

More than a Meeting:

Communities of practice for teacher professional development in the Western Balkans

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Key takeaways



Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of individuals who come together, fuelled by a common interest and motivation to learn and share with their peers. For teachers, CoPs offer valuable opportunities for professional growth, skill development and collaboration. CoPs enable teachers to share ideas, reflect on pedagogical practice and strengthen professional relationships. However, while teacher CoPs are widely acknowledged to be an important resource for teachers, there is a lack of evidence on how they are used and how they can be leveraged to improve education delivery. This report aims to understand the landscape of teacher CoPs in the Western Balkan countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The research investigates how teachers are engaged in CoPs, their motivations, the barriers they face and what outcomes they achieve from participating in CoPs. It also explores how to strengthen CoPs as a tool to improve teachers' practice. To investigate these issues, a mixed methods qualitative and quantitative participatory research approach was undertaken across the four countries.

- Surveys conducted with over 8,500 teachers found that nearly all (99 per cent) had participated in a CoP, and around three quarters (78 per cent) reported that CoPs had positively impacted their professional development.
- Teachers most commonly engage with School Aktivs (78 per cent), online platforms (49 per cent), subject-based associations (29 per cent), and national workshops and conferences (17 per cent). Other modalities such as regional workshops (9 per cent) or non-governmental organization (NGO)-facilitated groups (8 per cent) are much less common.
- Engagement in CoPs however is uneven; over one third of teachers report that they face barriers that limit their involvement with CoPs. Research found that the most common barriers are lack of time to engage in CoPs, and insufficient information on how to join CoPs.

- There is widespread desire to engage with and learn new skills, including information and communications technology (ICT) and artificial intelligence (AI) content. Over a quarter of mid-career teachers seek ICT content, while almost one in five emphasize the desire to learn more about AI.
- Only one third of respondents overall considered subject-based associations as effective, but subject-specific teachers were more likely to consider associations as effective. For science teachers, 45 per cent considered subject associations effective, as did 41 per cent of mathematics and 40 per cent of language teachers. This highlights that relevance and member participation is key to effective CoPs.
- Qualitative research uncovered that incentives for teachers to join CoPs are weakened by barriers such as limited institutional recognition of CoPs. In addition, teachers have “reform fatigue” and competing priorities for their limited time.
- Findings show that trust, collaboration and relevance emerged as the defining characteristics of effective CoPs. Respondents emphasize that the most successful groups are those which foster open dialogue, mutual respect and shared purpose.
- Looking to the future, teachers advocate more formal recognition of CoP participation within teacher professional development (TPD) frameworks, allocating time and resources for participation, and recognizing the shared educational legacies and challenges in the region as a valuable opportunity to work subregional collaboration for collective innovation.

99%

of teachers in the Western Balkans have participated in a CoP at some point

36%

of teachers face some kind of barrier to participating in CoPs

42%

of teachers with no/minimal levels of CoP participation say they do not know how or where to join a community

53%

of those with no/minimal CoP participation levels feel they do not have adequate support to join a community

To ensure the benefits of teacher CoPs are realized across the Western Balkans, coordinating action is needed by ministries, pedagogical institutes and partners such as UNICEF. Based on the findings discussed in this report, the following recommendations outline concrete ways to strengthen CoPs as a sustainable mechanism for TPD:



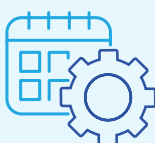
1. **Develop and communicate accessible databases of recognized CoPs to improve visibility and access.** Many teachers, particularly those who are less engaged, report limited information on how to join or access a CoP. A transparent and regularly updated registry would increase visibility and help teachers connect with relevant networks. Education partners can work to co-develop user-friendly material and outreach campaigns which target underrepresented teacher groups through channels such as unions, school networks and School Aktivs.



2. **Develop quality standards for CoPs that ensure relevance, inclusivity and legitimacy while preserving teacher ownership.** Standards which are co-created with teacher and education partners can strengthen legitimacy and safeguard against inactive or low-quality groups, ensuring recognized CoPs foster collaboration and professional learning, while protecting teacher ownership and autonomy.



3. **Integrate CoPs into professional development pathways, linking participation to TPD credits and career progression.** Teachers see CoPs as valuable for skill development, but participation is not always systematically recognized. Embedding CoPs into career progression pathways and incentives would motivate engagement, institutionalize peer learning and align CoP activity with national professional development frameworks.



4. **Allocate time and resources to facilitate participation, especially for early-career teachers and those teachers who are restricted by a lack of time and heavy workloads.** The lack of time was the most frequently cited barrier to engagement, and institutional time allocation would enable more equitable participation by preventing CoPs from becoming limited to those with fewer teachers or caring obligations.



5. Support inclusive CoP leadership and facilitation, strengthening moderation and peer-led engagement. CoPs often depend on motivated individuals, risking burnout and exclusion. Developing facilitation skills across members will strengthen inclusivity, sustainability and equitable participation.



6. Work to strengthen regional exchange and collaboration to harness shared language, educational legacy and common practice for collective learning. Teachers in the Western Balkans recognize common educational legacies and shared challenges. Regional exchange, something which almost 10 per cent of teachers already engage with, can amplify good practices, strengthen cross-border peer networks and build collective capacity for innovation beyond national boundaries.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Teacher professional development (TPD) is crucial to ensuring quality education delivery. Yet evidence from Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-UNICEF policy reviews show that systems of teacher appraisal and professional development in the Western Balkans often fall short in promoting student-centred teaching practices (OECD 2020). This gap demonstrates that there is a need for approaches to professional development that go beyond formal training, and which foster continuous practice-based learning. In this context, communities of practice (CoPs) can provide valuable spaces for peer exchange, collaboration and reflection which manifest in real classroom change.

CoPs are groups of practitioners where members share a common goal and engage with each other to share knowledge, improve their skills and build a shared repertoire in a specific domain (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott 2002; Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner 2016). Existing evidence on CoPs for TPD shows that CoPs offer powerful spaces for professional learning

which can offer alternatives to more traditional professional development programmes, by providing spaces for mutual learning oriented to both the reflection of practices and skill development (Hofman and Dijkstra 2010; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 2011).

This report discusses research conducted to support the implementation of TPD programmes in the Western Balkans. Research was designed to provide insight into the dynamics of teacher communities, their impact on professional development, and cohesion. Research was conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This project generates a regional evidence base for the potential of CoPs for TPD.

CoPs are of particular interest in the Western Balkans where there is an impetus to identify sustainable approaches to TPD that build on existing platforms for online and offline peer-to-peer learning. By identifying opportunities to strengthen collaboration and knowledge exchange with teachers across the region, CoPs offer a space to move away from one-off training with teachers, and towards platforms or communities that provide relevant and accessible learning and professional exchange.

CoP initiatives have already been supported in the Western Balkans through programmes such as From Reflection on Action to Reflection for Action targeting preschool teachers in Serbia, Digitalna Škola (Digital School Concept) in Montenegro, EDUINO in North Macedonia, and the creation of Viber and Facebook groups for structured teacher knowledge exchange. Through these education skills development programmes, significant efforts have been made to create and strengthen CoPs among teachers and education professionals. These initiatives aim to support the sustainability of education programmes through building communities around them.

There is currently limited literature on the use of teacher CoPs in the Western Balkans. Existing regional literature highlights the capacity for teacher CoPs to engender collaborative professional approaches (Underwood and Joshevska 2019a), enhance collegial trust (Joshevska and Kirandziska 2015; Underwood and Joshevska 2019b; Ninković et al. 2022), and provide practical and classroom-relevant support (Teodorović, Milin and Stanković 2019). However, there is no comprehensive research into the overall teacher CoP landscape, what specific characteristics of CoPs render them effective or not, or what motivates teachers to collaborate in such communities, important gaps which this research seeks to address.

1.1 Conceptual research framework

Building on existing literature, this research explores teacher CoPs following a conceptual framework based on five key dimensions (*Figure 1*):

Figure 1: Conceptual research framework



1.2 Research questions and approach

Relying on the conceptual framework above, this research is based around the following research questions:

1. What motivates teachers to join, engage and remain active in CoPs?
2. What factors prevent teachers who are not active in CoPs from using them?
3. How do different teachers interact with CoPs?
4. What distinguishes effective, engaging and accessible communities from less successful ones?
5. How accessible are professional CoPs for teachers?
6. How is the quality of professional learning communities ensured?
7. How is the sustainability of professional CoPs ensured?
8. What criteria do education authorities set for acknowledging participation in CoPs as professional development hours?
9. What is the role of key stakeholders in building a CoP?
10. How do teachers perceive the potential impact of participating in a CoP on their professional growth and student motivation?
11. What subregional activities are of interest and relevance to teachers?
12. Is there a business case for a national/subregional CoP?

To explore these questions, mixed methods qualitative and quantitative research was conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia between January and May 2025. Research was initiated under the **Dialogue for the Future 3 project** (UNESCO 2024), being jointly implemented by UNICEF, UNDP and UNESCO in cooperation with the United Nations Resident Coordinator, and in partnership with the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The project is funded by the United Nations Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF).

Research was carried out by UNICEF Innocenti in collaboration with UNICEF Country Offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Data collection was supported by national Ministries of Education, pedagogical institutes, civil society organizations (CSOs), and local teacher networks to ensure contextual relevance and stakeholder engagement. The remainder of this report outlines a review of the literature, methodology, research findings, and policy recommendations.



CHAPTER 2

Literature review: What are communities of practice, and why do they matter for teachers?

CoPs are collaborative groups of practitioners where members are unified by a common professional goal. CoPs are spaces where members interact to share knowledge, enhance professional practice, and collectively develop joint expertise or skills within a particular field of work. Recently, scholars and practitioners have turned their attention to the role of CoPs as platforms for TPD, and this review of the literature aims to understand the processes via which members come together to develop practice. Importantly, CoPs should be understood as spaces for mutual collective learning – in the broadest sense, they are spaces where people bound by practice development can come to *think together* (Sutherland, Scanlon and Sperring 2005; Wenger, Snyder and McDermott 2002; Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner 2016; Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden 2017; Vangrieken et al. 2017; Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn 2018; Huijboom et al. 2021).

2.1 Communities of practice and social learning

In CoPs, learning occurs within groups, communities and networks, and through relationships between people who share mutual interests. CoPs involve a *social learning* which occurs in the context of people who have come together for co-development. CoPs are therefore embedded not within static or rigid forms of knowledge acquisition, but rather in people's active participation in social, cultural and community contexts (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Wenger 2011; Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner 2016).

At their core, CoPs are “communities [of] joint enterprise, shared repertoire, and mutual engagement” (Wenger 1998, p. 73). As groups, they facilitate identity formation via learning, shared membership, and meeting collective social and educational needs.

CoPs offer members a platform for contextualized or situated peer learning. For teachers, this may involve experience exchanges and sharing classroom-tested strategies to collaboratively refine institutional practices (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden 2017; Clark Moore 2021).

Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002) propose that CoPs can be defined across three core dimensions:

1. **Domain**, or the shared area of interest in which the CoP focuses
2. **Community**, or the social fabric and relationships among members
3. **Practice**, or the group's shared knowledge, tools and techniques

Following this framework, the focus of understanding CoPs, and their contribution to mutual learning, should not rely entirely on the individuals which inhabit them, but rather the “social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time” (Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner 2016, p. 6). Learning is not, therefore, about a rigid or linear acquisition of knowledge. Instead, CoPs produce learning through people's active participation in the nexus of social, cultural and community contexts. These contexts are multiple and heterogenous, however, and CoPs and their members are subject to internal and external power relations that shape the legitimacy

and authority of CoPs. Although this produces both the potential and the limits of CoP knowledge production and practice development, the strength of CoPs lies in the potential to offer an alternative to traditional programmes that may restrict the possibilities of growth of capacity-building (Contu and Willmott 2003; Roberts 2006).

2.2 Teacher professional development within communities of practice

Teacher CoPs offer alternatives to more traditional TPD programmes, which are often organized around lectures or workshops. More traditional forms of TPD equip teachers with new knowledge or skills, but often fail to encourage reflection on how to apply these in their own practice in ways that are relevant to local contexts (Hofman and Dijkstra 2010; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 2011).

This lack of reflection, extending to more limited integration into everyday practice, may limit the opportunities for teachers to refine and enhance teaching practices. In contrast, teacher CoPs can support sustainable and practice-oriented professional development by fostering continuous, collaborative learning among peers (Avalos 2011; Vangrieken et al. 2017).

The strength of teacher CoPs relies precisely in professional development that is grounded in teachers' experiences and needs, with teachers, who have real-world classroom experience, rather than external consultants shaping the learning context (Cochran-Smith et al. 2008).

Existing evidence shows that teachers typically join CoPs to access professional resources for teaching and professional growth opportunities, while also engaging for social connection and emotional support. This can reduce teachers' professional isolation, while simultaneously fostering collaboration, increasing collegial support, and supporting social cohesion among members (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter 2016; Macià and García 2016; Patton and Parker 2017; Van Meeuwen et al. 2019; Johannesson 2022).

Teacher CoPs can take both online and in-person forms, with digital platforms facilitating novel opportunities for collaboration. Online CoPs offer the potential to leverage social media, discussion forums and collaborative

platforms to connect educators across geographical boundaries, thus making professional collaboration more accessible, scalable and cost-effective (Macià and García 2016; Peeters and Pretorius 2020; Luo, Freeman and Stefaniak 2020; Clark Moore 2021; Dille and Røkenes 2021; Liljekvist et al. 2021; Nelimarkka et al. 2021).

Teacher CoPs can be formal or informal depending on their structure and leadership. Formal CoPs are often school-initiated and may be tied to institutional or national goals, frequently involving structured meetings, guided discussions and alignment with national curriculum standards. Informal CoPs can also be effective, and these may emerge organically among teachers with shared interests. Such CoPs may function with greater flexibility, and might arise spontaneously in response to specific challenges, or be driven by intrinsic motivations rather than external requirements (Hadar and Brody 2018; Brodie 2021).

2.3 What makes communities of practice work and what makes them fail?

Irrespective of format, there are common challenges which impact teacher CoPs. These include unequal participation among members, concerns around longer-term sustainability, and challenges around internal dynamics pertaining to interaction depth. Sustaining engagement over time can be difficult without active facilitation and institutional support, and teachers may struggle to balance multiple professional responsibilities, thus making it difficult to achieve consistent engagement in community discussions over time (Brodie 2021; Nelimarkka et al. 2021).

In-person CoPs face challenges, including logistical, scheduling, time and institutional constraints that inhibit participation. While online CoPs may mitigate some of these issues, online modalities may rely on a small core of members who often dominate discussion, while others remain as more passive observers. However, while more peripheral or ad hoc participation in CoPs is not inherently detrimental to overall CoP health, overly hierarchical structures have also been shown to discourage open dialogue thus restricting the potential for knowledge-sharing (Li et al. 2009; Khalid and Strange 2016; Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden 2017; Vangrieken et al. 2017).



Evidence on teacher CoPs outlines institutional leadership support, trust, and shared purpose as important factors which contribute to sustained interaction within groups. More successful communities tend to ensure regular interaction, encourage member participation, and balance structure and flexibility. Trust is also seen as a key mechanism to facilitate open dialogue, making it easier for participants to share successes and failures without fear or judgment, with sustainable engagement nurtured by community incentives such as peer recognition and active moderation (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden 2017; Vangrieken et al. 2017; Ghamrawi 2022)

Given that participation in CoPs is voluntary, success emerges over time from a community's ability to generate excitement, relevance and value that attracts and engages members. Likewise, failure is often attributed to weak group identification, poorly defined practice, insufficient organizational support, and institutional, contextual or organizational barriers that do not nurture CoP participation (Wenger, Snyder and McDermott 2002; Ardichvili, Page and Wentling 2003; Kimble and Bourdon 2008; Probst and Borzillo 2008).

2.4 Teacher communities of practice in the Western Balkans

There is limited literature on grassroots, national or regional CoPs in the Western Balkans. However, existing regional studies and grey literature largely corroborate international empirical and theoretical discussion.

There have also been important critical contributions, with some research recognizing the potential of informal CoPs, while nonetheless advocating for strong external competency standards to be linked to professional learning communities, thus better institutionalizing peer collaboration, interaction and mentorship (Teodorović, Milin and Stanković 2019).

In Serbia, for instance, emphasis has been placed on the role of professional learning communities as spaces which facilitate mutual teacher trust. Mutual trust was found to hold a direct role in collective teacher efficacy, with professional learning communities holding a significant mediating role fostered via collaboration (Ninković et al. 2022).

Regional work has also emphasized the collaborative approach of CoPs, and the potential to offer support where more mainstream development pathways are limited. By extending beyond individual schools, therefore, CoPs offer an opportunity for teachers to participate in much wider professional networks. For instance, in the context of limited professional support for Spanish language in Serbia, pre-service teachers were able to exchange in learning via communities with peers, educators and mentors to develop relevant and hands on experience with Spanish teaching (Jovanović and Filipović 2013; Underwood and Joshevska 2019a).

In the Western Balkans, there is a unique opportunity to engage with the cross-national CoPs. Existing evidence shows that international and wider participation can help challenge existing local assumptions, and with existing regional affinities and common languages, the Western Balkans is in a unique position to build new best practices across a familiar regional context (Boulos and Feixas 2022; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak and Underwood 2023).

Teacher CoPs can be powerful mechanisms for professional learning by offering sustainable and peer-driven professional development. CoPs can bridge the gap between formal training and day-to-day classroom practice, making professional growth more relevant and impactful. However, ensuring equal participation, sustained engagement and deep interaction is a challenge. Addressing these issues required active facilitation, institutional support and buy-in, and deliberate efforts to create inclusive and engaging environments.



CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Research was structured across five stages, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies:

- **Stage 1:** Community of practice mapping
- **Stage 2:** Desk review of existing evidence
- **Stage 3:** National teacher surveys
- **Stage 4:** Qualitative interviews and focus groups
- **Stage 5:** Validation workshops and stakeholder consultations

This approach enabled the triangulation of perspectives across tools and stakeholders, contributing to a deeper understanding of the teacher CoP landscape across the Western Balkans.

3.1 Community of practice mapping

To understand the existing regional, national and local CoP landscape, the research team conducted a mapping exercise to document existing networks in the region. In each country, mapping was designed to identify existing CoPs, their size, geographic scope, education levels, and participation modalities including online, offline and hybrid.

The CoP mapping exercise provided valuable insight into regional and national landscapes. Mapping data allowed the research team to understand the most common modalities of participation, and to categorize the kinds of institutions which support CoPs, with the later questionnaire exploring participant attitudes to NGO-, government-, association- and informally led CoPs identified during this mapping.

3.2 Desk review of existing literature

A literature review was conducted to understand existing research and theory on effective CoPs. Particular attention was given to factors that make CoPs succeed and fail, and what any future interventions may learn from existing research. This review allowed the study to be grounded in existing evidence on CoP best practices, and helped to identify gaps in the literature including those on teacher CoPs and CoPs in the Western Balkans.

The review covers academic publications, policy frameworks, programme documentation and grey literature relevant to CoPs. It identifies the social processes which underpin effective CoPs, and informed later research by allowing empirical tools to consider social processes. This review was also used to develop a conceptual research framework, which guided the research team's approach on how best to conceptualize a CoP.

3.3 National teacher surveys

Teacher surveys were designed and deployed to understand how respondents engaged with CoPs, motivations to participate, barriers to participation, and perceptions of CoP effectiveness and sustainability.

Surveys were designed in collaboration with UNICEF Country Offices, and instruments were adapted to reflect each country's education system. Surveys incorporated data from the mapping activity, with respondents being directly asked whether they had engaged with any of the CoPs identified during the first stage of research.

Each instrument was administered in local languages. Surveys were self-administered by teachers via KoboToolbox, and dissemination was led by UNICEF Country Offices in collaboration with national Ministries of Education, teacher training institutes and CSOs.

In total, 10,397 people responded to the survey, with 8,599 meeting the inclusion criteria (teacher or preschool teacher). Those not meeting inclusion criteria such as principals or school pedagogues were invited to provide contact details to participate in interviews and focus groups. Teacher responses were collected across the four countries between February 2024 and May 2025.

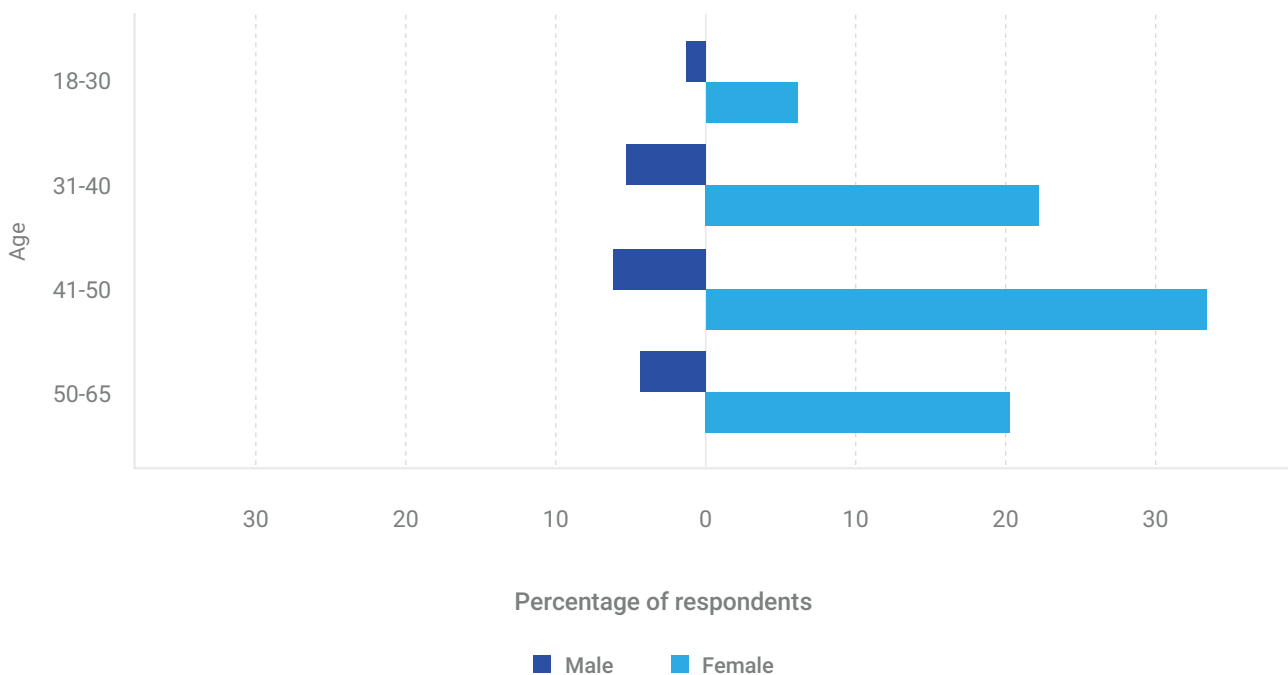
3.3.1 Regional sample

At the regional level, 1,489 (17 per cent) of respondents were male and 7,099 (83 per cent) were female. A further 11 respondents (<1 per cent) identified as another gender. The average age of respondents in the regional sample was 44.2, with respondent ages ranging from 17 to 65 (see *Figure 2*).

