

Handbook for Setting Up a Community of Practice (CoP)

for Civil Society Organisations
Supporting Refugee Protection in
Europe



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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the handbook

This handbook is a practical guide for civil society organisations (CSOs) across Europe that wish to establish a *Community of Practice* (CoP) to strengthen collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collective impact. It was developed based on the experiences of the CoP of Caring to Include¹, which was founded by a group of refugee-assisting organisations in Europe, but principles may be relevant for the broader civil society community. It is written for practitioners, programme managers, coordinators, facilitators, and staff or anyone who want to initiate or coordinate a CoP within their thematic or geographic area.

1.2 Why a Community of Practice?

Refugee protection in Europe is complex and fast-changing. Organisations often face increased pressure due to hostile political environments, intense workloads, instable organisational dynamics due to funding cuts, and high emotional burden leading to staff burnout. In this demanding context, space and time to learn is limited and good practices remain isolated. Also, gaps between policy and frontline realities exist.

Knowledge exchange helps strengthening capacities of staff and building resilient CSOs that are better able to fulfil their mission to support and protect refugees. A *Community of Practice* (CoP) is a proven method to organise this in a structural way, based on the social learning theory introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), who emphasised that learning occurs through participation in social contexts. Wenger (1998) further developed the idea, defining CoPs as groups of people who share a concern or passion and deepen their knowledge through ongoing interaction.

For CSOs assisting refugees, a CoP can:

- Create **safe learning spaces** for exchange and reflection.
- Strengthen **peer support and well-being** of staff.
- Improve **quality and consistency** of services.
- Foster **joint advocacy and knowledge production**.

Through ongoing interaction, members of a CoP share both practical insights and tacit knowledge. Exposure to diverse perspectives fosters innovation, while collective learning helps improve practices across organisations. This dynamic, reciprocal process ensures

¹ Caring to Include is a European project co-funded by Erasmus+, aimed at supporting mental well-being of staff and trauma-informed approaches of refugee-assisting organisations in Europe. See for more info: [Caring to Include](#)

that knowledge is not only exchanged, but also applied, and in this way enabling real change in the sector.

While its purpose is to exchange knowledge, a CoP often becomes much more than that: a space of solidarity where people feel connected and supported, helping them sustain hope and continue their work.

1.3 How to use this handbook

The handbook follows six phases of development:

1. **Preparation** – Defining the purpose and partners
2. **Design** – Building the structure and principles
3. **Launch** – Establishing the CoP and engaging members
4. **Facilitation** – Sustaining participation and learning
5. **Learning and growth** – Evaluating progress and ensuring long-term sustainability

Annexes include model documents from the CoP of Caring to Include. These annexes illustrate what the building blocks of a CoP can look like in practice, and entail a **Framework** (Annex 1), an **Inclusion Plan** (Annex 2) and a **Sustainability Plan** (Annex 3).

This Handbook is building on the real-life experiences of Caring to Include and aims to inspire and support the setting up of other CoPs, with the ultimate goal is to strengthen and improve structural knowledge exchange between CSOs, and to enhance their resilience in the current context of increased pressure. Readers are invited to copy and paste and use the content to their benefit.

2. Phase 1 – Preparation

2.1 Clarify purpose and added value

Clarifying the purpose and added value of a *Community of Practice* (CoP) ensures that members understand why the group exists and what they will gain from participating. It helps focus discussions, align activities with shared goals, and maintain members engagement. Clear purpose and value also guide decision-making and provide benchmarks to assess the CoP's impact.

Start by answering three essential questions:

- What common challenge or opportunity connects us?
- How can collective learning improve our work with and for refugees?
- What is the concrete value for participants?

Examples of relevant CoP themes in refugee protection are: mental health and trauma-informed care, complementary pathways, changing the narrative, strengthening refugee-led organisations, digitalisation of service delivery, shrinking civic space, integration and labour market participation.

Checklist for defining your CoP's purpose

- ☐ Clear thematic focus
- ☐ Connection to existing organisational priorities
- ☐ Defined added value for participants
- ☐ Articulated long-term vision

Tip: use a digital survey to explore priorities of your colleagues and partner organisations, for example the forms functionality in Teams

2.2 Identify core partners

Identifying core partners involves aligning the CoP's purpose with stakeholders who have expertise, interest, capacity, and complementary perspectives. The goal is to create a committed, diverse, and collaborative foundation that can drive knowledge exchange and impact.

A CoP grows from a small core group, consisting of ideally 4–7 committed organisations, who co-design and pilot the initiative.

Checklist for identifying your core partners

- ☐ Geographic diversity (different EU countries)
- ☐ Balance between large and small organisations

- ☐ Inclusion of lived experience through persons and/or refugee-led initiatives
- ☐ Complementary expertise (depending on theme)

2.3 Assess context

Analysing the context before establishing a *Community of Practice* ensures that the CoP addresses real challenges and knowledge gaps faced by its members. It helps to refine your purpose, to make use of opportunities, and avoid duplication. It is a crucial step to enhance the CoP's effectiveness, impact, and long-term sustainability.

Checklist for conducting a context scan

- ☐ Existing networks or alliances that address the topic
- ☐ Gaps in exchange and collaboration
- ☐ Available funding
- ☐ Other stakeholders that can support (institutional backing, expertise)

Tip: You can make a SWOT-analysis to explore internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. See for example [SWOT Analysis With SWOT Templates and Examples!](#)

3. Phase 2 – Design

3.1 Develop a framework

Developing a framework for a *Community of Practice* (CoP) provides clarity on the structure and values, ensuring that activities are organised and in line with key principles that all members commit to. Having a clear shared understanding helps members to engage meaningfully, supports monitoring of progress, and guides decision-making. A clear framework also strengthens the CoP's sustainability and long-term impact.

A framework consists of several components, which are connected and together form the foundation of your CoP. See Annex 1 for the example of Caring to Include.

