

Communities as Policy Instruments

An alternative to regulation or expenditure programmes

2025

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Our future depends on resilient institutions able to act efficaciously where it matters. Beyond slow and costly regulation, we need smarter ways to act and be prepared.
- ▶ Communities as policy instruments leverage the EC's convening power to close the implementation gap through stakeholder-driven solutions. By convening people with shared purpose, communities enable structured dialogues and peer learning that help translate policy into practice and provide essential reality checks.

Policymaking today is shaped by a paradox: while the challenges we face are increasingly interconnected and shared across borders and sectors, the systems we use to address them remain fragmented, slow, and poorly connected to practice [50, 53, 59].

Knowledge is scattered across silos and institutions, making it hard to translate into coordinated policy action. Engagement with stakeholders is often reduced to one-off consultations, without continuity, trust-building, or space for learning. Ownership is diluted across portfolios and governance levels, making collaboration difficult. And policymaking tools themselves remain shaped by linear, resource-intensive processes that are ill-suited for a context that requires adaptation and iteration [1, 33, 52].

Too often, public institutions find themselves caught between the ambition to act and the inability to follow through. The result is not just inefficiency, but a persistent gap in the capacity to implement policies, to learn from those affected by them, and to scale what works or to unlearn what doesn't. Policy legitimacy suffers, preparedness lags, and opportunities for meaningful societal alignment are missed [1, 2, 3, 12, 13].

'The organisations that will truly excel in the future are those that harness the commitment and capacity to learn at every level.'

Peter Senge [53]

If we are serious about policymaking that is legitimate, responsive, and effective, we must rethink how we connect knowledge, actors, and action. That means embracing structures that are not merely reactive or representational, but participatory, ongoing, and adaptable [4, 8, 10, 19, 24].

This is where communities come in. As alternative policy instruments to regulation or expenditure programmes, they can serve as participatory infrastructures in response to this implementation gap. Instead of diluting policy authority, they enhance it by enabling coordination and collective intelligence. When communities are resourced and recognised, they help policymakers listen, learn, and act with the people they serve and make implementation simpler.

1. Communities – what they are and what they aren't

Communities are far from a new invention - they lie at the core of the European project. Over the years, however, bureaucratic procedure and technocratic imperatives have too often taken precedence over an approach whereby greater emphasis is placed on using the "communities" approach described in this paper. Intergovernmental processes and closed expert-led approaches don't offer the participatory spaces needed to translate ambition into action, nor do they build the trust, ownership, and responsiveness that complex, shared challenges demand to be better prepared for the future [28].

To understand what communities can offer, it is helpful to position them among other forms of engagement. Communities are groups of people with a shared purpose who come together regularly to learn, improve, and act together on a common theme [5, 23]. Some communities are more practice-oriented [56], focused on how to deliver and improve together. Others are more epistemic [35], centered on generating shared understanding. When they do both, communities can become powerful bridges between what we know and what we do [3, 4, 8, 57, 58].

Table 1 - Comprehensive Engagement Format Typology

Format	Purpose	Engagement Mode	Knowledge Valorisation	Limitation
COMMUNICATION	Share information or raise awareness	One-to-many Often reactive	Consumption	No continuity, feedback loop, or shared ownership
CONSULTATION	Collect input on predefined questions	Few-to-one Episodic, formalised	Contribution	Limited follow-up or co-design; participation ends with feedback
NETWORKS	Connect actors across a theme or sector	Many-to-many loosely linked	Exchange	No shared purpose, rhythm, or accountability
EXPERT GROUPS	Provide structured advice or validation on specific issues	Few-to-few selective participation	Expert synthesis	Limited representativeness, closed working environment
PORTFOLIOS (IN MATRIX ORGANISATIONS)	Align and coordinate efforts across internal units, services, or themes	Few-to-few Cross-functional with assigned responsibility	Strategic integration	Often inward-looking, may lack external engagement or iteration with policy stakeholders
COMMUNITIES	Learn, collaborate, and act together to shape and improve practice and policy	Many-to-many Iterative and mutual	Co-creation	Requires facilitation and clarity of mandate
MISSIONS / STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS	Align actors towards shared high-level objectives across systems or sectors	One-to-many or few-to-many Directional and formalised	Alignment and demonstration	Can be hierarchical and limited in inclusiveness or adaptability

Source: author, based on 23, 24, 29, 30, 33, 46, 55, 56, 58

These types are not mutually exclusive. Many policy ecosystems need a mix of them. For example, portfolios can be enriched or thought of as (parts of) communities. Missions operate on a larger policy frame but typically require communities to avoid tokenism and improve uptake. And whether called collaborative network, action

group, or coalition, the fundamental strength of communities is to move beyond transaction toward continuous, structured collaboration [12, 33, 55].