The gender distribution in the data is close to the regional demographic make-up of teachers. According to the TALIS survey (OECD 2025a; OECD 2025b; OECD 2025c), 71 per cent of teachers in Montenegro are female, 70 per cent of teachers in Serbia are female, and 67 per cent of teachers in North Macedonia are female. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the World Bank (2024), 87 per cent of primary teachers are female.

However, at the national level there is more substantial divergence from the actual distribution of teachers according to gender. In Serbia, only 8 per cent of teachers captured in the data were male, compared to 30 per cent nationally. In Montenegro, 12 per cent of teachers who responded to the survey were male compared to 29 per cent nationally. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20 per cent of survey respondents were male compared with 13 per cent nationally. In North Macedonia, 19 per cent were male compared with 33 per cent nationally.

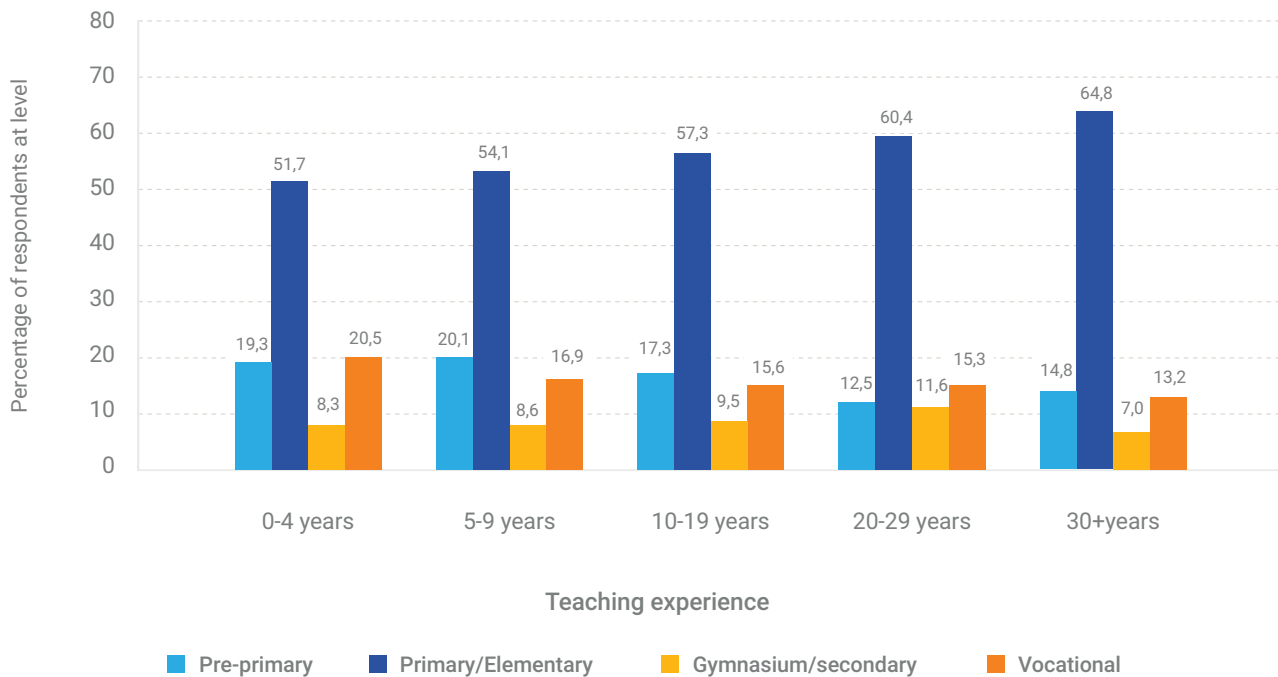
Figure 2: Regional age and gender distribution



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 8,599)

The regional distribution of teachers by experience shows that 1,319 (15 per cent) of respondents held 0–4 years of experience, 1,456 (17 per cent) 5–9 years, 2,879 (33 per cent) 10–19 years, 2,110 (25 per cent) 20–29 years and 835 (10 per cent) over 30 years of experience (see Figure 3).

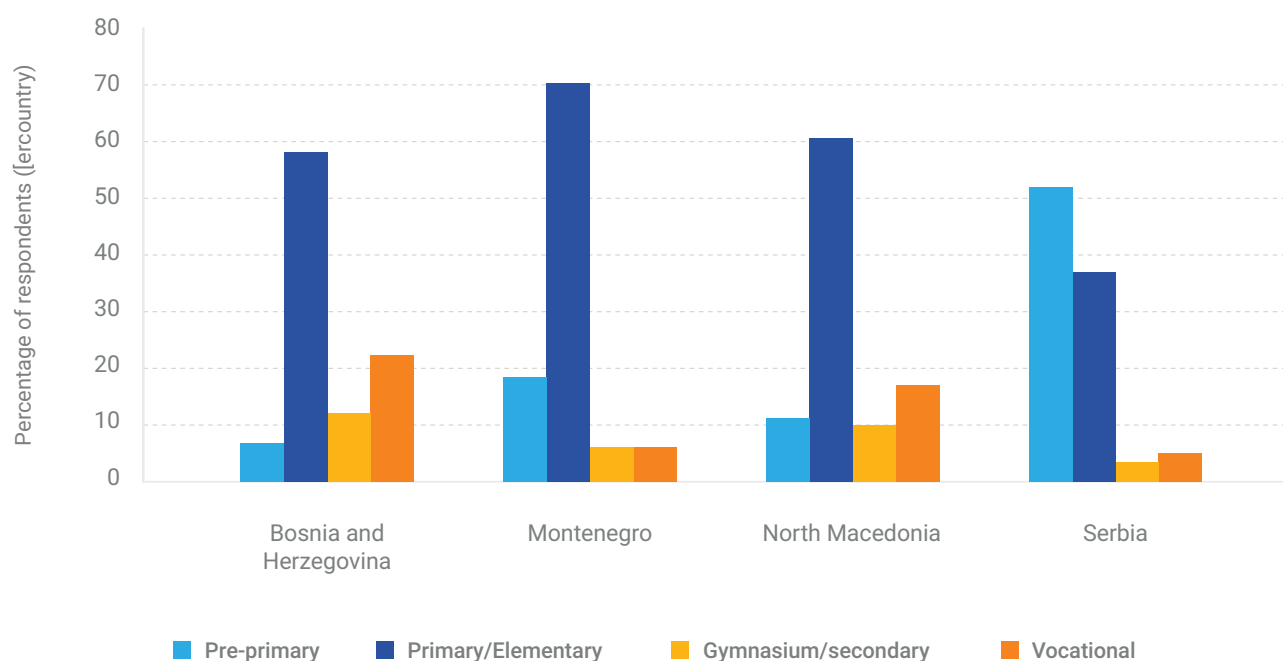
Figure 3: Regional teaching experience and level



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 8,599)

At the regional level, 1,411 respondents (18 per cent) taught at kindergarten/pre-primary levels, 5,178 (60 per cent) at primary/elementary levels, 854 (10 per cent) at gymnasium/secondary levels, 1,474 (17 per cent) at vocational levels and 4 respondents from Serbia (< 1 per cent of the overall sample) taught at secondary combined (those schools which offer both vocational and academic programmes in the same school) schools (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Regional sample by teaching level



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 8,599)

3.3.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Of the 2,551 respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 522 (20 per cent) were male and 2,023 (79 per cent) were female. A further 6 respondents (<1 per cent) identified with a gender other than male or female. Respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina were aged between 17 and 65, with the average age of 43.

A total of 184 respondents (7 per cent) taught at kindergarten/pre-primary levels, 1,631 (64 per cent) at primary/elementary schools, 325 (13 per cent) at secondary/gymnasium schools and 631 (25 per cent) worked in vocational training. Regarding teaching experience, 407 respondents (16 per cent) held 0–4 years of experience, 406 (16 per cent) 5–9 years, 779 (31 per cent) 10–19 years, 750 (29 per cent) 20–29 years and 209 (8 per cent) over 30 years of experience.

3.3.3 Montenegro

In Montenegro, of 611 respondents, 74 (12 per cent) were male and 536 (88 per cent) were female. Respondents were aged between 18 and 56, with the average age being 44.6.

A total of 115 respondents (19 per cent) taught at the kindergarten/pre-primary level, 445 (73 per cent) at primary/elementary level, 37 (9 per cent) at secondary/gymnasium level and 37 (9 per cent) worked in vocational training. Meanwhile, 66 teachers (11 per cent) held 0–4 years of experience, 114 (19 per cent) 5–9 years, 199 (33 per cent) 10–19 years, 142 (23 per cent) 20–29 years and 90 respondents (15 per cent) over 30 years of experience.

3.3.4 North Macedonia

In total there were 4,075 respondents from North Macedonia, of whom 786 (19 per cent) were male and 3,280 (81 per cent) were female. Five respondents (<1 per cent) identified with a gender other than male or female. Respondents were aged between 20 and 64, with the average age of respondents being 44.4.

In total, 569 respondents (12 per cent) taught at kindergarten/pre-primary levels, 2,573 (63 per cent) primary/elementary levels, 453 (11 per cent) secondary/gymnasium levels and 733 (18 per cent) worked in vocational training. In terms of teaching experience, 668 teachers (16 per cent) held 0–4 years of experience, 757 (19 per cent) 5–9 years, 1,470 (36 per cent) 10–19 years, 814 (20 per cent) 20–29 years and 362 (9 per cent) over 30 years of experience.

3.3.5 Serbia

Of 1,361 respondents from Serbia, 105 (8 per cent) were male and 1,265 (92 per cent) were female. Respondents were aged between 20 and 65, with the average age of 45.