Checklist for a framework

- ☐ Vision and goals: what the CoP aims to achieve
- ☐ Shared values, for example inclusion, solidarity, trust, and well-being
- ☐ Inclusivity and governance: how to become a member, how decisions are made, and how coordination is taking place (see 3.2 design for inclusion)
- ☐ Activities and engagement: what the members are going to do
- ☐ Communication: how members interact and spread knowledge
- ☐ Sustainability and impact: how monitoring and evaluation is taking place

Tip: Ensure a participatory process and sufficient time for reflection on a draft. The framework is the foundation of the CoP that all members have to support.

Tip: Keep governance light and participatory. A flat structure with rotating leadership encourages ownership and sustainability.

Tip: Include in the framework a reporting mechanism in case of conflict, inappropriate behaviour or misunderstanding.

3.2 Design for inclusion

Inclusion is essential for a *Community of Practice* (CoP) because it ensures diverse perspectives, equitable participation, and a sense of belonging among members. It fosters richer knowledge exchange, encourages engagement, and strengthens trust within the community. Inclusive practices also enhance the CoP's legitimacy and overall impact.

Without intentional design, CoPs can replicate the power dynamics and exclusions present in the wider system. Especially when inclusion is a key-principle in the CoP it is recommendable to create a separate inclusion plan, with detailed strategies. See Annex 2 for the example of Caring to Include.

Checklist for an inclusion plan

- ☐ Purpose and vision: what the inclusion plan aims to achieve and why
- ☐ Principles and values: refer to the framework and add specific ones related to inclusion, such as equity, representation, accessibility, and lived experience leadership
- ☐ Inclusive membership & participation: criteria and support systems for members
- ☐ Lived experience leadership: how to make sure the voices of people with lived experience are heard
- ☐ Accessible formats and tools: methods to increase accessibility, for example multilingual practices, shared folders, agenda setting, transparency and scheduling
- ☐ Governance & accountability: highlighting methods for enhancing inclusion in line with the framework
- ☐ Community norms and agreements: norms that makes sure the CoP is a safe space, and what to do in case a member is not living up to these norms
- ☐ Monitoring, evaluation & learning: indicators to track inclusion and when they are evaluated
- ☐ Recognition and celebration: how to celebrate success of the members in the CoP

Tip: Support and facilitate a Refugee Focus Group to ensure lived experience leadership. Include a budget for compensation of the experts by experience.

Tip: Assign a buddy to new members to support onboarding.

3.3 Design for sustainability

Part of the design phase is identifying how to sustain the CoP in the short and long run. For starting up it is essential to find funding (EU programmes, national grants, or private foundations) and to allocate in-kind contributions (staff time, meeting venues, online tools). In addition, it should be clarified which organisation hosts the coordination, and partnership agreements with the founding members should be formalised in a short MoU.

Civil society organisations in Europe that support refugees are struggling to survive. In this context, it is not only necessary to be creative, but also to have a plan B in case funding is not coming through. To ensure sustainability in the long run, it is recommendable to develop a sustainability plan. See Annex 3 for an example of Caring to Include.

Checklist for a sustainability plan

- ☐ Financial stability: how to ensure funding beyond the founding phase
- ☐ Operational stability: how to make sure the CoP is a dependable space
- ☐ Strategic stability: how to stay focused and relevant in a changing world
- ☐ Sustainability & inclusion: how they are linked

- Back up plan: what to do in case there is no funding
- Conclusion, monitoring and evaluation: when this plan is evaluated

Tip: pitch the CoP with internal fundraisers in member organisations and keep the CoP in mind when scoping for new funds.

Tip: celebrate results and tools and make them visible for potential donors. Cooperate with strategic European networks (such as ECRE) to increase outreach and visibility.

4. Phase 3 – Launch

4.1 Create a shared identity

Creating a shared identity for a *Community of Practice* (CoP) helps to strengthen connection and external visibility. It serves as the social glue that binds members together and enables the CoP to function effectively. Building ownership and visibility from the start are the foundation for a shared identity.

The overall purpose ideally feeds into the visuals and wording that are being used. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the support of donors that enable the foundation of the CoP, for example by using their logo.

Checklist for creating a shared identity

- ☐ Co-develop a name, tagline, and visual identity
- ☐ Launch a joint statement or event introducing the CoP's purpose
- ☐ Present at international, European or national forums (e.g. ECRE, FRA, UNHCR)
- ☐ Make space for logos of donors in your visual expressions

Tip: Include a communication budget in your project proposal for donors in order to secure resources for developing a visual identity.

4.2 Establish communication infrastructure

Effective communication tools are essential for a *Community of Practice* (CoP) because they enable members to share knowledge, experiences, and best practices efficiently, regardless of location or time zone. They foster collaboration, strengthen relationships, and ensure that insights and resources are accessible to all members, which is critical for learning, innovation, and sustaining an engaged, connected community.

Checklist for effective communication

- ☐ Shared drive or platform for documents
- ☐ Email list or online forum
- ☐ Regular online meetings (quarterly minimum)
- ☐ Website sections or existing online space for public visibility

Tip: Use the tools and online spaces of the member organisations that are already available to save costs.

Tip: Take note of national holidays and different time zones of CoP members when scheduling meetings.

4.3 Host the inaugural gathering

Hosting an inaugural gathering for a *Community of Practice* (CoP) is important because it establishes a sense of shared purpose and community from the start. It allows members to meet, build relationships, align on goals, clarify expectations, and create a foundation of trust and engagement that supports ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing.

During the inaugural meeting, member organisations agree on the first year's priorities, define working groups or thematic clusters and identify first outputs. A joint dinner is a good way to celebrate solidarity and cooperation, and for creating a strong foundation of the community.

Checklist for hosting the inaugural gathering

- ☐ Agreement on hosting member organisation, dates and location
- ☐ Agenda with space to build relationship and discussing goals, activities and outputs
- ☐ Sufficient resources to pay for travel, accommodation and joint dinners
- ☐ Integrate a field visit or training to inspire member organisations from the start

Tip: Focus on creating a safe space and connection before diving into technical topics. You can use the knowledge of participants to jointly identify what a safe space means to them.

5. Phase 4 – Facilitation and community building

5.1 Maintain engagement

Maintaining engagement of member organisations in a *Community of Practice* (CoP) is important because active participation ensures the community remains vibrant, collaborative, and impactful. Engagement allows members to share knowledge, learn from each other, and apply best practices, which strengthen both individual organisations and the CoP as a whole.

