

Linking communities of practice and science advice in Marine Spatial Planning – first lessons from collaborative learning across the North and Baltic Sea Regions

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The Challenge

Marine/maritime spatial planning (MSP) is an approach designed to provide comprehensive, balanced and forward-looking spatial solutions to address complex issues such as climate change, ecosystem health, sustainable food and energy provision. Engaging stakeholders, citizens and scientists in MSP is a key challenge, and mechanisms need to be found that enable effective collaborative and double/triple loop learning (Hurlbert & Gupta 2015) at varying scales.

The eMSP NBSR project *Emerging ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning topics in North and Baltic Sea Regions* serves as a testbed to apply and evaluate the Communities of Practice (CoP) approach. Its aim is to make learning responsive to current needs and reflective, allowing different levels of engagement and the inclusion of different types of knowledge. Bringing together science and collaborative learning can be a challenge in MSP and is a particular focus of the project.

Guiding questions

1. How can the Communities of Practice (CoPs) approach promote collaborative learning in MSP across marine basins and institutional contexts?
2. What are the prerequisites, enablers and challenges to successfully apply it?

We share first lessons with the wider science community and want to discuss how to deepen and broaden the project's interactive learning.



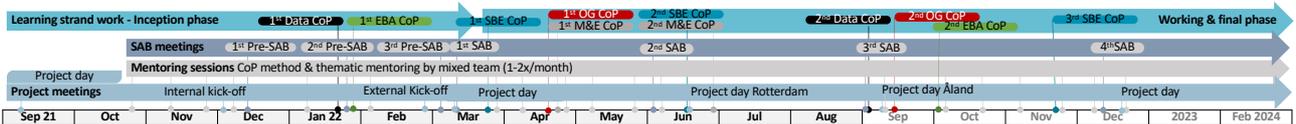
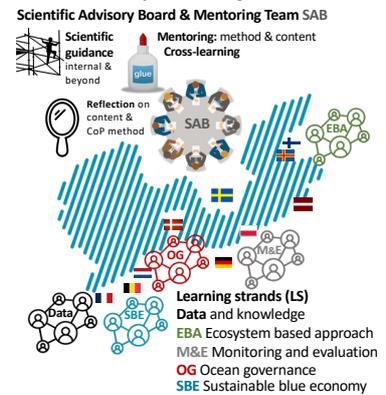
Communities of practice as project approach

To make learning collaborative and adaptive we chose a reflective communities of practice (CoP) approach (see top), well established in the social learning field (Wenger 1998) – inspired by the Dutch North Sea CoP for marine multi-use. Each project CoP consists of a *Core Group* from within the project consortium (with appointed leaders and science fellows) and committed external *Participants* from practice and research, co-designing their thematic learning, and interested *Followers*. Planners, scientists and marine stakeholders collaborate in 5 thematic learning strands and learn to apply a CoP approach to progress their work (see right). Regular mentoring sessions provide method input and possibilities to reflect. A mentoring team and a Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) with science fellows and members from beyond the project follows the learning (glue), provides reflection across strands (mirror) and scientific back-up (scaffolding). The project itself works as a “meta-CoP” fostering learning across themes.

The eMSP NBSR Project

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Lead: Netherlands Enterprise Agency
15 partners from 9 countries and regions:
Baltic & North sea marine planning & data agencies: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Åland.
International organisations: HELCOM, VASAB.
Knowledge actors: Maritime Institute Gdynia, Nordregio, Finnish Environment Institute.

eMSP Project Working Structure



Implementation & collaborative research

Proceeding at slightly different pace, the 5 CoPs have now arrived at step 3. We find that the project working structure (top right) indeed offers multiple occasions for peer learning, even if its complexity is challenging, both in terms of process and content. The composition of the learning strands varies depending on the theme; it has been difficult to recruit all CoP members at the same time. Given the interconnected nature of the themes, an early lesson is the importance of keeping up with each other to share across CoPs and reflect on the method. The inherently open nature of a CoP, open to join in any time, needs to be balanced with the need of groups to feel safe and make progress based on an established level of knowledge and with the goal-oriented logic of project work.

A participant survey (n=17), observation of CoP meetings and document analysis reveals first insights on challenges and enablers of using the CoP method within an MSP project context.

References

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Hurlbert, M. & Gupta, J. 2015. The split ladder of participation: A diagnostic, strategic, and evaluation tool to assess when participation is necessary. *Environ. Sci. Policy* 50, pp. 100–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2015.01.011>
Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

“One gets the impression that time is spent on unnecessary matters, there is no specific to-do list, what is happening is not clear.”

“Keep non-core group members of the CoP well informed on the progress of the LS work; maintain interest and sense of relevance of the work within the CoP.”

“Understanding this method, ... this way of working takes time, so far it is hard for me to find myself in this form of cooperation, it seems imprecise to me and the effects are not tangible.”

Challenges using the CoP approach

- Time, effort & capacity
- Targets & structure unclear/missing
- Commitment & facilitation
- Space for uncertainty – not too much...

Enablers & Preconditions for using the approach

- Time: to learn, apply, process
- Facilitation: structure, common goals, language, safe learning space, transparency, accessibility
- Attitude of all: listening, openness, flexibility, curiosity, engagement
- Commitment/driver: content/common interest
- Capacity & understanding to apply method
- Balance: guidance vs participant driven / CoP mindfulness vs regular project management

“Willingness to engage, commitment, openness, flexibility, curiosity to explore the potential of this method ... to actively contribute and ... listen.”

First insights & reflections

On-going MSP & capacity development: a new approach to be understood & implemented – also as training/mentoring.
Recognising & balancing approaches: open CoP vs. directed project work.
Individuals & organisations go beyond present practice: more inclusive, mutual learning as intrinsic goal vs. finding concrete solutions to known problems.
Project enables reflection & learning-preconditions: time, structure, established temporary reflection, sharing platform.
Mobilisation and keeping up the energy and managing information flows are important in voluntary process design.
Online work is more challenging – communication is key but demanding in terms of resources, energy/health, social & technical skills, time.
Criticising and taking in criticism: safe space for sharing & learning and avoiding an echo chamber.
Organising the triple loop (Nordregio, SYKE, SAB, LS-leads): requires lots of creativity, resources, time, capacity – but is also fun and rewarding.
Interaction SAB-LS: initially unclear role of Science Fellows (openness, self-finding); address interdependency and accommodate different development in CoPs.
Science-advice: initially in content, more in linking to various fields, challenging due to broad variety of needs – eMSP as “living science-advice” from a social science perspective.