A total of 742 (55 per cent) reported teaching at kindergarten/pre-primary levels, 525 (39 per cent) primary/elementary levels, 61 (4 per cent) secondary/gymnasium level and 73 (5 per cent) in vocational programmes. Overall, 178 respondents (13 per cent) reported 0–4 years of teaching experience, 178 (13 per cent) 5–9 years of experience, 430 (32 per cent) 10–19 years, 402 (30 per cent) 20–29 years and 173 (13 per cent) over 30 years of experience.

3.5 Quantitative analysis

The analysis of quantitative data was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive analysis summarized participant sociodemographic characteristics and offered an overview of participation patterns. This included summarizing overall participation trends such as frequency of engagement and the distribution of participation across sociodemographic characteristics.

Second, a series of bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between themes and respondent characteristics. This analysis explored how factors such as age, teaching experience, subject taught and level of engagement with CoPs were associated with participation in learning communities, while also considering outcomes in relation to professional development and teaching practice. The second stage of analysis included the use of regression models to identify significant predictors of CoP participation and outcomes, as well as Kruskal-Wallis tests to assess differences across groups in the absence of normally distributed data. These analyses provide an understanding of the key drivers of participation and the variation of perceived benefits across profiles.

3.6 Qualitative interviews and focus groups

Qualitative data were collected via key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). This represents a core part of this research, offering an insight into the personal meaning and subjective understanding behind CoP participation, effectiveness and sustainability. Qualitative analysis also tapped into valuable stakeholder knowledge about how CoP membership could be strengthened in the future.

Qualitative participants included teachers from all levels of teaching (kindergarten/pre-primary, primary/elementary, secondary/gymnasium, and vocational), teachers showing both high and low levels of CoP engagement, CoP leaders, and representatives from Ministries of Education and those involved in professional development and innovation. Participants were recruited via voluntary opt-in through surveys, and later via purposive sampling through teacher and UNICEF networks to ensure a diverse sample.

Data collection took place in person and online, and was conducted in local languages. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. In total, 25 KIIs and 23 FGDs were conducted:

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** 5 KIIs and 3 FGDs
- **Montenegro:** 7 KIIs and 5 FGDs
- **North Macedonia:** 6 KIIs and 8 FGDs
- **Serbia:** 6 KIIs and 7 FGDs

Qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo with a deductive coding framework aligned with the project's research questions. A codebook was developed consisting of 14 thematic categories, based on the overall research questions, which guided coding. In the first stage, transcripts from FGDs and KIIs were systematically coded to capture concepts and ensure cross-setting comparability.

Stage two of qualitative research involved synthesizing qualitative data to identify commonalities between themes and contexts. In dialogue with quantitative data, patterns were explored to understand links between and within categories, allowing the analysis to focus on moments of commonality such as shared barriers and facilitators of participation. The qualitative approach emphasized triangulation with quantitative data, ensuring that insights from both methods would add depth to analysis.

3.7 Validation workshops and stakeholder consultations

Once initial analysis of qualitative and quantitative data had been completed, validation workshops and stakeholder consultations were held in each country to discuss findings. Invitees included a wide range of national and regional stakeholders such as teachers, representatives from Ministries of Education, CoP leaders, NGOs and CSOs. These workshops were designed to gather additional feedback from participants to co-develop recommendations suitable for both the national and regional contexts.

Workshops presented emerging findings and followed with participatory activities designed to generate actional recommendations for strengthening and institutionalizing CoPs at national and regional levels. Workshops focused on who may best be placed within existing institutions to support CoP proliferation, and which groups may require additional advocacy or engagement to better support CoPs in the future.

3.8 Study limitations

The mixed methods research approach generated a rich evidence base, but limitations should be noted. Most significantly, the survey sample is skewed towards kindergarten and primary-level teachers, possibly limiting generalizability to secondary and vocational education levels. There is also a proportionally larger number of respondents from North Macedonia ($n = 4,075$), making up a disproportionately larger share of the regional sample relative to overall population. This imbalance should be noted when interpreting regional comparisons, and analysis has been approached with cautious interpretation and triangulated against qualitative data to provide insight. Similarly, while the overall gender balance in the sample does not dramatically diverge from the gendered make-up of teachers in the region, in some countries, particularly Serbia and Montenegro, there is a more pronounced gender skew towards female respondents. Interpretation of regional and national-level findings that discuss gender should retain this consideration.

Additionally, qualitative data are not representative and are not intended to be. Rather, qualitative participants were selected for relevance and expertise to offer insight into CoP dynamics across contexts. Despite these modest limitations, the study offers robust evidence to inform the design and scale-up of CoP-related programmes in the Western Balkans.



CHAPTER 4

Research findings

The following section presents research findings, synthesizing mixed methods data collected throughout this regional initiative. The analysis presented here explores how teachers in the Western Balkans engage with CoPs, the social and structural factors that inhibit and facilitate participation, the impact of CoP participation on professional development, and the potential for regional collaboration in the future.

Particular attention is given to the relationship between motivational and structural barriers. Both qualitative and quantitative work highlights factors such as time or interest as a key local reason for non-participation, while there is also an emphasis on more systematic constraints such as inadequate information, lack of time or limited institutional support.

The tension between motivation and structure is key to understanding the nature of CoP participation. If motivational barriers emerge as a symptom of structural barriers, then barriers to CoP participation can be addressed through interventions that target CoP design, formal integration of CoPs into TPD, and improvement of institutional and social support mechanisms.

4.1 CoP mapping in the Western Balkans

An overwhelming majority of respondents (99 per cent) have participated in CoPs at some point. In each country, fewer than 1 per cent of participants had never participated in any form of CoP at any time. However, research indicates substantial variation in the **depth, frequency and nature** of engagement across different types of CoP.

Understanding CoP landscapes locally, including the **number, format and target audiences** of CoPs, but also the **extent to which CoPs are recognized by Ministries of Education and integrated into TPD pathways**, is essential to contextualizing wider CoP participation. Box 1 provides an overview of each country TPD pathway and how they interact with CoPs.

Uniquely, in the Western Balkans, participation in local mechanisms called School Aktivs are mandatory for teachers. While not reflective of intrinsically motivated participation, School Aktivs are a mechanism for structured peer collaboration and the coordination of pedagogical practice among teachers, and they work within formal governance and professional development structures of national education systems.

School Aktivs are included in the CoP pool because they already reflect the essential characteristics of a CoP, such as shared purpose, professional learning, and collaborative problem solving, while also providing a system-wide structure that can be further strengthened for greater TPD.

BOX 1

Teacher professional development pathways in the Western Balkans

Bosnia and Herzegovina

TPD pathways are developed at cantonal and entity levels, with local pedagogical institutes or universities shaping and delivering training. This decentralized model means TPD practices vary across cantons. For example, in Sarajevo and Tuzla there are established minimum annual requirements regarding professional development hours, whereas in others such as Republika Srpska, although there are bylaws mandating continuous professional development (CPD), required hours and monitoring mechanisms are not always implemented consistently in practice. Similarly, Brčko District holds its own system and recommendations for professional development, but lacks strict and universally applied quantification of TPD requirements.

TPD incorporates traditional training and certification processes, with NGOs often playing a role in introducing CoPs and professional learning communities through projects such as Step by Step or SMART Balkans. Community of practice participation is not mandatory in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and involvement relies on teacher participation driven by personal interest and motivation. Schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina include mandatory School Aktivs, and these platforms act as CoP mechanisms at all school levels to encourage curriculum alignment and peer support.

Montenegro

TPD in Montenegro is regulated by the General Law on Education, which states that teachers are obliged to undertake professional development through approved programmes and activities. TPD is coordinated by the Bureau for Educational Services and the Centre for Vocational Education in cooperation with education institutions. Approved by the National Council for Education, TPD can be individual, formal and informal, including accredited training programmes, professional literature, demonstration and model lessons, classroom observation, participation in professional events, professional networks, and national and international conferences.

Accredited training programmes are selected through biennial public calls, and programmes meeting required standards are accredited by the National Council for Education and published in official catalogues, including offerings via the Bureau for Educational Services and Centre for Vocational Education. Teachers are obliged to undertake at least 24 hours of accredited training within five-year licence renewal cycles. At institutional levels, kindergartens and schools apply mandatory TPD based on annual identification of individual and institutional development needs through the preparation of school and individual professional development plans supported by professional development teams and school TPD coordinators. CoPs are also present in Montenegro through projects, regional collaborations and pilot initiatives, but CoPs are not currently embedded in or recognized by state policy.

North Macedonia

TPD frameworks are established for teaching in primary (nine grades) and secondary (four grades) education. Teachers are mandated to complete a minimum of 60 hours of CPD during a three-year cycle, including 40 hours via accredited programmes and 20 hours chosen individually. Individual CPD plans are approved by school principals and are aligned with requirements established with the Bureau for Development of Education. Integrated into TPD in North Macedonia are self-evaluation, appraisal and student outcomes, with schools monitoring CPD records and professional portfolios.

At the preschool level, professional development is regulated by the Law on Child Protection, which mandates CPD as both a right and an obligation. Every year, preschool institutions are expected to develop individual CPD plans based on the self-assessment of competencies,

institutional priorities and national education goals. While the law does not specify annual targets, the legislation nonetheless requires at least 20 hours of professional development through structured activities such as workshops, trainings and conferences as a requirement for the renewal of licences every five years.

Besides School Aktivs which operate in every school, CoPs predominantly emerge via externally funded or independent initiatives, such as practice-school networks with European Union-sponsored projects.

Serbia

TPD is regulated by legislation such as the Rulebook on CPD for education professionals. This regulation mandates all teachers (including preschool educators) must engage with TPD, including self-evaluation, to develop a personal CPD portfolio. This development may include peer-learning, mentoring or international exchange, and education employees are afforded the right and duty to complete at least 44 hours of professional development per year.

Professionals are mandated to attend at least one approved programme from the catalogue of professional training, at least one professional meeting, and international meetings. At the school-level, professional learning is also supported through school Aktivs, in which participation is mandatory, with the aim to ensure standardized curriculum implementation and facilitate professional communication and collaboration within schools.

To further understand the regional landscape of CoPs beyond School Aktivs in each country, a **mapping exercise** was conducted to identify active CoPs across the four countries:

- **In Bosnia and Herzegovina**, 18 CoPs were identified, with membership ranging between 1,214 and 30,700 members in regional groups (Balkanska Nastavnička Mreža). Among survey respondents, in 2024 the most attended CoPs were School Aktivs (44 per cent), followed by professional associations at canton/municipal/national level (29 per cent), and the Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step (7 per cent).
- **In Montenegro**, a total of 20 CoPs were identified, with membership ranging between 40 and 30,600 members in regional groups (EduBalkan). Among survey respondents, in 2024 the most attended CoPs were School Aktivs (61 per cent), Digitalna Škola (31 per cent) and Prosvjetna Zajednica (19 per cent).