2. Why communities matter in policymaking

A well-supported community allows institutions to listen and learn continuously to implement better, not just during consultation or dialogue windows. This is precisely why communities have value as policy instruments. In this way, communities can help institutions deal with some of their most pressing challenges as they offer a format for holding complexity together.

Communities deliver impact across the *policy cycle* and *organisational development*:

Table 2 – Community Impact Evidence Overview

Impact Dimension	Impact Overview	Key References
EARLY DETECTION OF PROMISING PRACTICES	Communities enable early identification of context-relevant innovations by surfacing local knowledge, tacit insights, and weak signals that would otherwise be missed through structured feedback loops and participatory action research.	2, 6, 7, 13, 33, 36, 43, 51, 58
IMPROVED POLICY DESIGN AND MEANINGFUL EVALUATION	Participatory processes in community settings significantly enhance policy relevance, legitimacy, and embedded evaluation. Co-designed processes embed tacit knowledge and peer-tested solutions and insights in what is (not) working well and enhance capacity for formative evaluation.	8, 11, 12, 38, 39, 40, 43
BETTER IMPLEMENTATION READINESS SYSTEM AND RESILIENCE	Policies developed through community co-creation are easier to implement due to shared responsibility, real-world relevance, and adaptive delivery pathways that reflect the needs and capacities of those involved.	3, 9, 36, 37, 51, 57
FASTER ALIGNMENT AND REDUCED DUPLICATION	Communities align actors working in parallel by providing shared collaboration spaces, reducing redundancy, increasing visibility, and promoting coherence and shared accountability across fragmented policy landscapes.	3, 4, 12, 13, 38, 48
INCREASED LEGITIMACY AND TRUST	By fostering inclusive dialogue, shared accountability, and recognition of lived experience, communities strengthen trust in institutions and increase legitimacy through co-ownership of the policy journey.	5, 31, 32, 36, 42, 50
AS ENABLERS OF CHANGE AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING	Communities act as institutional learning and knowledge management platforms, embedding adaptive capacity and shared direction across systems. Through sustained peer interaction, identity-building, and collective learning, they enhance public sector agility and innovation.	7, 34, 38, 44, 49, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 60

Source: author

Communities are not replacements for existing implementation agencies. They complement them by leveraging and coordinating the shared goals with other stakeholders with mandates and additional resources, knowledge and implementation instruments. They enhance the power of public authorities to find out what is happening and do something about it, without coercion through regulation or incentives through expenditure programmes.

Thus, communities are not replacements for existing structures, but the *missing connective tissue* between them. They do not dilute policy authority - they *enhance it* by making it more legitimate, actionable, and resilient. They *don't slow things down - they prevent failure* by getting things right earlier and together.

Policy Community Examples

Outside the Commission

Communities are widely used by many international organisations and in industry to foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, ideation, and problem-solving around a specific challenge, with participation tailored to enable practical collaboration.

For instance, [Apolitical](#) hosts numerous thematic communities around public service development where public servants from around the world can connect and exchange ideas. The [OECD's Observatory of Public Sector Innovation Mission Action Lab community](#) analyses mission-oriented practices and supports public sector organisations by co-developing tools and methods through action research. Similar practices can be found across other international institutions such as the [World Bank](#), [WHO](#), [FAO](#), and [IFRC](#), as well as in national administrations like [Canadian Health](#), or [German Immigration](#). Communities in the private sector, especially IT and commerce, serve to mobilise user knowledge, co-develop standards, and fast-track innovative solutions.

Hosted by the Commission

The European Commission hosts a growing range of communities to support both external collaboration and internal transformation. Some engage stakeholders beyond the institution (Member States and local authorities, researchers, civil society) to co-produce knowledge and support policy delivery. Others focus inward, enabling EU staff to learn, experiment, and grow together across thematic and functional domains. Some are more online, some are more place-based: but all use the power to convene on the European level.

