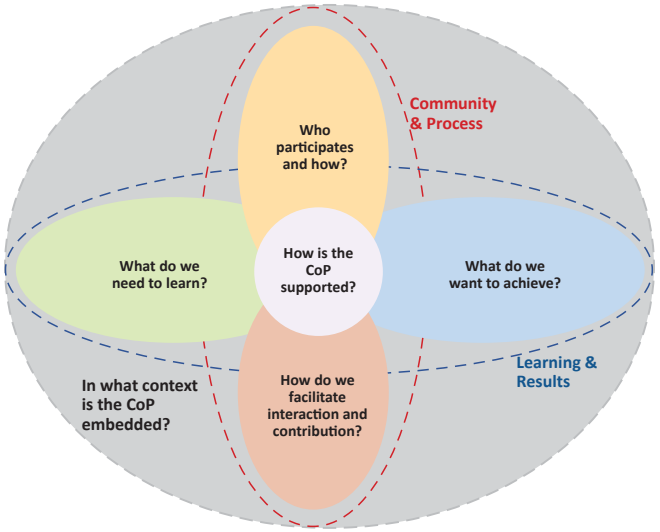
A technical challenge was how to balance online and hybrid meetings with in-person work. Online interaction requires a particular structure when working on content, and facilitation skills are needed for developing social interaction within the CoPs. Online meetings are appealing because they are flexible, but they may be less likely to trigger continuous commitment. We found it crucial to have good planning and skilled facilitation to guarantee interactive meetings, especially online. Curating regular contact with the wider CoP group and providing feedback was also important.



3. Recommendations - Do's and don'ts of CoPs in MSP

The recommendations below, including the ground rules summarise our insights on how to deal with the above key challenges. The key enablers according to our insights are summarised in Figure 4 zooming into the centre of the flower - including the ground rules (red dotted frame; for more, see final report and reference list).

Ground rules for safe space & trust
- Respect
- All perspectives are needed
- Listening
- Constructive input
- What stays within, what is shared beyond bases on mutual agreement
- Rules for conflict management