- **In North Macedonia**, 44 CoPs were identified. Of these, 27 were national, with membership ranging between 83 and 250,000+ members (AI for Teachers). Among survey respondents, in 2024 the most attended CoPs were School Aktivs (74 per cent), EDUINO (23 per cent), Просветни работници (15 per cent) and Учители-одделенска настава (10 per cent).
- **In Serbia**, 56 CoPs were identified. Membership ranged between 6 and 33,000 participants (Kindergarten Clusters). Among survey respondents, the most commonly engaged with CoPs were School Aktivs (78 per cent), School Professional Councils (45 per cent), and Passport for Learning (28 per cent).
- **At the regional level**, 120 unique CoPs were mapped, including two CoPs identified in multiple countries, the Balkans Teachers Network (Balkanska nastavnička mreža) and the Association of the Best Teachers of Former Yugoslavia (Asocijacija najboljih nastavnika bivše Jugoslavije). Most CoPs operate at the national level (87), with a significant number extending cross-nationally (20). Most identified CoPs served all education levels (61), with specialized groups for primary (12), early childhood (6), secondary (3) and higher education (1).

4.2 CoP engagement in the Western Balkans

While nearly all responding teachers (99 per cent) had participated in CoPs before, their engagement in CoPs varied. For instance, 26 per cent of respondents had only ever engaged with a School Aktiv. To better quantify this variation and understand how engaged teachers are in CoPs, a four-point scale was developed based on their responses to questions in the survey. The scale groups respondents into 1) no or minimal CoP participation, 2) casual participation, 3) active participation, and 4) high participation. This scale was calculated according to the frequency of engagement across the five following domains of participation activity:

1. **Sharing lesson plans, resources or activities with other teachers:** 44 per cent of teachers and educators reported doing so weekly or monthly.
2. **Reading lesson plans, resources or activities shared by other teachers in teacher groups:** 40 per cent of teachers and educators reported doing so weekly or monthly.

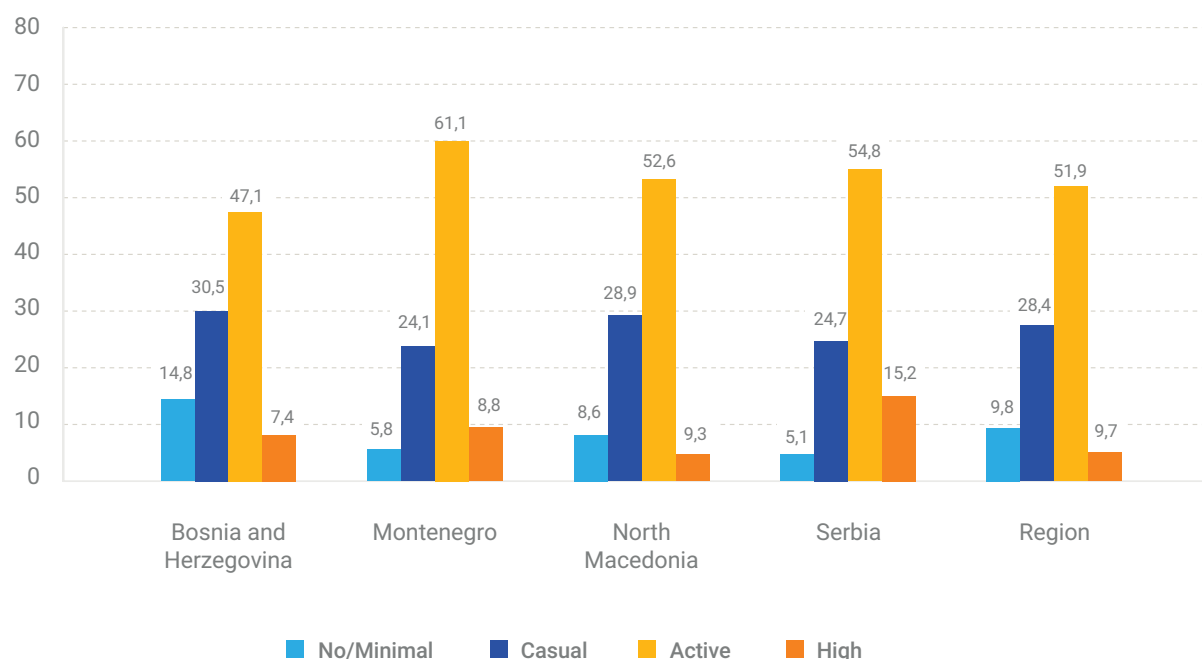
3. **Discussing teaching strategies with other teachers or education professionals:** 32 per cent of teachers and educators reported doing so weekly or monthly.
4. **Joining online groups or forums where teachers exchange ideas and materials:** 27 per cent of teachers and educators reported doing so weekly or monthly.
5. **Participating in meetings or events focused on improving or innovating teaching practices:** 27 per cent of teachers and educators reported doing so weekly or monthly.

In total, respondents were grouped as follows (see Figure 5):

- **No or minimal CoP participation:** 849 (10 per cent). These respondents report low-frequency engagement, never or only engaging once or twice per year across the five domains of participation activity.
- **Casual participation:** 2,446 (28 per cent). This group reported occasional engagement in at least one of the five domains of participation activity. However, their overall participation remains irregular, and does not extend consistently across all five domains.
- **Active participants:** 4,469 (52 per cent). This group reported regular engagement in one or more domains. This group includes respondents who participate actively in meetings, online forums or peer exchanges, but without this pattern being evidenced across all five domains.
- **High levels of CoP participation:** 835 (10 per cent). This group reported frequent engagement (monthly or weekly) in all five domains of participation activity. This group demonstrates comprehensive and sustained patterns of engagement across in- person and online platforms.



Figure 5: Regional engagement categories



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 8,599)

Participation depth remains relatively consistent at the country level, with Serbia holding a larger proportion of high levels of CoP participation, and Bosnia and Herzegovina a larger proportion of no or minimal participation.

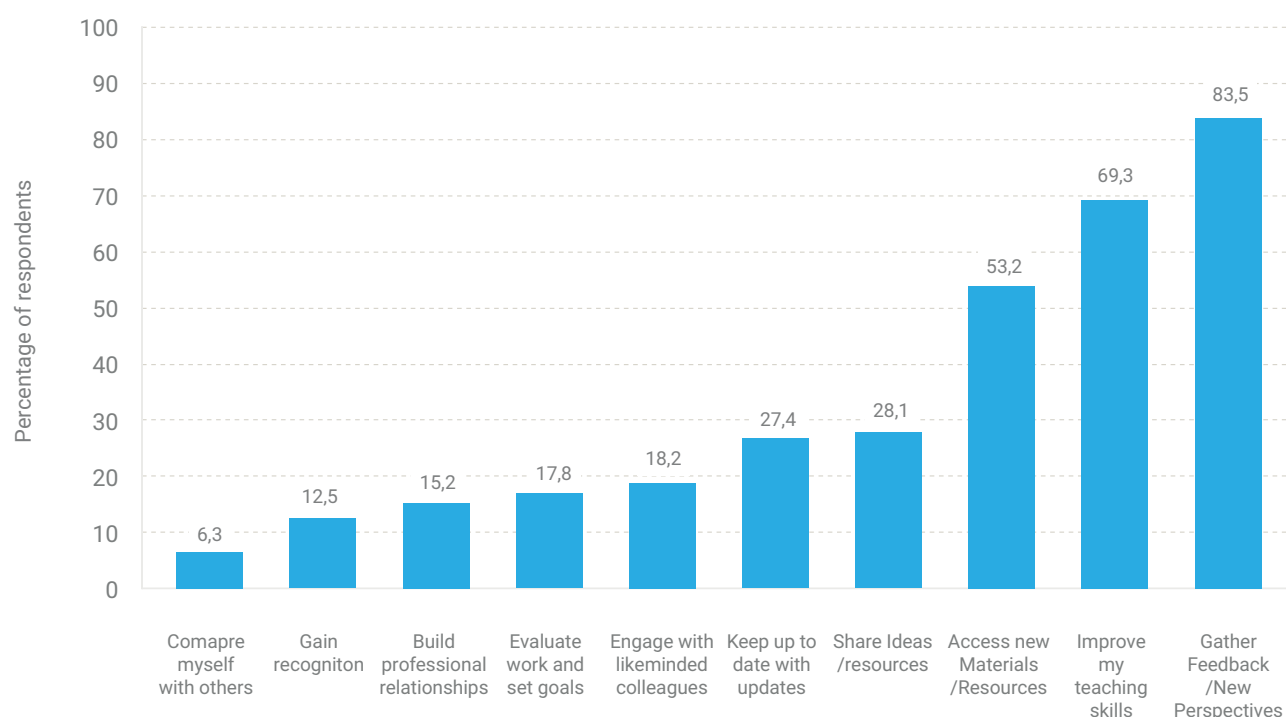
- **In Serbia**, 15 per cent of respondents held high levels of CoP participation, and 55 per cent were active participants. A quarter (25 per cent) were casual participants, and 5 per cent held no or minimal levels of CoP participation. Only 2 participants (< 1 per cent) had never participated in any CoP format at any time, and 20 per cent had only participated in their School Aktiv.
- **In Montenegro**, 9 per cent of respondents held high levels of CoP participation, 61 per cent were active participants, 24 per cent were casual participants, and 6 per cent demonstrated no or minimal CoP participation. Only 1 respondent (< 1 per cent) had never participated in any CoP at any time, and 34 per cent had only ever participated in their School Aktiv.
- **In North Macedonia**, 9 per cent of respondents held high levels of CoP participation, 53 per cent were active participants, 29 per cent were casual participants, and 9 per cent demonstrated no or minimal CoP participation. Only 29 respondents (< 1 per cent) had never engaged with any CoP at any time, and 26 per cent had only ever engaged in School Aktiv.

- **In Bosnia and Herzegovina**, 7 per cent of respondents held high levels of CoP participation, 47 per cent were active participants, 31 per cent were casual participants, and 15 per cent demonstrated no or minimal CoP participation. Overall, 31 participants (1 per cent) had never participated in any CoP format at any time, and 28 per cent had only participated in their School Aktiv.

4.3 Engagement motivations

Teachers are primarily motivated to engage with CoPs for skill development, practical content and classroom-relevant professional support. Quantitative results show that 84 per cent hope to gather feedback or new perspectives and ideas from colleagues, and 69 per cent participate to improve teaching skills (*Figure 6*).

Figure 6: Motivations to engage with other teachers



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 8,599)

When engaging with CoPs to access new materials, teachers typically look for practical content, and 54 per cent of respondents seek **lesson plans with interactive activities:**

[Teachers are] motivated by getting something concrete. Tools and methods they can apply depending on the problems they face in their classrooms ... We focus on practice. That's something [teachers] consistently highlight in external evaluations and evaluations of our trainings. Everything they learn can be applied directly in the classroom.

CoP leader, Bosnia and Herzegovina

For me personally, [CoPs are] always an opportunity to learn something. Any community, any exchange or specifically any seminar ... is an opportunity to hear from each other, number one. Number two, to exchange and learn from each other, and I think that's something that irreplicable in our professional work.