To ensure membership engagement, facilitation and guarding the implementation of agreed roles and activities are keys. Predictability and consistency are important, so members know what to expect. This enables members to block time for participation in their busy agendas.

Checklist for maintaining engagement

- ☐ Regular meetings with added value for the members are scheduled
- ☐ Active working groups are functioning with involvement of all members
- ☐ Outputs and updates, including minutes, are documented and circulated to keep all members informed
- ☐ Ownership is enhanced by joint planning and co-creation of outputs

Tip: Give all members a leading role in thematic subgroups and rotate the chairing/ hosting of the main meetings.

Tip: Also have individual check-ins with members apart from the regular meetings. This ensures that people can speak freely and helps to connect to needs.

5.2 Foster knowledge exchange

Fostering knowledge exchange is a crucial, because the core purpose of a CoP is to enable learning, collaboration, and the sharing of expertise among its members. Without active knowledge exchange, the community loses its value as a platform for innovation, problem-solving, and professional growth.

Members gains are determined by the quality of the knowledge shared. Such Knowledge may originate with participating members, be produced through the CoP's research activities, or be contributed by external experts.

Checklist for fostering knowledge exchange

- ☐ Allocate time and space to do research to collect best practices and case studies
- ☐ Facilitate the exchange of training materials or tools
- ☐ Co-create resources such as guidelines or advocacy briefs
- ☐ Invite guest speakers or external experts

Tip: Incorporate resources for a (desk and/or field) research in a project proposal for funding a CoP. Based on the research needs and best practices can be identified.

5.3 Promote peer support

Peer support is important: It gives staff and organisations a supportive space to share experiences, challenges, and solutions. As staff of refugee assisting organisations often face emotional exhaustion, acknowledging this and incorporating peer support mechanisms are crucial for a well-functioning CoP and learning practical strategies from peers who face similar frontline realities.

Time and space to actively participate in a CoP may be limited due to the high-pressure people face in their work and limited resources. Based on the experience of Caring to Include, it can be recommended to be supportive rather than dismissive when such a thing happens. The CoP should be a pleasant and encouraging space.

Checklist for incorporating peer support

- ☐ Support each other when members are not able to deliver due to high pressure
- ☐ Facilitate reflective sessions and feedback
- ☐ Be open about well-being and exchange on self-care and burnout prevention
- ☐ Keep space for building capacities that help to deal with frontline realities

Tip: Keep space for a check-in at the start of meetings. Sharing the burden of working under pressure and looking for ways to keep hope contribute to feeling connected.

6. Phase 5 – Learning and growth

6.1 Monitoring and evaluating impact

If the CoP is aligned with the member organisations' impact goals, it should make a difference beyond internal discussions within the group. Demonstrating tangible results – such as improved practices, strengthened capacities of staff or policy influence – justifies the time and resources invested. It also helps to guide strategic decisions and adapting the priorities to make a difference in the future.

For monitoring and evaluation, it is important to know what success looks like. Depending on the rhythm of the CoP, reviews and learning loops can be planned to collectively reflect on progress made. This includes a discussion on which methods be used by the members to measure progress, for example surveys or interviews. Storytelling can be a strong instrument to show how the CoP has an impact on the real world.

Checklist for monitoring and evaluating impact

- ☐ Indicators for measuring impact on different levels (individual, organisational and if possible societal) are defined
- ☐ Methods for measuring progress are identified and implemented (for example focus groups, interviews, surveys)
- ☐ Annual review meeting to discuss outcomes and future priorities is planned
- ☐ Story-based evidence is collected and supports communication on impact

Tip: Use the impact tool developed by Erasmus+ to support the design, monitoring and adjustment of the priorities of your CoP. See [Impacttool Partnerships | Erasmus+](#).

6.2 Evaluation of CoP functioning

Evaluating the functioning of a CoP is crucial because it helps you understand whether the community is achieving its goals and remaining sustainable. Specifically, it helps to assess the value it has to the members and to identify barriers for engagement or learning. Results of this evaluation will guide adjustments to the structure, facilitation and activities of the CoP.

Dimensions of an evaluation of the functioning of the CoP are for example: a review of structure and process, assessment of engagement and inclusion and monitoring output and relevance. Findings can be used to adapt the way of working and if needed, adjusting the framework document, and inclusion and sustainability plan.

Checklist for an evaluation of a CoP

- ☐ Indicators for assessing structure and process are defined, for example: regularity of meetings, clarity of purpose, roles, and responsibilities, accessibility of documents,

availability and quality of facilitation, decision making in line with agreed method.

- ☐ Indicators for assessing participation and engagement and inclusion are defined, for example: level of participation in meetings and creating deliverables, inclusion of lived experience, quality of interaction in line with agreed values and principles.

- ☐ Indicators for assessing output and relevance are defined, for example: number and quality of outputs (research, tools, trainings), overall satisfaction with CoP activities, perceived relevance to daily work, motivation to continue participation.

- ☐ Method for gathering feedback is agreed (for example: member feedback survey, collective discussion)

- ☐ Suggestions for improvement feed into adjusting policies and practices

Tip: You can keep evaluation light and combine monitoring impact and the CoP functioning in one annual review meeting with the members.

6.3 Expanding membership and inclusion

Once your CoP is up and running and the founding members feel that their community could benefit more people and organisations, expanding membership is a next step. This is an opportunity to include underrepresented groups, professions or geographical areas that could enrich the CoP.

Expanding membership means that it should be clear how new members can join and that onboarding and support mechanisms should be in place. It is important to balance growth with coherence and to ensure that new members are committed to the CoP's purpose and values.

Checklist for expanding membership and inclusion

- ☐ Agreement on readiness and decision-making method for expanding membership among existing members

- ☐ Identification of and targeted outreach to potential members that could enrich the CoP

- ☐ Onboarding process in place (for example buddy system, starter kit)

- ☐ Memorandum of Understanding for new members ready to sign

Tip: Enhance inclusion by refraining from membership fees, acknowledging that underrepresented groups and many NGOs often have limited resources.