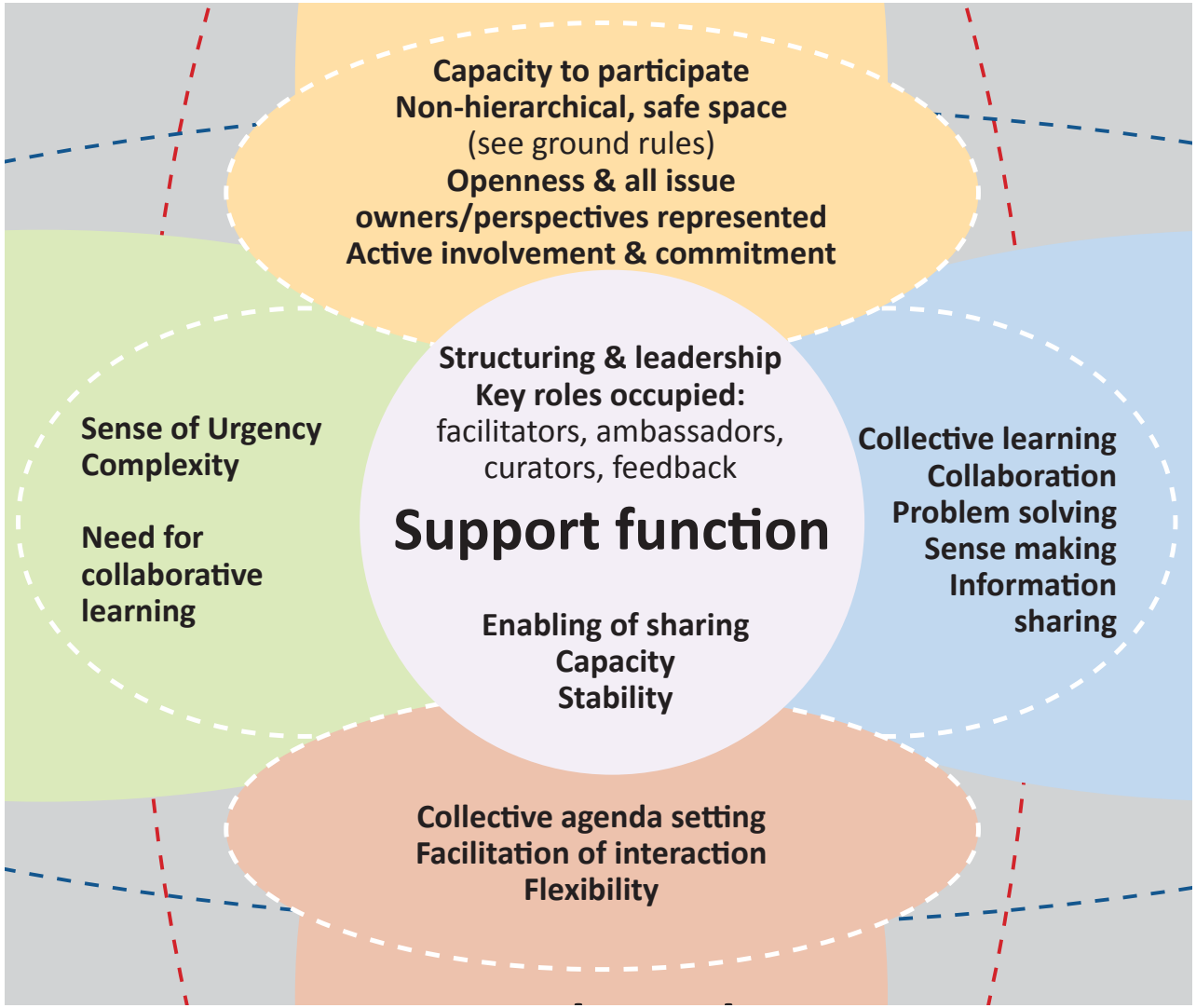


Figure 4: The key enablers of a CoP at the centre of the CoP Flower: each of the four petals has its key enablers (inner petals). All is held together by a fully encapacitated and stable support function at the core where all necessary key roles are occuppied. This includes the enabling of sharing. (Source: authors based o own and project experience and literature)

The Context

1

- **Allow the CoP to develop its own agenda and way of operating**

  Those organisations hosting or in charge of a CoP should trust the basic principles of a CoP-based approach. This means accepting its lack of hierarchy and its openness and flexibility, which is a potential challenge in authorities and countries with hiearchical decision structures. It is important not to be prescriptive but provide wiggle room for the CoP to evolve its aims, focus and activities.

- **Provide time, mandates and resources throughout the life of the CoP**

  Organisations sending participants to a CoP or hosting one should make sure staff have enough time and resources to be active, and a mandate to do so, throughout the life of the CoP. Make use of windows of opportunity in relation to the topics, people and events the CoP is covering.

The Content

2

- **Make a plan for dealing with a complex, cross-cutting and urgent topic that requires sharing knowledge**

  Dealing with a complex topic requires a step-by-step approach. This includes defining the topic at hand and then structuring and addressing it - with possibilities for revision and adjustment. In the thematic groups we reached out to new participants by snowballing throughout the life of the CoPs. They then worked with the participants to narrow down initially complex and broad topics (such as data for MSP) and specify the task at hand (e.g. narrowing down to a working question).

- **Make sure to promote knowledge sharing based on recognition**

  Make sure to promote willingness to share knowledge amongst the participants based on a partnership of equals. Trust and accept different participants' knowledge and expertise and don't put people into boxes. Allow flexibility in people's roles and that they may wear several hats and abandon preconceptions. Build a shared, agreed and well-maintained knowledge base and curate the content to keep it up to date, especially with respect to cross-cutting / cross-boundary themes.