School expert associate, Serbia

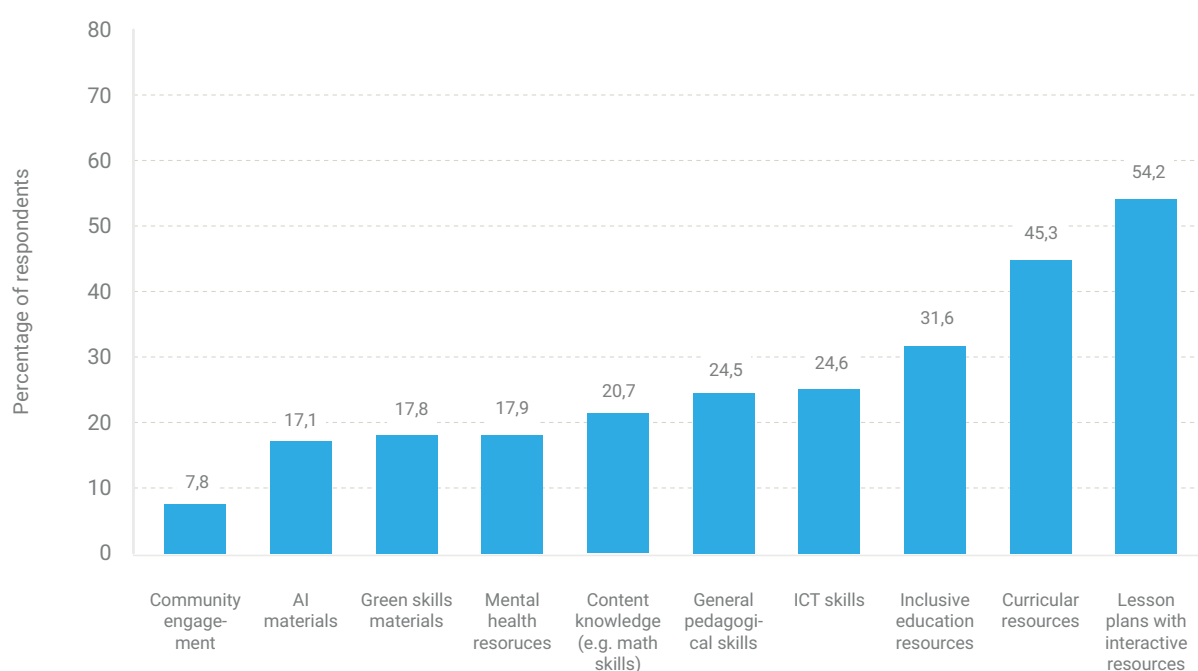
Other less common motivations include networking, reflective practice or seeking growth opportunities. For instance, only 18 per cent of respondents participate to evaluate their work and set goals, while 13 per cent participate to gain recognition or seek professional growth opportunities. Qualitative findings also show that factors such professional recognition are secondary motivations to engagement, with this data also emphasizing content relevant to the classroom setting.

When engaging with CoPs, teachers' motivations are nuanced and vary according to age, teaching experience, subject, teaching level and country (see Figure 7):

- **Younger and early-career teachers** are more likely than older peers to participate in CoPs to improve teaching skills and access practical resources. Over 80 per cent of teachers under 30 or in their first four years of work report being motivated by skill development and resources, compared with 60 per cent of those aged 50–65 or with 30+ years of experience.

- **Mid-career teachers** stand out for their desire to engage with and learn skills related to information and communications technology (ICT) and artificial intelligence (AI) content, with over a quarter prioritizing ICT and nearly one in five emphasizing AI. This shows that they want to build new skills which were not available when they began their careers.
- **Subject specializations** reinforce these patterns, and over a third of mathematics teachers emphasize subject knowledge, while ICT teachers show the strongest appetite for digital resources, with four in ten seeking IT skills, and a third AI content.
- By **teaching level**, primary teachers are the most likely to seek interactive lesson plans and curricular resources, while gymnasium (or secondary level) teachers prioritize ICT and AI content.

Figure 7: Teacher content preferences



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 8,599)

There are also interesting differences which emerge across countries.

- **In Serbia**, demand is lower for curricular resources or lesson plans (sought after by fewer than 30 per cent), compared with more than half of teachers elsewhere. This may be due to the larger number of kindergarten respondents from Serbia, who in the context of open child-led curricular for kindergartens in Serbia, are less likely overall to seek curricular resources (29 per cent) when compared with primary (61 per cent) or secondary/gymnasium (60 per cent) teachers

- **In North Macedonia**, demand skews towards digital innovation, with nearly one third of teachers seeking ICT content and one in five seeking AI material.
- **In Montenegro**, the demand for curricular resources dominates, with more than two thirds of teachers seeking in-class resources.
- **In Bosnia and Herzegovina**, a third of teachers prioritize green skills, and one in five highlight the demand for mental health resources.

Despite quantitative trends, qualitative data also revealed an appetite for forward-thinking material in CoPs:

I'm interested in how we'll apply AI in mathematics classes. That's what I need. Materials on that.

Teacher, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Practice-oriented exchange is a cross-cutting theme across all sociodemographic distinctions, despite some national differences.

More aspirational or holistic motivations such as professional recognition, self-evaluation or community engagement play secondary roles.



4.4 Social and structural barriers to participation

While there is widespread engagement in CoPs, research shows that 36 per cent of respondents face some kind of challenge or barrier to participating in CoPs (Figure 8). These constraints emerge in two forms.

The first concerns motivational factors shaping individual willingness to participate. Qualitative data shows that there are uneven levels of motivation among teachers to participate in CoPs. As illustrated in the quote below, in some CoPs there remain teachers who are engaged and active, alongside others who are more passive.

We're lucky to have many active teachers. Of the 20 teachers promoted in our canton, [many] were from our school. But even here, some remain passive. I think they chose the wrong profession. How can they inspire students to improve if they themselves don't grow?

Teacher, Bosnia and Herzegovina

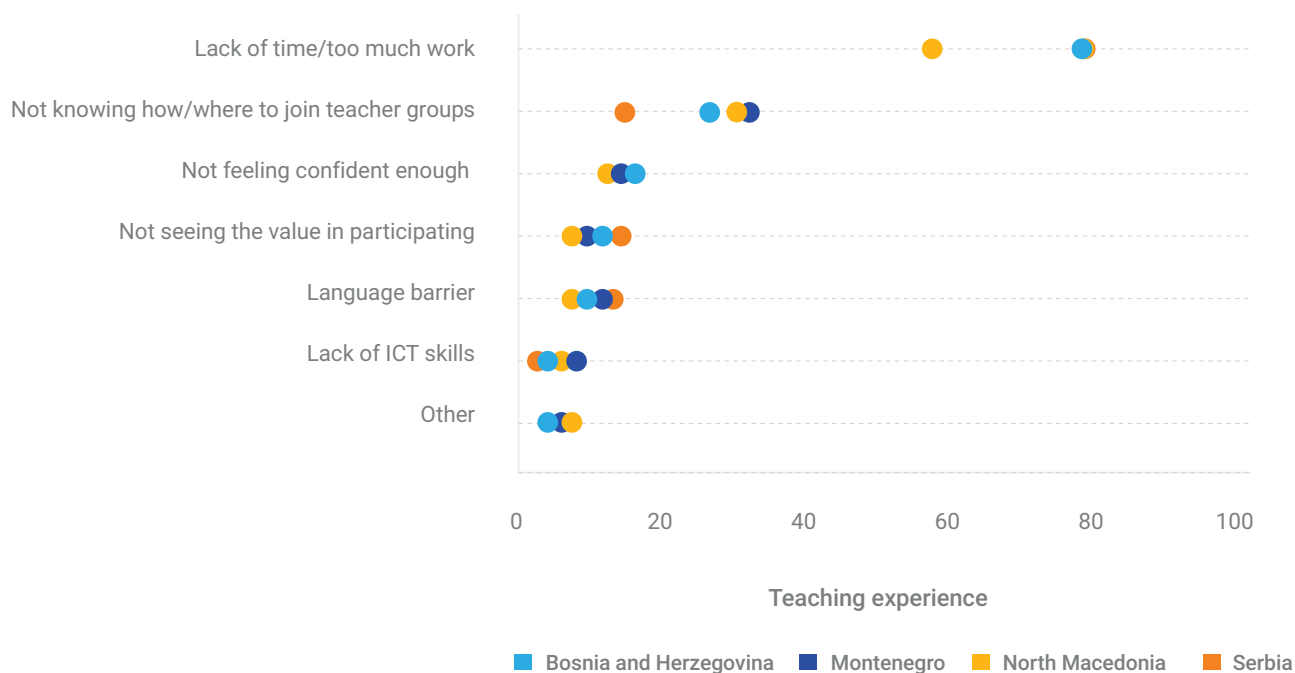
However, at local or individual levels motivation is often shaped by contextual and structural barriers. As such, **the second major group of barriers to participation are structural, including a lack time or information.** Surveys reveal 73 per cent of respondents cite a lack of time or too much workload, making this the most prominent barrier to CoP participation.

This matches with previous research, as time barriers are consistently cited in existing literature as key institutional constraints that inhibit participation in CoPs in other areas (Vangrieken et al. 2017; Brodie 2021). Moreover, nearly one third (27 per cent) cite not knowing how or where to join CoPs. Qualitative respondents also explicitly linked poor levels of individual motivation to wider socioeconomic or socio-structural pressures:

Passivity is evident. I believe socioeconomic and political factors shape passive mindsets. People become passive observers. That affects their personal life, too. Those who are active often disturb the status quo, and might be seen as problematic or discredited. So, passivity and apathy are the biggest barriers. Constant reforms also wear people down.

Teacher, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Figure 8: Reported barriers to CoP participation



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 3,075)

At the more individual or social level, structural constraints also refer to those outside the school. These can also constrain an individual's time, inhibiting participation, with some factors disproportionately affecting those with caring responsibilities, especially women:

... in the broadest sense, female educators in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot set aside weekends or afternoons because of the expectation, unfortunately, that they take on other responsibilities.

CoP leader, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The majority of the collective is female. Most are women, they have children, they need to go [to participate in a CoP], to lose a day [of classroom teaching]. There is the transportation, you can't make it, someone needs to replace you at school. There's no one to replace you at school that day. We already have a shortage of teachers, and now a teacher decides to go to some kind of training, there is no one to replace them...