6.4 Increased visibility and funding

Building on the success stories, the CoP can expand visibility and external engagement of for example new donors and partners. In this way, innovation and sustainability are nurtured. Especially in the current climate with NGOs under pressure and high

competition for funding this is an important step to guarantee continuity and enable growth.

Strategic communication and resource diversification go hand in hand and should be based on the priorities of the members. Therefore, it is recommended to connect planning for joint fundraising to the findings of the monitoring and evaluation process. Visibility can be increased by cooperating with existing platforms or networks.

Checklist for increased visibility and funding

- ☐ Strategic communication based on success stories part of activities of the CoP
- ☐ Identification of main needs and innovative ideas based on monitoring and evaluation
- ☐ Mapping of and engagement with potential donors
- ☐ Cooperation with other relevant platforms or networks

Tip: Celebrate achievements. This is not only beneficial for strategic communication, but also for maintaining motivation and community spirit.

7. Conclusion and invitation

Based on the experience of Caring to Include, we can share that a *Community of Practice* (CoP) is not just a network.

- It is a collective of people who believe that learning together can make a difference. A CoP holds the **power to inspire change** in your domain. When people come together around a shared purpose, ideas take shape, courage grows, and transformation becomes possible.
- A CoP is a **space for innovation** where creativity is sparked through collaboration and challenges are met with collective wisdom. Innovation does not always mean grand breakthroughs. Sometimes it is the small shifts in practice, the shared insights, or the new connections made that quietly change the landscape of your field.
- Last but not least, in times of uncertainty and pressure, a CoP can become an **instrument of solidarity**. It can be a place where people stand together, support one another, and remind each other that they are not alone. Through shared reflection and mutual care, members can find strength, hope, and purpose to continue their important work.

The members of the **Caring to Include** *Community of Practice* invite you to **use this Handbook**, adapt it to your own context, and **share your experience with us**. Each CoP adds a new voice to a growing movement of collaboration and compassion. Together, we can strengthen our resilience and stand strong to protect our civic space and the rights of refugees.

Contact

Dutch Council for Refugees (coordinator Caring to Include): ip@dcfr.nl

Annex 1 Framework example Caring to Include

This framework describes the founding principles of our Community of Practice (CoP) that aims to promote mental well-being and trauma-informed approaches of refugee organisations in Europe. It was created as a result of the project “Caring to Include”, which is a three-year project financed by Erasmus+. This initiative is implemented by seven refugee-assisting organisations from the Netherlands, Hungary, Estonia, Malta, Cyprus, Greece, and Croatia.¹

The founding organisations aim to provide a space for shared knowledge, experience exchange, and practical support, ultimately for the broader community of civil society organisations that support the protection of refugees² in Europe, beyond the timeframe of the project. This initiative is a response to the increasing pressure from hostile environments that both refugees and refugee-assisting organisations face across Europe, which is also affecting mental well-being of both refugees and workers supporting them.

This framework functions as a charter, which is a guiding document that lays out the purpose, structure, and ways of working of the CoP.

1. Vision and Goals

Our vision is that trauma-informed support to refugees and mental health of staff and volunteers working for refugee-assisting organisations³ are the foundation for solidarity with refugees in Europe. We define a trauma-informed approach as an approach that is grounded in and directed by a complete understanding of how trauma exposure affects the person’s neurological, biological, psychological and social development. A programme, an organisation, or a system that is trauma-informed realises the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognises the signs and symptoms of trauma in their beneficiaries and staff, and others involved; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatisation.⁴ Key-principles of trauma-informed practice in organisations are safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment.⁵

Therefore, our Community of Practice (CoP) aims to develop practical skills, knowledge and tools to contribute to the realisation of the following goals:

- a) Refugee organisations and their leadership acknowledge the challenges and importance of supporting well-being of staff and volunteers and a trauma-

informed approach of refugees in their organisational strategy and communication;

- b) Refugee organisations and their leadership empower staff to work in ways that embody the principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment by integrating these principles into relevant policies (including a staff well-being policy) and practices (including service delivery for refugees);
- c) Refugee organisations share power with and engage refugees, by having clear processes in place for influencing change on all levels: from the strategic and policy level to the project level. Especially for mental health projects engagement of cultural mediators is essential to ensure that support is tailored to the needs and culture of the people they serve;
- d) Refugee organisations identify and offer tailored support to persons with specific mental health needs, both internally for staff members as well as in their work in support of refugees, thereby addressing vulnerabilities and strengthening resilience based on the diverse backgrounds and experiences persons have;
- e) Refugee organisations address the root causes of the pressure on mental well-being of refugees and staff and volunteers of refugee organisations by advocating for providing basic needs and safety of refugees in Europe, and the need of resilient and well-funded civil society organisations in support of that.

By exchanging knowledge and developing tools that support these goals, we strengthen each other, and we become stronger catalysts of change. Together, we create a foundation for resilient refugee organisations and a better future for refugees in Europe.

2. Shared Values

In our Community of Practice (CoP) we embrace the following values:

- a) **Respect for culture and diversity:** Respecting diversity and cultural sensitivity ensure that our Community of Practice is inclusive and responsive to real needs. A shared respect for diversity also celebrates the wisdom of the variety of participants involved, creating a strong collaboration and solidarity across borders and between cultures.
- b) **Trust and safety:** We encourage open sharing without judgement, so all participants can share insights and contribute to the collective growth of the group. A supportive environment where everyone, regardless of experience or background, feels they belong strengthens a sense of community, and engagement and contribution for the long term.
- c) **Empowerment and collaboration:** Collaboration is the engine that drives knowledge-sharing and co-creation. Our Community of Practice is a supportive

network where participants can learn from each other and share best practices, bringing diverse perspectives, leading to innovative solutions.

- d) **Well-being and selfcare:** In our Community of Practice we put well-being and selfcare at the core. We keep workloads within limits, celebrate achievements, acknowledge stress, and support each other during tough times. We openly talk about challenges and coping strategies, and build reflective space in our meetings.

