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Policy on Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice

for the

ACT Alliance

This policy was approved by the Executive Committee on 29 August 2014.

It is a revision of the original policy approved by the ACT governing board on 03 May 2012.

1.   Introduction

Prior to the formation of ACT Alliance in 2010, ACT International and ACT Development had formed a number of groups of members to work on particular issues. The categories of groups were formalised in June 2010 when the governing board approved three types of groups, namely: advisory groups, working groups, and steering groups. The work of these groups was invaluable for the growth of the alliance, and particularly in the areas of policy, advocacy, shared learning and capacity building.

In February 2011 ACT management was tasked by the governing board to review existing groups to ensure alignment with ACT's strategic priorities for 2011-2014, and to ensure that work directly connected to the strategic priorities would be reflected in the core budget of the ACT Alliance. The board indicated that the number of groups relating directly to the secretariat should be limited to better reflect the capacity of the secretariat to facilitate them and directly to the needs of the secretariat in carrying out the strategic plan. It also wanted to ensure that there was space within the alliance for members to pursue work together around a variety of topics of importance and interest. The board also wanted to ensure strong engagement of members in leadership and participation. The ACT governing board consequently made a decision in September 2011 that ACT would have only two categories of groups: Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice (CoP).

An evaluation of the existing advisory group and CoP structures took place early in 2014 with a view to learning what went well and what were some of the challenges experienced by the first set of Advisory Groups, before their mandate came to an end in October 2014 at the 2nd ACT General Assembly. This led to some specific recommendations for the Executive Committee to consider in August 2014 for implementation in the next strategic period, following the Assembly in October 2014 and for a revision of the current policy.

A key change proposed was the way Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice relate to each other and how they link with other ACT structures and sources of expertise in the rest of the alliance. The issue of requiring a new model of engagement with improved relating/networking/linkages between both the Advisory Groups and the Communities of Practice, as well as between them and the other parts of the alliance was a recurring theme in the analysis and required a change to the architecture of the groups.

2.   Purpose of this policy

This policy outlines the role of ACT groups in the alliance, clarifies distinctions between groups and provides guidance on the architecture, role, group structure, working methods and funding of groups, and the role of the secretariat.

3.   Advisory Group and Communities of Practice Architecture

The Advisory Groups are made up of 8-10 committed individuals with relevant expertise and balanced geographical and gender representation to form a fixed 'strategic hub' of expertise for a 4 year strategic period. Intentional linkages are created, facilitated by the secretariat, which enable the Advisory Group hub to host a looser network of actors within the alliance with expertise in the strategic area. This network includes relevant CoPs, individuals with specific expertise, sub-working groups formed for a time-bound specific piece of work, other networks of member-staff with specific interest/expertise relevant to that advisory group, interested forums, Governance etc. These looser elements of the network are more flexible to specific needs arising from the membership and anchored to the alliance structures through one of the Advisory Group 'hubs'.

In particular, the linkages with the ACT forums are strengthened so that the Advisory Groups and Communities of Practice are able to benefit from the wealth of experience and resources in the forums, and equally that the linkages exist so that the forums are able to access what they need from the Advisory Groups or Communities of Practice.

A Secretariat Focal Point engages with each Advisory Group. This focal point role ensures that information is shared, that the network is actively built and that the governance has access to the Advisory Group and the broader network for strategic advice. The secretariat focal point is a connecter and enabler, facilitating the Advisory Group in this role.

4.   Role and criteria for group formation

4.1 Advisory groups

The role of the Advisory Groups is primarily the strategic advice and policy work, while they may turn to the broader network formed around them for specific operational tasks.

ACT advisory groups are established to work on issues that:
- are in line with and support implementation of the Alliance's strategic plan
- relate to the humanitarian, development or advocacy work of members
- are global in nature
- are of concern to a cross section of the membership
- support the work of ACT governance bodies and/or the ACT secretariat

4.2 Communities of Practice

The purpose of the ACT Communities of Practice (CoP) is to create and support spaces within the alliance for members to work together on issues of common interest and concern to the members and to the alliance.

ACT community of practice groups are established to work on issues:
- that are in line with and support implementation of the Alliance's strategic plan
- that relate to the humanitarian, development or advocacy work of members
- where members and observers believe that they can be more effective by working together under the name of ACT
- on which members and observers are willing to commit time, energy and resources

5.   Group structure, working methods and funding

5.1   Advisory groups

Formation: ACT advisory groups can be set up by the governing board, executive committee or secretariat to provide advice on a particular issue.