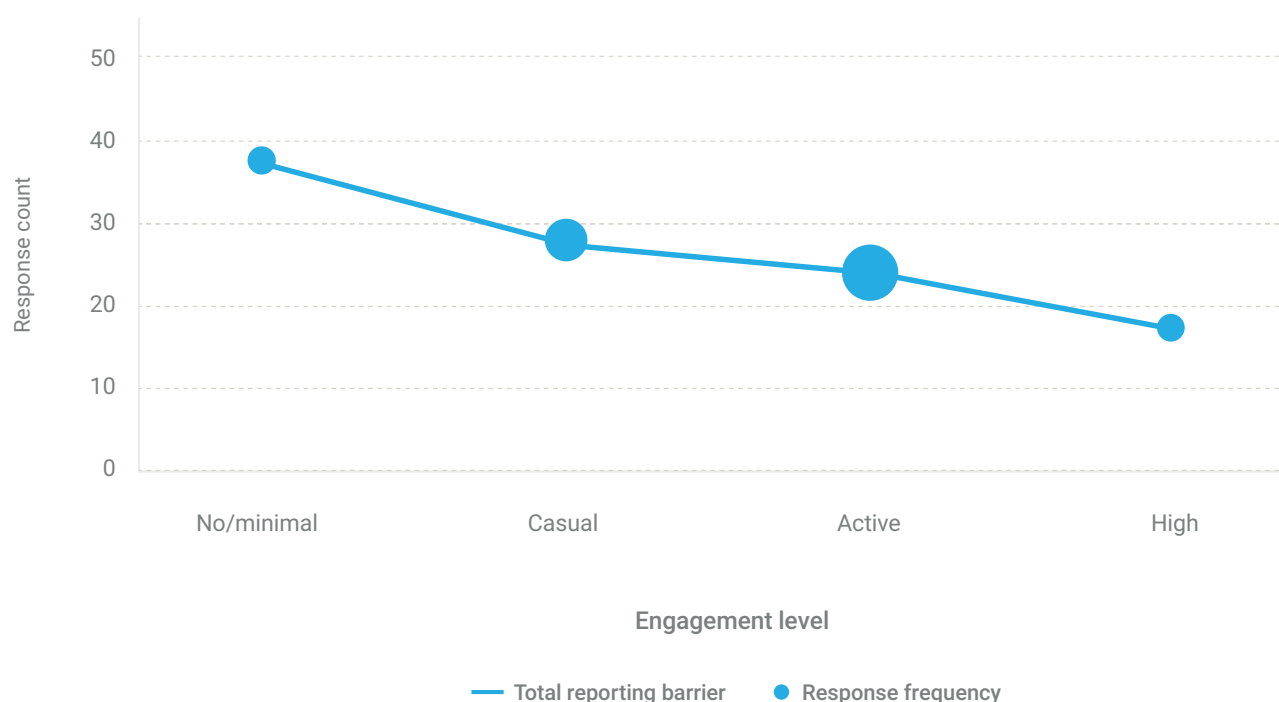
School associate, Montenegro

These findings are consistent with the existing literature, which emphasizes challenges to sustained participation when CoP members juggle multiple professional and personal responsibilities (Brodie 2021). While qualitative insights highlight CoP participation is shaped by individual dispositions, further quantitative analysis shows that the nature and intensity of barriers vary between countries:

- In **Serbia**, 44 per cent of teachers report experiencing barriers. Time and workload constraints dominate (cited by 80 per cent) among those reporting barriers.
- In **Montenegro**, 32 per cent report barriers to participating, rising to over half of secondary and vocational teachers. While workload was the most common issue for those experiencing barriers (cited by 80 per cent), knowledge gaps on how or where to join groups persist among teachers with no or minimal and casual engagement (44 per cent and 39 per cent respectively).
- In **North Macedonia**, respondents report the lowest level of barriers overall (27 per cent). Time and workload are the top issues for those who experienced barriers (cited by 59 per cent), but these are notably lower than in other countries. The lack of information on how to join groups, cited by 32 per cent, rises to 42 per cent among those with no or minimal participation.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** nearly half of all respondents (48 per cent) cite experiencing barriers, rising to 55 per cent among kindergarten teachers and dropping for primary, secondary and vocational teachers (47 per cent). Of those reporting barriers, a high proportion cite workload-related issues (80 per cent, rising to 85 per cent among secondary and vocational teachers). Information is cited by 27 per cent of teachers as a key barrier.

Only 5 per cent of respondents did not see the value in participating in CoPs, and even among those reporting no or minimal participation in CoPs, just 9 per cent did not see the value in participating. This suggests that limited participation is not driven by a lack of interest or perceived value. The key systemic barriers to engagement, especially among groups who are less engaged, are the lack of information and structural barriers such as time (*Figure 9*).

Figure 9: Information barriers and engagement level



Source: Aggregated national surveys (n = 3,075)

Motivation at the individual level can be strengthened by encouraging inclusivity locally. While there is high levels of CoP attendance, this can be expected as School Aktivs are mandatory, attendance however does not guarantee meaningful engagement, and sustained and deep participation also depends on personal and individual willingness to engage with CoPs at all:

Participation in the Aktiv is mandatory according to the law... [teachers] do not have a choice whether they participate or not. In other forms of CoP, not all educators are included, and this depends mostly on their personal motivation, desire for professional development, willingness to selflessly share their work, openness to change, readiness to hear criticism, and feedback from colleagues.

Education authorities, North Macedonia

While structural barriers are significant and participation is stymied by bureaucratic burdens, a lack of trust and social sanctioning also hinder individual motivation:

If this is for an honest conversation, I have to admit that people who stood out with their work, innovations, courage to try something and change, they were “contagious”, but not in such a way as to be expanded in the practice. But to be quarantined...

Education authorities, Serbia

Barriers are not solely about access, time or information, but about how structural and motivational constraints interact to produce uneven levels of engagement with CoPs. Even in instances where participation in groups is mandated, such as with School Aktivs, attendance does not automatically translate into active involvement and meaningful exchange. Teachers who face greater structural constraints, including time pressures, a lack of information on how or where to join CoPs, or competing personal responsibilities, may find it more difficult to become active participants, and could retreat into a passive role, thus reinforcing patterns of unequal engagement. Addressing both structural and social issues requires tackling barriers such as time or workload issues and improving access to information, but also needs fostering environments that emphasize collaboration, recognize teacher effort and nurture intrinsic motivation to participate. In doing so, CoPs can move beyond superficial or nominal participation towards deeper, sustained engagement that supports professional learning and peer exchange.

4.5 Impact through the career stage

More than three in four teachers in the Western Balkans agree that participating in CoPs has an impact on professional development. Reported benefits include gaining teaching and learning resources and ideas, and increasing classroom management skills. Findings reveal that perceived impact varies through the career trajectory, with early-career teachers emphasizing gains in classroom management, while later-career professionals place more emphasis on collaboration with colleagues.

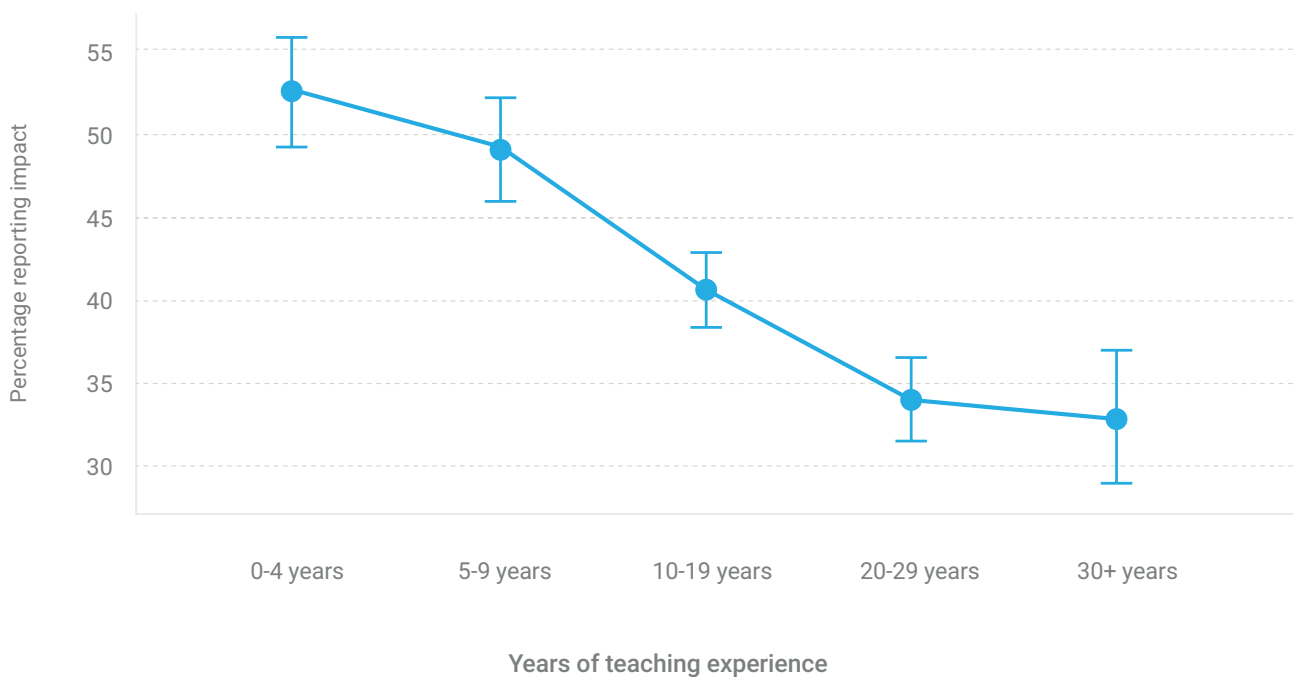
Over two thirds (69 per cent) of participants cite access to new teaching skills and resources as a key participation outcome, with qualitative findings showing the most tangible impact of CoPs often manifests directly in classroom practice:

When I returned from a training session, I would be eager to adapt what I had learned for my class, my students, and try it out with them. Education is a living process, it is constantly evolving, and I believe we must adapt our work accordingly.

School expert associate, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Early-career teachers report the strongest gains in classroom management skills and confidence, with a notable decline in classroom-focused outcomes as teaching experience rises. A regression model showed a strong and statistically significant relationship between teaching experience and the likelihood of reporting CoP participation improved classroom management ($\chi^2(4)=116.5$, $p<0.001$). Compared with teachers 30 in their first four years of work, those with 10–19, 20–29 and 30+ years of experience had significantly lower likelihood of identifying classroom management as a key benefit (Figure 10).