The Support Function

3

- **Ensure to have a well-rounded support function**
  A support function is a basic prerequisite at the core of each CoP. Make sure it contains the knowledge, skills, mindset and capacity for leadership and curatorship, including backup of these functions. Provide the expertise to support the different roles of the core group. Important roles include facilitation, knowledge of the topic and having an eye for the different participants' expertise.
- **Make sure the core group follows the principles of CoP-based work**
  The support function should itself follow the ground rules of CoP-based work and trust its flexibility and self-organisation. CoP leaders should aim to build trust across the many dimensions of the CoP: in its knowledge, leadership, among participants, in the process and the overall strategy. They should strive for openness, transparency, and clear process leadership and always listen and adapt, using specific mentoring if and when required.

The Community

4

- **Aim for quality rather than quantity in CoP participants**
  Aim for a stable core group of contributors that can actively drive the issues at hand (5-15 people). It should be composed of people with diverse backgrounds, relevant knowledge and mandates. The followers and consumers of a CoP can range from a dozen to hundreds. Keep reaching out to a wider group of followers and consumers to recruit new active participants.
- **Promote ownership by communicating with and listening to your CoP**
  Make sure there is continuity in communication and interaction within the CoP. Provide for openness and transparency in the process and listen to the ideas and contributions of CoP members, ensuring that members feel heard. Choose working modes that promote engagement and imply co-creation and sharing. Choose topics and outputs that are likely to promote commitment (see points 2 and 6).
- **Aim for continuity in engagement and relationship-building**
  Create a process that ensures trust between participants and allows relationships to be built over time. Encourage and assist CoP members to engage with each other outside the CoP context. Continuity is an important enabler but sometimes difficult to achieve. Here, good facilitation and other unifying aspects such as trust, shared knowledge and an urgent issue to rally around can function as enablers.
- **Create a safe space**
  Aim to create a safe space in order to promote a CoP mindset. A safe space is essential to promote curiosity, openness, inclusiveness, attentiveness and non-hierarchical working and for establishing the ground rules of appropriate behaviour. Establishing and maintaining this safe space is part of the leadership function (see point 3).

5 The Work Mode

- **Make sure to be equal, transparent and adaptive. Have transparency in the discussion and the production of final products**

  Make sure to have a) the infrastructure (e.g. online tools), b) the interpersonal skills, c) the communication pathways, and d) the time to guarantee openness throughout the entire process. This requires, besides the above, planning ahead and promoting transparency and self-reflection. Be aware of the risk of decreasing ownership and transparency when the CoP is working towards final products, in particular when projects are implementing a CoP-based approach. Make sure to train participants in the process to enable openness and provide feedback and enable learning about work modes. Different participants from the core to the fringe require different modes of working. While the core might facilitate and prepare content, the fringe of followers and consumers is there to comment, contribute and help to develop the products.

- **Provide technical support for communication and interaction**

  Support is important for online and hybrid settings and events. Be aware of advantages and disadvantages and use online and in-person tools to their best advantage to benefit the chosen meeting mode and the goals of the CoP. Make sure to test any technology to allow full interaction, in particular in hybrid settings.

- **Develop technical skills**

  Develop the required skills to run online and in-person meetings, but especially for facilitating online collaboration. Hybrid work is the most challenging but may be necessary to bring everyone together.

6 CoP learning

- **Intangible outcomes and concrete outputs are equally important**

  An important part of the beauty of a CoP-based approach are the intangibles. This should be made clear from the beginning. Possible intangibles are meeting other people, creating a network, and generating shared meaning, mutual trust, self-reflection and development. Intangibles also include the collective learning and co-creation of knowledge that would not have existed without the CoP. People not used to this will – at least in the beginning – not perceive the intangible added value of CoP work.

- **Make use of structures and deadlines**

  Structures and deadlines can be helpful to progress towards final products important to both participants and end users.