The body (the governing board, executive committee or secretariat) setting up the group shall:
- Develop a Terms of Reference for the group outlining the purpose, functions, working methods, timeframe and budget
- lead facilitation and coordination of the group
- select the membership of the group, drawing from members within the governance structures and/or alliance with particular expertise in the issue, as relevant
- have a mechanism in place for covering costs of the group before it is established. Those set up by the secretariat must be part of the core budget.
- consider regional and gender balance
- ensure a formal review process before extension or termination of the group, where appropriate.

Purpose: Advisory groups shall provide advice directly related to the strategic aims of the ACT Alliance. The number of groups will be limited and guided by the secretariat budget and staffing capacity. Members of advisory groups will be appointed by the director after requesting nominations from the alliance. In an effort to encourage broad participation from amongst the membership, the secretariat will ensure that as many members as possible are represented across advisory groups, and that any one member is not overly- represented in the groups. The director will inform the executive committee/governing board of the membership of the groups on a regular basis.

Group composition: Each group will have 8-10 members, based on criteria specific to the focus and functions of the group. Membership will reflect the diversity of the alliance, gender and technical expertise. Participation is open to all ACT members. Each member represents the whole alliance. When a member steps down, for whatever reason, the seat will be filled by the normal nomination process, outlined in the specific group's Terms of Reference, open to all members of the alliance. While representatives of ACT governance bodies are not excluded from being members of ACT secretariat advisory groups, the secretariat seeks the widest possible representation from ACT members on its groups, where possible.

According to the new architecture of the groups, sister ecumenical organisations with expertise in thematic issues can be invited to join the group as resource persons, as needed. Additional technical expertise may be drawn from the membership for a specific time-limited task. Such experts will not be formal members of the group and their participation will be task-limited.

Gender balance is essential. Achieving gender balance (50:50) is not always easy and therefore a gender ratio of 60:40 is considered 'reasonable'. However, a 70:30 gender ratio would not be considered

reasonable and a position should be left vacant until such time as correct ratio is able to be met, following the specific groups Terms of Reference.

Members are expected to attend an annual meeting unless in exceptional circumstances. Each member is expected to be active in the group between meetings. If a member of the advisory group is inactive for a period of three months, s/he will be asked to clarify the level of his/her organisational engagement. If the level of inactivity continues for another month, the secretariat may require this member to step down from the group, according to specific groups Terms of Reference.

Minimum requirements
- in-depth knowledge, skills and proven expertise of the thematic issue
- a commitment to dedicate time to support the work of the group and to attend annual meetings (as per specific groups' ToR).
- institutional support from member organisations to the Advisory Group members (especially chair) to enable them to allocate time and resources to the work
- an ability to communicate in English.

Nomination process: All ACT member organisations will be requested by the secretariat to nominate candidates for the advisory groups. The organisation must prepare a statement, signed by the nominee's supervisor, committing their staff member to participate in the group and a brief bio outlining how the nominee meets the membership criteria. Members should be given the authority by their organization to dedicate the required time to the group.

Leadership: Each group will have a chair and vice chair (as appropriate) who will lead the group to carry out its functions. The chair and vice chair will be nominated by the group members and elected by the group for a period of two years. Group leadership should, where possible, be gender and regional balanced. At the end of the two-year term, both can be re-elected for a further one-year term.

The roles of the chair and vice chair will be defined in the specific groups Terms of Reference and they will include:
- supporting the planning and facilitation of group meetings with the input of group members and the secretariat focal point
- facilitating discussion within the group and encouraging all group members to participate
- ensuring that the group achieves its objectives and accomplishes the tasks set forth in the groups Terms of Reference
- communicating with the lead ACT secretariat focal person on a regular basis.

The individual member roles will be defined in the specific groups Terms of Reference.

Decision making: In its advisory capacity, each group may want to make recommendations to the alliance around a range of topics. In such cases consensus-based decision making within the group on recommendations is preferred. If there are different views, all perspectives will be considered. If consensus is not possible, matters can be put to the vote and 50% plus one is required to carry the vote. Observers and additional technical experts will not have voting rights. The view of the minority shall be minuted.