Externally facing examples include:

Interreg – European Territorial Cooperation [18]

Funds and facilitates regional collaboration across borders, supporting over 250 projects in 36 countries through peer learning and co-designed solutions in areas like mobility, innovation, and environment.

Communities for Climate, Climate Pact, and Education for Climate [20]

Co-led by several DGs, these communities foster place-based climate and sustainability action across the EU. They provide facilitation, funding, and coordination to connect grassroots initiatives with EU-level goals.

The Sevilla Process [27]

Engages Member States, industry, and NGOs in a participatory model to co-develop environmental standards. Its inclusive process has helped align EU regulations with scientific evidence and real-world capabilities.

Further examples include [DG TAXUD's online collaboration platform for tax and customs professionals](#) working in national administrations across Europe; [Eurostat's Collaboration in Research and Methodology for Official Statistics](#), and the [Erasmus Networks Platform](#), providing the *Erasmus community* with learning opportunities.

Internally oriented communities include:

HR Professionals' Community of Practice

Brings together colleagues across the Commission and agencies to exchange on HR practices, enhance problem-solving, and build a shared identity as "People Professionals."

AI@EC Network [16]

Links staff working on digital transformation and artificial intelligence, creating a cross-DG space for responsible experimentation, peer support, and shaping common approaches to AI governance.

Team Lead & Middle Management Networks

Offer informal but strategic spaces for managerial learning, leadership exchange, and organisational alignment across units and services.

Further examples include *the Collaboration Hub, Greening the Commission, or the Participatory Leadership community*.

3. What is blocking community success and how to improve

For the Commission, the implication is clear: communities can offer value, but only when understood and supported accordingly. They are not add-ons nor quick fixes. They are *part of how a modern institution works and learns* [3, 4, 7, 37, 46, 49, 53, 57]. However, many communities stall, drift, or never fully take off. Not because the concept is flawed, but because *the institutional conditions do not yet support them*.

The core issue is a lack of strategic recognition. Communities are still seen as optional rather than essential. They remain absent from key policy tools like the Better Regulation Toolbox or formal implementation support strategies. Their potential to complement, or even substitute, traditional levers like regulation or funding is overlooked. Instead of building shared platforms, each service is left to improvise. Convening power is underused, and community management is undervalued. To unlock community impact, the Commission must acknowledge and resource communities as part of how modern policy gets designed, tested, and delivered.

Community Value across Commission Policy Competence

In full competences, they bring external expertise and diverse voices into feedback loops.

In shared competences, communities can strengthen the open method of coordination, offering spaces for peer learning and policy alignment.

In supporting competences, communities can be one of the few effective formats for soft coordination and practice development.

And even if communities are the right approach, success is not guaranteed.

Table 3 - Obstacles to community impact and recommendations to address them

What Is Not Working Well	Lesson Learned
No mandate or strategic positioning Communities are launched without alignment to policy priorities or stakeholder needs, risking meaninglessness.	Start with shared purpose and positioning. Every community needs a clearly articulated purpose that connects institutional goals with member motivations. Clarify the value of what can be done together that cannot be done alone. Situate the community in the broader ecosystem of tools and mandates. Recognise that communities evolve: most need a year to grow a foundation, another to mature. Not all are meant to last forever: ongoing alignment and reflection are key.
Unclear or one-directional engagement purpose Too often, engagement is extractive, tokenistic, or limited to information campaigns or static consultations.	Ensure engagement is reciprocal. Effective communities co-create rather than consult. Involve members early in agenda-setting, facilitation, and delivery. Ask: What matters to them? What's in it for them? Design formats where those answers are actionable, not rhetorical.
No long-term resources / buy-in Communities are expected to deliver impact while operating on goodwill. Outsourced community	Treat communities as shared institutional infrastructure. Insourcing community work strengthens policy credibility, coherence, and implementation impact. Provide dedicated staffing, cross-functional support (e.g. facilitation, tech, policy), strategic endorsement, and access