Our legacy beyond eMSP NBSR

Especially targeted towards the eMSP, EU and global MSP community

- **Apply for funding to allow the urgent issues identified by eMSP to evolve further**

  Enable the learning and capacity building experiences of eMSP to spread beyond the two sea basins. Active outreach should be directed to the local and regional level across the land-sea continuum; the approach should also be tested in other sea-basins. A number of topics have been identified that would benefit from a CoP-based approach in the other project outputs. Further relevant MSP and sustainable development related topics include social sustainability, social learning, and equity.

- **Continue research and testing of both CoP flower and methodology as a pedagogical and analytical tool.**

  Work with the CoP flower and related methodology as part of training courses and university-based education. Also look for opportunities to use the CoP flower for analysis and critical review, working towards specific criteria for assessing the value of a CoP-based approach and the outputs and outcomes it delivers in different contexts.

- **Test working with CoPs as a complement to more strict administrative procedural contexts using an embedded or parallel CoP approach for stakeholder involvement beyond the usual**

  Make sure to accommodate differences in the organisational and political culture in different countries.

  Hierarchical contexts may need a slower approach, allowing organisational learning and establishing new values and modes of interaction. They also require strong links to those with formal mandates and power. At the same time, discussion and solution seeking should take place in a non-hierarchical manner. This requires resources, capacity and interest by the legislators (see prerequisites above).

Figure 5.
Learning Strands of the eMSP NBSR working towards policy briefs and recommendations, Stockholm, 2023 (Source: authors)

Further reading/references

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Disclaimer

This policy brief has been developed within in the eMSP project. It is based on insights of the persons participating in the project and does not necessarily exactly mirror the views of their organisations and nations.

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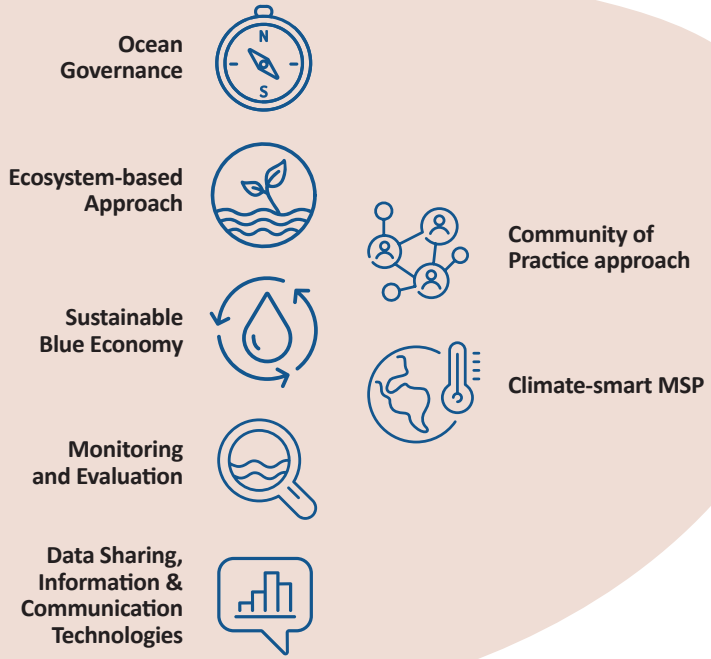
Find all project deliverables at www.eMSPproject.eu/Results



The eMSP NBSR project, implemented from September 2021 to February 2024, provided a platform for marine spatial planners and other experts to collaboratively advance MSP practice. It addressed five urgent emerging MSP topics through a community of practice-based approach that enabled joint learning across professions and across the North Sea and Baltic Sea areas.

Project work took into account the European Green Deal, climate change and how climate-neutrality targets can be addressed in MSP.

The planners and experts were supported by a method mentoring team and a scientific advisory board.

Netherlands Enterprise Agency
Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands
Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management of the Netherlands
SHOM
Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management
Syke
Varsinais-Suomen liitto
Egentliga Finlands förbund
Regional Council of Southwest Finland
HELCOM
Ålands landskapsregering
BSH
Nordregio
VASAB
Vision & Strategies around the Baltic Sea
Danish Maritime Authority
Blue Cluster