3. Activities and Engagement

Developing and sharing of knowledge in our Community of Practice (CoP) takes place in the following ways:

- a) **CoP meetings:** We organise workshops, webinars, or meetings where participants explore trends and specific topics in the field of trauma-informed approaches and staff well-being. Experts are invited to share their knowledge, and we build on the success of best practices. CoP meetings may also address the development of the community itself. These sessions take place each quarter, and can take place online or in-person, including site-visits whenever possible.
- b) **Refugee Focus Group meetings:** We organise regular sessions with refugee focus group members from each participating country, to discuss priorities, needs and approaches. In this way, we ensure our activities are inclusive, culturally sensitive and responsive to needs of refugees. These sessions take place each quarter, ideally before the CoP meetings.
- c) **Research:** We assess needs, map best practices and gather practical examples that give insight into what works and what doesn't in the field of mental well-being for refugees and staff. Research results feed into the discussions during CoP meetings, development of toolkits and training courses.
- d) **Development of tools:** We develop practical tools, such as guidelines, training formats, checklists and operating procedures. The tools build on existing best practices and address the most urgent gaps and needs. To identify these, a needs assessment and mapping of best practices took place by the founding organisations at the start. Other tools may be developed based on new demands and changing contexts and priorities.
- e) **Training and skills development:** Training on topics that contribute to a trauma-informed approach and mental well-being provide participants with the right tools and knowledge to work effectively. These training sessions are part of the pilot phase of the Community of Practice and further developed based on needs and demands. Training sessions can be organised on an international or national level. Participants are selected by the participating organisations.

Trainers are qualified to facilitate a training course by profession or because they have followed a training of trainers course.

- f) **Multiplier events:** To disseminate our knowledge and tools we organise events, where we invite refugees, stakeholders from (European) governmental bodies, and other (semi)-governmental organisations working for the protection of rights of refugees. These events provide a platform for presenting outcomes to a diverse and influential audience. Events like this take place at least once every three years and more often if capacity allows.
- g) **Buddy system:** To enhance solidarity, connection, continuity, and mutual learning we pair newcomers with experienced members. Twinning promotes onboarding, facilitates an exchange of experiences and insights and strengthens trust and supportive interaction in the Community of Practice.

4. Communication Tools and Platform

To spread our knowledge and tools, and to facilitate the debate in our Community of Practice (CoP) use the following communication channels and platforms:

- a) **Digital platform and newsletter of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE):** Through the platform hosted on the website of ECRE, and the ECRE newsletter we reach out to 128 organisations in 40 countries. Research results, the main building blocks of the CoP, tools and articles are published on the platform. Links to the platform are spread through the ECRE newsletter;
- b) **Websites, newsletters and social media of participating and associated organisations:** The main tools, stories and intellectual outcomes of the Community of Practice are shared through the channels of the participating organisations;
- c) **Websites donors:** We present our Community of Practice on the websites of our donor(s). Content is managed by the lead applicant;
- d) **General communication in the Community of Practice:** The participating organisations share information and updates on initiatives, needs and resources in their sessions. Meetings can take place online (Zoom, Teams) or in person. Meetings take place on a quarterly base. Mail and phone are used to contact each other and to share documents;
- e) **The archive** of the CoP is stored in the shared SharePoint folder of the Dutch Council for Refugees, building on their lead role in the Caring to Include project.

Communication between participating organisations is English. It is our ambition to translate essential knowledge and tools in multiple languages to enlarge accessibility.

5. Inclusivity and Governance

The chosen governance model of our Community of Practice (CoP) is flat with some delegated responsibilities to each of the participating organisations. Key elements of our governance model are:

- a) **Core Group:** Consisting of one representative of each participating organisation and two representatives of the Refugee Focus Group (one fixed, one rotating). The Core Group aims to exchange knowledge and best practices and receive expert inputs. The Core Groups also discusses and decides upon the development of the CoP itself, for example on strategic priorities and new participating organisations. This group meets every quarter.
- b) **Refugee Focus Group:** Consisting of two representatives from each participating country to give input on the strategic course of the CoP and to contribute with knowledge and lived-experience to the development of content, ensuring that everything we do is responding to real demands and is culturally sensitive. This group meets every quarter, and two representatives join the meetings of the Core Group.
- c) **Participating Organisations:** all organisations that agree to endorse the vision and values as described in this framework, and that take active steps towards the goals, and that participate actively in meetings or trainings by sharing knowledge and contributing to content or projects. Organisations can become a participant by sending an expression of interest to the Core Group or by joining activities on invitation. Decisions on who can participate are taken by the Core Group.

Decision-making takes place based on consensus. This reflects our values of creating a community based on trust and diversity, ensuring that everyone has a voice and that decisions reflect collective wisdom.

In the event of a conflict that cannot be solved in a regular CoP meeting, we create a space for a restorative conversation, where the participating organisations can express harm, listen and rebuild trust. Conflicting parties may express the need for a neutral, external facilitator. Costs for an external facilitator are split between all participating organisations.

Meetings are chaired by rotation. The chairing organisation leads in setting the agenda, which is based on the demands of the participating organisations. The organisation that chairs the meeting is responsible for making meeting notes reflecting a summary of the discussions, including action points and decisions. These are shared, discussed and adopted in the next meeting to ensure transparency and accountability.

Criteria for who can participate in the CoP, and strategies for inclusion and engagement will be further developed in a separate inclusion plan.

6. Sustainability and impact

The impact depends on the political and fundraising context and capacities of participating organisations. We track our sustainability and impact by:

- a) The adoption of action plans for each participating organisation, setting out goals and intervention strategies to strengthen mental well-being and a trauma-informed approach in their organisation;
- b) Annual evaluation of accomplishments and needs of participating organisations in the Core Group;
- c) Evaluation of our knowledge sharing and training sessions with the participants of these sessions. In all our sessions we reserve time to reflect, share success stories, and express what is needed for further personal and professional growth.
- d) The level of outreach and engagement beyond the participating organisations, indicated by the amount of users of our tools, participation in our trainings and events and visitors of our online platform.

To create a long lasting impact and mobilise resources, fundraising is part of the Community of Practice. Strategies will be developed in a separate sustainability plan that can be updated and reviewed as part of the annual evaluation.