management firms act without policy authority.	to capacity-building materials and learning paths. Invest in communities as strategic platforms, not side projects.
<p>Community management underestimated</p> <p>Often only seen as basic facilitation or tech support, when it requires a mix of political, social, and technical competence and teams involved.</p>	<p>Recognise community stewardship as a full-spectrum, long-term role.</p> <p>Develop formal job profiles that include social facilitation, political positioning, and technical orchestration. Build multi-competence teams and recognition pathways for those leading or supporting communities. Also realise that there is no such thing as a “self-sustaining” community and that an evolving level of investment will be needed for any policy community scenario.</p>
<p>Scattered efforts and ecosystem fragmentation</p> <p>Unlinked micro-communities risk duplication, confusion, and engagement fatigue.</p>	<p>Build connective tissue across communities.</p> <p>Enable alignment and collaboration across DGs, Member States, and stakeholder systems. Support thematic bundling and shared infrastructure. Don’t centralise for control: coordinate for coherence and collective learning.</p>
<p>Extractive participation and institutional pressure</p> <p>People are asked to contribute time and insights within institutional timelines voluntarily, with little support or acknowledgement.</p>	<p>Design for reciprocity, rhythm, and respect.</p> <p>Respect members’ time. Establish clear cycles of contribution and rest. Offer non-monetary incentives (recognition, learning, influence) and financial support for concrete action. Rotate leadership and advisory roles and foster meaningful rituals and shared ownership.</p>
<p>Avoided trade-offs</p> <p>Key tensions are ignored and not negotiated according to the community’s maturity.</p>	<p>Name and manage trade-offs sequentially</p> <p>Clarify expectations among sponsors, community managers, and members. E.g.</p> <p><i>Growth:</i> Fast growth can boost visibility but risks dilution in the beginning; small-scale allows depth and shared purpose but may delay traction. Start small to build ownership and identity, then pilot activities and scale intentionally once cohesion and value are clear.</p> <p><i>Engagement:</i> Outreach builds political momentum, but without sufficient inner work, relational value weakens. Early stages benefit from inward focus and concrete actions; later stages can expand visibility and influence.</p> <p><i>Format:</i> Online formats offer scale and continuity, but in-person convening accelerates trust and alignment. Use in-person engagement early on to establish identity, then blend with digital tools for rhythm and reach as the community matures.</p>
<p>Over-focus on instant results or KPIs</p> <p>Pressure to show quick success leads to shallow engagement, vanity metrics, and missed long-term value.</p>	<p>Design and curate for depth, not optics.</p> <p>Communities grow through trust, iteration, and learning. Start small, scale with maturity. Integrate reflection milestones and connect short-term visibility moments to long-term goals. Stack actions into sustained impact.</p>
<p>Impact is hard to trace or demonstrate</p> <p>Because community outcomes are long-term and contextual, their value is often dismissed as ‘soft’ or invisible across levels</p>	<p>Create a shared logic and language for impact.</p> <p>Use both qualitative and quantitative methods, embed impact cycles from the start and use outcome harvesting to capture influence on policy, practice, and institutional culture.</p>

Source: author

These obstacles are not technicalities. Avoiding them weakens outcomes, facing them explicitly builds shared direction. They are early moments to set expectations, build ownership, and establish alignment between institutional intent and member value.

What this calls for, above all, is a shift in mindset. Community work is not just engagement. It is an institutional mode of listening, learning, and co-shaping policies with those affected by them. It's a way to connect the Commission more directly to lived realities and emerging needs to change how policy is implemented and how it can stay resilient through being better connected and understood.

Available Capacity-building Materials and Tools

The Communities of Practice Playbook [23] is the European Commission's reference guide to collectively run and develop communities, including a one-page roadmap overview [25].

The Community Checklist [21] provides community action plans, including necessary roles, competences, deliverables and time estimates.

The Community Digital Compass [26] provides civic technology guidance and checklists on digital community platform solutions.

The Community Barometer [22] provides action-orientated evaluation frameworks.