Communication: The spoken and written language in the group is English as this is the official working language of the ACT secretariat. The main means of communication will be via email and Skype conferences. There will be a face-to-face meeting of all group members at least once a year preferably linked to a major development, humanitarian or advocacy event. Consideration will be given to using different formats and venues for the meetings if this is deemed useful to facilitate optimal participation from all regions. It is envisaged that Advisory Groups would be key actors in using a new communication

platform for the alliance to communicate their work more effectively with the rest of the alliance and enable others in the alliance to link more effectively with them.

Costs: Costs related to the functioning of the advisory group will be kept to a minimum. All members are requested to cover all costs related to their representatives' travel for the physical meetings. Members from the global south who do not have enough funds to cover all meeting costs will be supported by ACT Alliance. It is expected that ACT members from the global north will cover all meeting-related costs of all staff regardless of their location. Costs related to advisory groups will be covered through the annual core budget of the ACT secretariat.

Administration and logistics: The ACT secretariat will assist the group in administrative and logistics matters, where necessary.

Timeframe: The work of the group will be determined by its mandate and functions. The members of the group are appointed for the period in between the ACT general assemblies. In some cases member terms might be flexible depending upon the nature of the work as well as the participation and commitment of individual members.

Approval process: The ACT director approves the formation of an advisory group. All Advisory Groups are encouraged to work within the ACT strategic plan and ACT policies as included in the ACT Quality and Accountability Framework.

Reporting and information sharing: Regular updates on the group's activities are shared with the ACT governance in the director's report and with the wider membership via an appropriate ACT communication channel.

5.2   Communities of Practice (CoP)

Purpose: In the ACT context, a CoP is a group of staff of ACT members that agree to work together to gain knowledge, share learning, best practice and develop competence related to their field of work. A CoP's overall goal is to strengthen and support the work of the alliance and its members as outlined in its policies and strategic plan and develop the capabilities of participants.

ACT Communities of Practice (CoP) create and support spaces within the alliance for members to work together on issues of common interest and concern to the members and to the alliance. In addition, ACT recognises knowledge and learning as a key asset to the alliance and seeks to provide ways for members to work together as learning organisations. ACT CoPs are established to nurture this process.

Function: Each ACT Community of Practice (CoP) will shape its work around the nature of the issue and the needs and interests of the members. It may or may not wish to undertake specific activities that go beyond knowledge transfer and good practice. Creativity and innovation will be at the heart of all ACT CoPs. All advocacy activities will be in line with ACT advocacy policies and done in coordination with the secretariat.

Group composition: ACT CoPs are open to all ACT members interested in working together on a given issue.

Leadership: ACT CoP's will be self-organising under the leadership of an ACT member or members from the global south and north. Broad direction will be influenced by ACT's strategic plan. It is expected that each CoP will have a high degree of autonomy, flexibility, and responsiveness to evolving situations.

Working Methods: Each CoP will determine its own working methods.

Communication: The main means of communication will be via email and Skype conferences. It is envisaged that CoPs would be key actors in using a new communication platform for the alliance to communicate their work more effectively with the rest of the alliance and enable others in the alliance to link more effectively with them.

Link with formal ACT structures: To ensure the credibility and institutional link within the alliance of a CoP, each CoP will be endorsed by ACT secretariat and its existence will be announced to ACT membership and reported to ACT governance. According to the new architecture, ACT CoPs will be encouraged to establish a link with national and regional forums, as appropriate; and will be linked with one or more of the ACT advisory groups relevant to their area of interest. Some members of the advisory groups may be active in one or more CoPs. A staff person from the ACT secretariat will be nominated as a contact person for a CoP.

Administration: All administration and logistics related to CoPs will be undertaken by the CoP lead member organisation(s) and participants.

Timeframe: A CoP's life cycle will be determined by the value it provides to its members. It will cease to exist if members do not wish to continue and if there is no lead member organisation(s).

Approval process: An expression of interest can be submitted to the secretariat outlining the area of interest, broad objectives of the proposed CoP, name of lead organisation(s), and how it links to ACT's strategic aims. The secretariat will approve the CoP, be responsible for informing the whole alliance that a CoP is being created, invite participation and solicit interest from members; name a secretariat contact person, and provide information as to how ACT members can participate. All CoPs are encouraged to work within the ACT strategic plan and ACT policies as included in the ACT Quality and Accountability Framework.

Reporting and information sharing: All CoPs will have the option to share information through an appropriate ACT communication channel. In order to support sharing of information and inclusion of the work of CoPs in the historical record of the ACT Alliance, the leaders(s) of the CoP will submit a brief report to the ACT secretariat annually. The secretariat will report at least annually to ACT governance on the work of the CoPs.