Annex 2 Inclusion Plan example Caring to Include

Refugees across Europe face unique and often complex mental health challenges due to displacement, trauma, uncertainty, and structural barriers in host societies. Pressure on staff members and volunteers of refugee assisting organisations is increasing due to hostile environments, intense workloads and instability caused by funding cuts.

Many organisations—ranging from large NGOs to refugee led groups— are working to support refugees, often under high pressure and with limited resources. Overall, there is a lack of capacity and tools to strengthen mental health and protect staff from vicarious and secondary traumatisation. This Community of Practice (CoP) aims to bring these actors together to share knowledge, strengthen collaboration, and promote inclusive, culturally responsive mental health practices.

However, inclusion is not automatic. Without intentional design, CoPs can replicate the power dynamics and exclusions present in the wider system. This inclusion plan seeks to prevent that and to foster a truly diverse, equitable, and participatory space.

1. Purpose and vision

The purpose of this plan is to guide the development and operations of the CoP in a way that ensures inclusive participation, especially for underrepresented groups and individuals including especially people with lived experience as a refugee and refugee led organisations.

We envision a collaborative European platform where all members—regardless of geography, language, size of organisation, or lived experience—feel equally welcome, heard, and empowered to shape the agenda on mental health in the sector that is supporting refugees in Europe.

2. Principles and values

As laid out in the Framework document the founding principles of our Community of Practice (CoP) are:

- **Respect for culture and diversity:** Respecting diversity and cultural sensitivity ensure that our Community of Practice is inclusive and responsive to real needs. A shared respect for diversity also celebrates the wisdom of the variety of participants involved, creating a strong collaboration and solidarity across borders and between cultures.
- **Trust and safety:** We encourage open sharing without judgement, so all participants can share insights and contribute to the collective growth of the group. A supportive environment where everyone, regardless of experience

or background, feels they belong strengthens a sense of community, and engagement and contribution for the long term.

- **Empowerment and collaboration:** Collaboration is the engine that drives knowledge-sharing and co-creation. Our Community of Practice is a supportive network where participants can learn from each other and share best practices, bringing diverse perspectives, leading to innovative solutions.
- **Well-being and selfcare:** In our Community of Practice, we put well-being and selfcare at the core. We keep workloads within limits, celebrate achievements, acknowledge stress, and support each other during tough times. We openly talk about challenges and coping strategies and build reflective space in our meetings.

To strengthen inclusion, we specifically put the following values into practice:

- **Equity:** We recognise and address systemic barriers to participation.
- **Representation:** We ensure decision-making involves a broad cross-section of members.
- **Accessibility:** We provide information and access in multiple languages and formats.
- **Cultural humility:** We respect different cultural understandings of mental health.
- **Lived experience leadership:** We center the voices of people with refugee backgrounds.
- **Rotating leadership:** each participant will, in rotation, be responsible for the meetings.

3. Inclusive membership & participation

The Community of Practice was founded by seven partner organisations and with the active participation of two associated organisations. The organisations come from different countries in Europe and vary in size (from 8 to more than 10.000 workers). They are all members of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). After creating a solid foundation of the CoP membership will be opened up to other organisations.

Eligibility criteria for Participating Organisations are:

- You are a civil society or community based organisation that supports refugees.
- You subscribe to the principles and values of the CoP.
- You have the ambition to strengthen the mental health of staff and a trauma-informed approach.

- You have the capacity to participate in international meetings and knowledge exchanges with English as the main language.
- You bring resources to the CoP and/or are ready to participate in calls for proposals to find funding for the CoP.
- You are recommended and supported by at least one of the members of the Core Group.
- You are willing to sign a membership agreement.

Expressions of interest can be sent to the Core Group. The Core Group will decide based on the eligibility criteria as well as absorption capacity and focus of the CoP. For applications from a country with current membership, the voice of the existing member is decisive.

Recruitment will take place through public calls to join, using the CoP platform on the ECRE website and newsletter, as well as personal contacts to encourage participation from underrepresented countries and refugee-led organisations. The CoP members will put inclusion and membership on the agenda at least once a year to assess if additional action is desirable.

New members will be assigned a buddy from the existing membership to support onboarding. The buddy will be responsible for initiating an onboarding meeting and sharing materials. New members will receive a welcome pack with the membership agreement, framework document, the inclusion plan, the sustainability plan, the handbook, the main outputs of the CoP as well as a calendar with upcoming meetings and events.

4. Lived experience leadership

In our CoP we make sure the voices of people with lived experience as refugees are heard. We do this in two phases: by having a Refugee Focus Group and by inviting Refugee Led Organisations to join.

Refugee Focus Group

In the first phase of the project period of Caring to Include we have a Refugee Focus Group (RFG) as a central element in the governance of our CoP. Before the CoP meeting, inputs are prepared in a safe space. Two representatives are invited to each CoP meeting (one fixed, one on a rotational basis). The RFG is coordinated by an employee of one of the Core Group members, who preferably also has lived experience as a refugee.

Each Core Group member can invite two members from their country to the RFG. Members of the RFG do not represent an organisation, but are invited as individuals based on their expertise. Members of the RFG receive a modest financial contribution for their voluntary participation.

Eligibility criteria are:

- Lived experience as a refugee
- Settled down in the country of the Core Group member that invites
- Interest and capacity to participate in CoP meetings with English as the main language.

Recruitment and support of members of the RFG is the responsibility of the members of the Core Group. We make an effort to guide, support, ensure and protect people feel welcome and empowered in their role as experts based on their experience.

Refugee Led Organisations

In the second phase, when we have the capacity to expand the membership of the CoP we actively invite Refugee Led Organisations to join. Once we have a balanced membership we will phase out the Refugee Focus Group.

Each Core Group member can invite one Refugee Led Organisation. Eligibility criteria are the same as for Participating Organisations, and in addition:

- **Leadership by refugees:** Refugees (or other forcibly displaced people such as asylum-seekers, stateless people, returnees) hold a majority of leadership positions (board and management).
- **Community accountability:** the organisation is accountable to the refugee community it represents.