4. Where this leads: communities as a new tool in the regulatory toolbox leveraging the Commission's power to convene to turn policy into results

When well-supported, communities enhance institutional implementation capacity and impact by rooting it in practice and expanding the evidence base for better implementation. If the Commission were to take communities seriously as a policy instrument, we would see a tangible shift across four domains:

1. A CENTRAL CAPACITY HUB TO BUILD AND COORDINATE COMMUNITY PRACTICE

WITHIN THE CENTRE FOR ORGANISATIONAL TRANSFORMATION, A DEDICATED SUPPORT TEAM WOULD HELP DGS' COMMUNITY TEAMS DESIGN, SUSTAIN, AND EVALUATE COMMUNITIES WITH COHERENCE AND AMBITION. THIS INCLUDES:

- A shared logic and resource pooling for when and how to structure communities around policy challenges or theme to avoid fragmentation and fragile engagement and enhance community value.
- A community of communities and their managers across the Commission and EU institutions to learn, exchange, and co-develop solutions for shared challenges and opportunities to build up a shared community ecosystem, including regular touchpoints with outside expertise.
- Strengthen community capacity and coordination across levels in a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach: Equip both institutional portfolios and European/ local community actors with advanced community materials. This includes internal capacity-building within the Commission and thematic/place-based outreach to support public sector communities on the ground, bridging the gap between EU ambition and local implementation.

2. PROFESSIONALISATION AND RECOGNITION OF COMMUNITY ROLES

COMMUNITY WORK REQUIRES MULTI-COMPETENCE TEAMS. IT MUST BE STAFFED, AND VALUED, ACCORDINGLY. THIS INCLUDES:

- Clear career paths and role profiles that acknowledge the hybrid nature of community stewardship and team necessity (political, technical, social, and organisational – linked to knowledge brokerage and management within existing EC competence frameworks [21, 24]).
- Recognition that community work is not just operational, but that it is strategic policy development that curates knowledge, convenes stakeholders, generates evidence, and aligns implementation with intent.

- Institutional safeguards to avoid complete outsourcing, ensuring that communities remain linked to policy intent and maintain internal credibility and ownership. To balance internal stewardship with external expertise, framework contracts must be designed to reflect the multi-disciplinary nature of community management and be accessible across all services, learning from current individually existing examples.

3. FIT-FOR-PURPOSE DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

DIGITAL SPACES MUST REFLECT THE COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF COMMUNITY WORK. THIS INCLUDES:

- Interoperable, multi-community platforms that enable members to move seamlessly across communities while retaining access to shared knowledge and interactions.
- A coherent *community universe* with umbrella-level Data Protection Records to streamline compliance and reduce administrative friction.
- AI-enhanced community systems that support community managers through intelligent intervention agents that suggest targeted actions, while helping members with real-time synthesis tailored to their contributions and goals.

4. COMMUNITIES EMBEDDED IN KEY GOVERNANCE LOGICS

COMMUNITIES POSITIONED AS ENABLING INFRASTRUCTURE ACROSS BETTER REGULATION AND SIMPLIFICATION AGENDAS. THIS INCLUDES:

- Communities as policy tools within the *Better Regulation Toolbox* [14]: to extend stakeholder input beyond episodic consultations, building cumulative insight and participatory foresight.
- Communities as organisational backbone of *Reality Checks and Implementation Dialogues* [17]: to retain institutional memory of stakeholder relations, reducing duplication of one-off efforts, and enabling structured policy feedback.
- Communities as infrastructure for *European Partnerships for Innovation and Research* [building on 29, 30]: to strengthen the knowledge triangle by embedding co-creation, peer learning, and transnational collaboration into research and innovation ecosystems, fostering shared ownership and improving research-to-policy impact.
- Communities as learning spaces within the *Technical Support Instruments* [15] and the *Open Method of Coordination*: to help Member States' Public Administrations build shared policy capacity with the European Commission through sustained exchange, practical collaboration, and mutual learning.

Imagine a Commission where communities are not one-off experiments, but embedded infrastructure: trusted spaces that strengthen implementation capacity by linking design with delivery, insight with action. Where every major policy initiative includes a space for shared sense-making and practical follow-through.

In this future, communities are not symbolic or scattered. They are coordinated, resourced, and recognised as essential to governing well. Imagine policymaking that does not reset with each mandate but one that matures through community-driven learning. Where implementation dialogues, reality checks, and stakeholder engagement are not events, but part of a continuous ecosystem of collaboration.

This is not a distant vision. It is within reach: if we choose to design for it, and commit not only to building communities, but to being one.

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