5. Accessible formats and tools

The ambition of the CoP is to have multilingual practices to increase accessibility. Though the meetings of the CoP will be held in English, the tools and knowledge that are developed will be translated in the national languages of the members by the members. For public meetings we consider the use of interpreters, depending on the target audience.

We use accessible technology, such as Teams or Zoom. Participating organisations have access to a shared folder.

The agenda of our meetings is co-designed and shared in advance.

We always make minutes of meetings that will be shared with the CoP members, so everybody is informed and up to date at all times. Minutes will be adopted at the next meeting to ensure transparency, accountability, and reflection of all perspectives.

We ensure inclusive scheduling of meetings by taking into account various time zones and national and religious holidays.

6. Governance & accountability

In the Framework document, the chosen governance model is described. Key elements are the Core Group, the Refugee Focus Group and Participating Organisations. To enhance inclusion and promote lived experience leadership we:

- Support and facilitate quarterly meetings of the Refugee Focus Group in the first phase
- Invite two representatives of the Refugee Focus Group to each Core Group meeting
- Ensure a geographically and size balanced composition of the Core Group, with active participation of Refugee Led Organisations in the second phase
- Aim for gender balance in all our meetings
- Rotate chairing, setting the agenda and making meeting notes
- Provide support from a buddy to help people to navigate their role and responsibilities within the CoP
- Evaluate inclusion mechanisms annually

In the Framework document it says that “decision-making takes place based on consensus. This reflects our values of creating a community based on trust and diversity, ensuring that everyone has a voice and that decisions reflect collective wisdom.”

7. Community norms and agreements

All members commit to:

- Using inclusive and non-stigmatising language
- Respecting confidentiality and psychological safety
- Being mindful of power dynamics and cultural sensitivities
- Upholding anti-racism, anti-xenophobia, and gender equity principles
- Being mild on incapability to participate due to work pressure

We discussed these norms and paid attention to creating a safe space at the beginning of the project. New members will be informed and will sign up to these norms in the membership agreement. If needed, we will organise a training.

In case we witness a member that is not living up to these norms, we do not judge immediately, but we speak up and enter into a conversation. We work based on trust and the idea that we are ready and able to learn and improve, knowing that it is not always known which language or behavior is harmful.

In case disrespectful language or behavior continues, a member can put the issue on the agenda of the Core Group. In the event of a conflict that cannot be solved in a regular meeting, we create a space for a restorative conversation, where the participating

organisations can express harm, listen and rebuild trust, as described in the Framework document.

In case it is not possible to speak out for whatever reason, we invite people to share concerns using the contact point for complaints of the Participating Organisations. (DCR: klachten@vluchtelingenwerk.nl)

8. Monitoring, evaluation & learning

We evaluate this inclusion plan on an annual basis, as part of the annual evaluation as described in the Framework document. Indicators to track inclusion are:

- Number of meetings of the Refugee Focus Group
- Participation of the Refugee Focus Group representatives in the Core Group (first phase)
- Participation of Refugee Led Organisations in the Core Group (second phase)
- Geographical and size balance in Participating Organisations
- Gender balance in the Core Group
- Implementation of rotational schedule for chairing the meetings
- Satisfaction scores from evaluation form
- Language diversity in tools and communication

9. Recognition and celebration

Celebrating successes and putting members in the spotlight is part of recognising the diversity and richness of our community. Therefore we:

- Highlight best practices of our members in our reports and meetings
- Amplify refugee voices within our organisations and in our CoP, including by having a RFG profile page
- Close our meetings by thanking all participants for dedicating their time to the CoP
- Combine work with pleasure when we meet physically, celebrating the human dimension of solidarity
- Communicate our successes and milestones externally with pride, showing that change is possible by setting an example.

Annex 3 Sustainability Plan example

Caring to Include

Refugees across Europe face unique and often complex mental health challenges due to displacement, trauma, uncertainty, and structural barriers in host societies. Pressure on staff members and volunteers of refugee assisting organisations is increasing due to hostile environments, intense workloads and instability caused by funding cuts.

Many organisations, ranging from large NGOs to grassroots refugee led groups, are working to support refugees, often under high pressure and with limited resources. This Community of Practice (CoP) aims to bring these actors together to share knowledge, strengthen collaboration, and promote inclusive, culturally responsive mental health practices.

Sustainability of the CoP participation and focus on the topic within each participating organisation is not guaranteed automatically. Without an effort to sustain activities, cooperation and exchange will be temporary, risking the loss of valuable networks and knowledge. This sustainability plan seeks to maintain the CoP's financial, operational, and strategic viability long-term, beyond the initial funding phase.

A. Financial sustainability

Financial stability is important for our CoP because it provides the foundation for continuity, growth, and meaningful impact. The most serious risk of financial instability is the disruption of continuity and the gradual loss of the collective knowledge the CoP was built to nurture.

Our CoP thrives on regular interaction, trust-building, and the development of shared knowledge. Financial stability ensures that the essential functions of the community like facilitation, communication, content development, and coordination are reliably maintained, rather than depending on volunteers who may eventually burn out or disengage.

Financial sustainability also allows the CoP to plan strategically and to support its members. With stable funding, our community can set long-term goals, invest in high-quality tools or services (like translation, attractive communication, or expert trainers), and respond quickly to emerging needs or opportunities.

To enhance financial stability, we take the following measures:

- We use the last year of the initial funding phase, 2027, to find follow up funding for continuing the functioning of coordination and quarterly exchanges;

- We budget and collect in-kind contributions to work on mental health and international knowledge exchange (staff time, venue, tools) in each participating organisation and include this into the partnership agreement for new members;
- We pitch our CoP with internal fundraisers in each participating organisation and keep our CoP in mind when scoping for new funds;
- We discuss fundraising opportunities and sustainability on an annual base in the CoP, based on a mapping of potential funding;
- We engage with potential funders by inviting them to our public events and give them a role in the programme;
- We celebrate our results and tools and make them visible for potential donors through the participating organisations and the CoP platform on the ECRE website.

We deliberately choose not to introduce membership fees, because this would create a barrier for participation for many organisations in our line of work. Following our inclusion plan we champion equity and representation as leading values.

Financial stability isn't just about money. It's about ensuring the CoP can stay true to its purpose, maintain trust, and continue delivering value over time. It turns a promising initiative into a lasting, resilient force for change.

B. Operational sustainability

Operational stability is important for our CoP because it creates the structure, reliability, and trust that allow the community to function, evolve, and truly serve its members over time.

The participating organisations are all refugee-assisting organisations that operate in a hostile environment, with staff that is often dealing with trauma, burnout, limited resources, and rapidly changing conditions and high turnover. In this context, the CoP itself must feel like a steady anchor and a dependable space where people can learn, reflect, and connect without having to worry that it might suddenly disappear.

Operational stability provides that anchor. It ensures there's consistent leadership, clear processes, reliable communication, and continuity in the relationships and projects that define the community.

To enhance operational sustainability we take the following measures:

- We have clearly defined processes and principles, which are described in the Framework document and Inclusion plan;

- We have a flat governance structure, rotating chairs and decentralised leadership across working groups and we support each other when necessary to keep the CoP functioning;
- We are dedicated to organise regular, at least quarterly, safe spaces for reflection, knowledge sharing, empowerment and personal growth;
- We share our knowledge within our countries and organisations by organising at least one training a year by each participating organisation on the national level;
- We are open about the challenges we face in fulfilling our personal tasks in the CoP and mobilise solidarity and peer-support when needed;
- We have a shared folder for all relevant documents and outputs of the CoP;
- We plan our meetings on moments that suit the majority of members and in a timely manner so everybody knows what to expect.

Operational stability is what makes our CoP a resilient platform capable of holding space for solidarity, adapting to change, and making a lasting difference in the mental health of refugees and those supporting refugees.

C. Strategic sustainability

Strategic stability ensures that our CoP is not just active, but also intentional working toward clear, long-term goals rather than reacting only to short-term needs or external pressures.

This clarity allows participating organisations to stay focused and aligned, fostering trust and a sense of direction across changing circumstances. It creates a space where people know their efforts matter and are part of something meaningful.

Strategic stability sends the signal that this is a community that knows where it's going. It will enhance external credibility. Funders, partners, and stakeholders are far more likely to engage with and support a CoP that demonstrates a clear vision, a track record of reliable action, and a thoughtful approach to long-term impact.

To enhance strategic sustainability we take the following measures:

- We defined our mission and goals in the Framework document. Priorities and activities will be annually reviewed to ensure they are aligned with this;
- New members will sign up to a partnership agreement that states these mission and goals and dedication to sustainability of the CoP;
- We have rotating leadership roles to ensure shared ownership of the implementation of the strategic course;
- We link our CoP to ECRE and other existing and established European and national initiatives in the field of supporting refugees and/ or mental health;
- We ensure participation organisations see tangible value from participating: access to tools, peer support, research and joint advocacy;

- We facilitate regular communication channels in the form of at least quarterly online meetings to maintain engagement with strategic priorities;
- We track and share impact stories or outcomes that demonstrate the CoP's contribution to our mission and goals;
- We promote the production of joint knowledge outputs, such as toolkits, guidelines, or policy briefs, enhancing the CoP's visibility and credibility.

In short, strategic stability doesn't mean rigidity. It means holding steady to a shared purpose, so that learning, innovation, and collaboration can flourish over time. For our Community of Practice that is committed to real-world change, it is not a luxury, it is essential.

Sustainability and inclusion

For our CoP sustainability and inclusion are inseparable and mutually reinforcing goals. Therefore, this sustainability plan is linked to the inclusion plan, which is one of the other building blocks of this CoP.

Inclusion ensures that the CoP reflects the diverse realities, needs, and strengths of those working in and served by the refugee assisting organisations that are part of this CoP. An inclusive CoP is more than just diverse; it actively creates space for underrepresented voices and in particular individuals with lived refugee experience.

Sustainability, in turn, provides the stable foundation necessary for inclusion to be meaningful and lasting. With stable coordination, predictable resources, and long-term partnerships our inclusive practices will be deepened.

Back up plan: CoP light

In this document we presented our ambition. At the same time, we have to acknowledge the context we are working in, which is a reality of shrinking civic space, funding cuts and increased pressure on our organisations. Therefore, we also have a back-up plan, in case no funding will be allocated at the end of the Erasmus+ project that enabled us to found the CoP. In that case, we will continue to work in the format of a "CoP light", based on the following measures

1. Financial measures

- No membership fees to ensure inclusivity.
- Rely on in-kind contributions (staff time, venues, tools) from participating organisations.
- Integrate CoP activities into existing organisational programmes where possible.

2. Operational measures

- Maintain flat governance and rotating leadership roles to distribute workload.
- Continue quarterly online exchanges using free digital tools.
- Share knowledge outputs through open-access platforms (shared folder if ECRE website is no longer financially feasible).
- Each organisation delivers at least one national-level training per year.

3. Strategic measures

- Anchor activities in the agreed mission and goals from the Framework document.
- Keep alignment with ECRE and other European/national initiatives for visibility and relevance.
- Produce lightweight joint outputs (e.g., short guidelines, case studies) to keep momentum.
- Document and share impact stories to sustain motivation and credibility.

4. Inclusion

- Prioritise participation of refugee-led and grassroots groups.
- Ensure space for lived-experience voices through facilitation and leadership opportunities.

5. Monitoring

- Conduct annual self-evaluation to adjust activities to members' needs and capacities.

Conclusion, monitoring and evaluation

A sustainable Community of Practice is not just financially supported. It is owned by the participating organisations, resilient in its operations, and recognised as a key actor in shaping resilient refugee support in Europe.

This plan provides the foundation for such a CoP to grow in legitimacy, capacity, and reach, enabling frontline organisations to support each other and amplify their collective voice.

To adapt to changing circumstances, while staying anchored to the mission and goals of our CoP we will evaluate the functioning of our CoP annually. In case of lack of funding we will continue our operations in a "CoP light".

In this way we assess relevance, member needs, and ensure our activities are serving our mission. Together, we strengthen trauma-informed support to refugees and mental health of staff and volunteers working for refugee organisations.