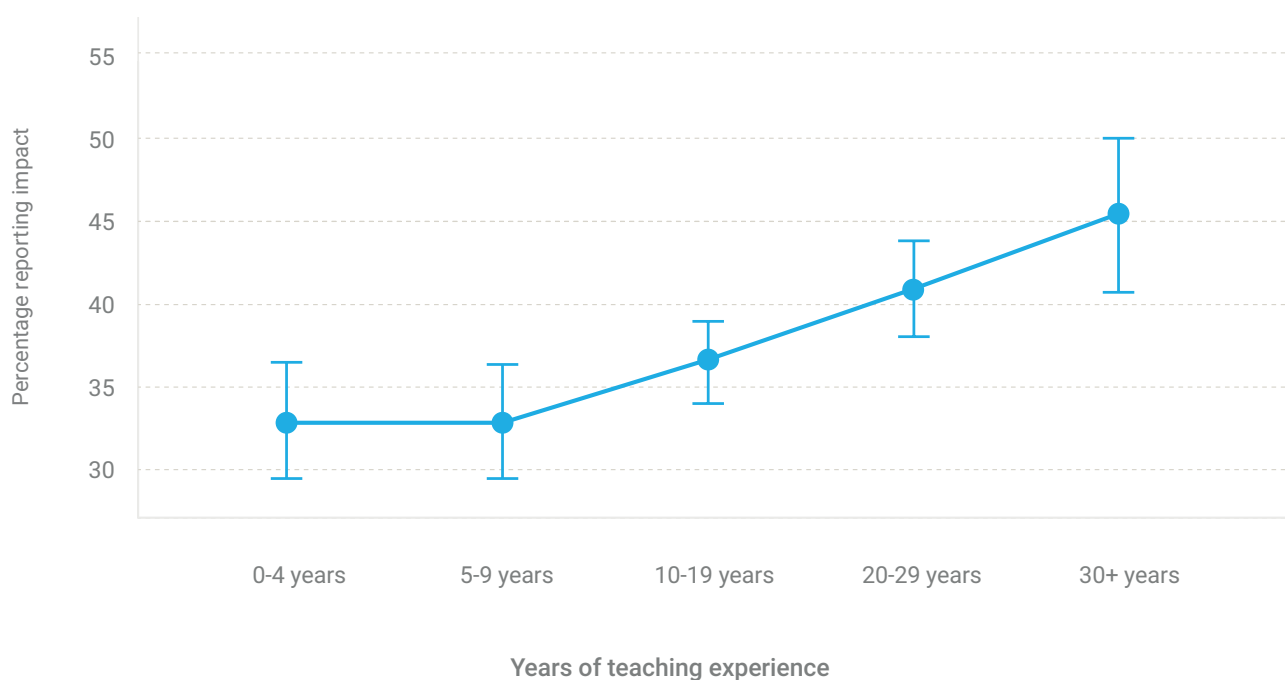
Figure 10: Classroom management outcome by teaching experience



Source: Aggregated teacher survey (n = 6,788)

In contrast, later-career teachers placed more emphasis on collaboration with colleagues than did their early-career peers. A regression model showing statistically significant association between experience and the likelihood of reporting increased collaboration ($\chi^2(4)=30.0$, $P<0.001$) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Collaboration outcome by teaching experience



Source: Aggregated teacher survey (n = 6,788)

Taken together, these results suggest CoP participation has a differentiated impact across the career span, with later-career teachers benefiting more from enhanced collaboration and peer exchange, while early-career teachers are more likely to gain practical skills to improve their teaching practice.

Although teaching experience was the most significant predictor of reported outcomes, other demographic variables also held an impact:

- **Gender:** Male respondents were less likely than female peers to feel participation afforded new teaching resources or materials (61 per cent compared with 71 per cent), and female respondents were more likely to feel CoPs offered emotional support (25 per cent compared with 17 per cent).
- **Teaching level:** Almost half of secondary and gymnasium teachers (47 per cent) reported an increase in collaboration, compared with 45 per cent of vocational, 34 per cent of primary and 40 per cent of kindergarten teachers. Building confidence is most reported among kindergarten teachers (41 per cent), with secondary (33 per cent), primary (31 per cent) and vocational (28 per cent) teachers reporting lower figures.

- **Country:** North Macedonia stands out as an exceptional case where 32 per cent of teachers saw CoPs as important for building professional networks, compared to just 8 per cent in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 6 per cent in Montenegro. Confidence as a key outcome was highest in Serbia (42 per cent) and lower in North Macedonia (34 per cent), Montenegro (28 per cent), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (26 per cent).

4.6 Relevance, collaboration and trust as key ingredients for success

Participants emphasized that professional impact emerges through CoPs which foster a sense of relevance, collaboration and trust.

Despite diverse reported impacts of CoP participation and differentiation through the career stage, findings showed that effectiveness is context-dependent, and contingent on a CoP's ability to create a sense of trust, foster collaboration and remain relevant.

Over half (58 per cent) of participants considered School Aktivs effective, making this the most selected modality. However, qualitative findings show the effectiveness of Aktivs is dependent on cooperation, preparedness and the willingness of members to engage:

A successful Aktiv is a cohesive Aktiv. An Aktiv where the teachers cooperate with each other ... where they jointly develop plans ... jointly prepare questions for exceptional students, and exchange experiences when encountering a problem...

Education authorities, North Macedonia

As in any group and community, [an Aktiv can be effective] if you have the will to move forward and support each other in that. [Aktivs] can work very well and achieve teacher development.

School leader, Montenegro

In Aktivs which did not hold a sense of trust or collaboration, respondents were more cynical about their potential effectiveness:

There is no discussion [in our Aktiv]. It does not exist. It absolutely does not exist. I mean zero per cent. The only thing we do is through Viber groups, through these social networks, or colleagues who may have worked together. So, we can exchange something, some of our ideas here and there, at a time when we are simply allowed to do so.

Preschool teacher, Serbia

Participants also acknowledged the advantages of online participation, but there is a persistent sense that online modalities are oversaturated. Online participation was described as often lending itself to box-ticking TPD exercises, especially when there is limited participation by members:

I would say [online group participation], it's more of an advantage. I mean, just the existence of technology and the entire online mode has opened up endless possibilities for us. But ... I think that COVID-19 has led to an overload of online models and the system of work ... Because now ... when I say "online seminar", this immediately triggers teachers to say "Give us something live."

Education authorities, North Macedonia

When we have these online meetings ... someone is registered on the list ... say, 30 participants in the training, but only five are actively talking or participating. The others don't participate, or are just there ... Their cameras and microphones are on, but they are not present ... They are registered as having attended the training, but they didn't participate at all, and they receive points, their [teaching] licence is renewed.

Teacher, Montenegro

Relevance and member participation is key to an effective CoP. While only one third (34 per cent) of respondents overall considered subject-based associations effective, subject-specific teachers are more likely to consider subject associations as effective. Among science teachers, 45 per cent considered subject associations effective, as well as 41 per cent of mathematics, art and social science teachers, and 40 per cent of language and ICT teachers:

I really love my subject group. I can proudly say it's one of the best in our school, probably in the city, maybe even in the canton ... We have a lot of joint activities, and for each one we assign a coordinator, but everyone participates ... I really love our group. We collaborate well. Our group includes a wide age range, from a teacher nearing retirement to one born in 1995. We older teachers support younger ones and include them in everything, while also letting them bring in new ideas. I'm truly proud of our subject group.

Teacher, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Patterns of perceived effectiveness by country, teaching level, age and experience show consistency, suggesting that the nature of the CoP itself drives perceptions of effectiveness, rather than demographic determinants.

Respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring that CoPs remain relevant and responsive to practical realities, with initiatives evolving naturally from needs identified by educators:

Everything we have developed in working with teachers, and what teachers themselves have developed through their classroom and school practice, has been a direct response to their needs ... Everything we have initiated, or are currently maintaining in our work, is shaped by ongoing feedback – whether it [the content] is needed, to what extent, and in what form – and then sustained over time.

Ministry of Education, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Trust is a foundation of effective CoPs, with leaders emphasizing that without trust, collaboration cannot be nurtured:

I'm trying to condense it [effectiveness of CoPs] into one word. I think the key word is trust. If there is no trust in what we do and believe in, then the community simply cannot exist. It's up to us not to squander that trust in any way. Leadership is difficult without trust. But if trust is present, everything becomes easier. So trust, responsibility to them [teachers] and to ourselves [CoP leaders], courage in leadership in the sense that we sometimes say things that they, unfortunately, are not in a position to say. We try to be the voice of that community, and people deeply value that, and we understand why that is.

CoP leader, Bosnia and Herzegovina

For respondents, this kind of trustworthy and nurturing environment was one which actively facilitated **reflexive practice among group members**:

[Ineffective] communities, people were... quite open to questioning their own practice and comparing it to others... people... were not afraid to question themselves... in terms of the practice that we carry out. [...] There is no better way to learn that [from] those who have experience and who are ready to question both their own experiences and the experiences of other people. It is an invaluable treasure for me.

Teacher, Serbia

Professionalism, respect and competency were underscored as integral to high-functioning CoPs. Specifically, participants valued effective collaboration, with the mutual recognition of expertise leading to cohesive and clear purpose:

The most valuable thing in our community is the mutual interaction and cohesion that exists among us ... It's a relationship that can't be described in any other way. We're not, let's say, friends ... It's a connection, and experience, between us, when you understand with a glance what you need to do in terms of work... It's not a private relationship, it's a professional relationship ... We sincerely respect each other.

CoP leader, North Macedonia

Effective communities are not defined by a singular format or a rigid repertoire of activities. For some teachers, an effective CoP is something that positively encroaches on everyday teaching and professional practice. For others, an effective CoP may be more about nurturing informal relationships between colleagues. Importantly, effective CoPs respond to some kind of need, are grounded in trust and emphasize collaborative practice.

4.7 Strengthening CoPs through stakeholder engagement and regional scale-up

Most participants (72 per cent) feel supported or very supported to participate with CoPs, but those who are the least engaged feel the least supported. Over half (53 per cent) of those with no or minimal participation feel they have little or no support. Research participants supported three key pathways to strengthen participation across the Western Balkans: **increased funding, more structured links with TPD frameworks and regional collaboration based on shared educational legacies.**

Teachers see funding as essential for sustaining CoPs, with 77 per cent advocating for increased funding for resources and regular community activities, but how funds should be used is unclear.

Although this underscores that teachers see CoPs as needing robust material support to sustain engagement, both survey and qualitative data did not specify how such funds should be allocated, suggesting the need for further research on how financial resources can most effectively be mobilized to support CoPs.

Teachers want CoPs to be tied to career progression and professional recognition. 43 per cent of respondents reported that more structured professional development tied to CoPs would facilitate and encourage their participation. This direct link between participation and career development, would enhance personal motivation. As one education official explained:

We have educators who want to invest in their growth, and the Ministry needs to find a way to recognize and reward their efforts. One way to do this would be by introducing teacher licencing regulations and clear career progression policies. Perhaps participation in CoPs could be included as one of the professional development requirements.

Ministry of Education, Bosnia and Herzegovina

However, validation workshops in countries revealed a disconnect between teachers and institutional leaders, while teachers saw CoPs as meaningful spaces for sharing ideas and building classroom skills that should be recognized, institutional actors often tended to view them as informal, a product of individual motivation, and secondary to official TPD:

I think the only salvation here is actually dialogue, that there is an active dialogue between teachers and those institutions that are responsible for teachers ... If we can't react to it, if we can't express our confusion, if we can't ask why that is, if we can't ultimately say what the obstacles are to making [TPD] happen at all.

Teacher, Serbia

Despite this tension, a key barrier identified during workshops to further institutional support was the lack of a robust monitoring system for CoPs. Participatory workshops highlighted that any formal advocacy or engagement from government or pedagogical institutions would require some kind of validation mechanism that ensured the legitimacy, relevance and safety of CoPs. As such, there is a need to **develop quality standard without over formalizing** by creating quality benchmarks in collaboration with stakeholders including teachers, CoP leaders, NGOs and ministries.

Although time is a key structural barrier, there is only modest support for dedicated hours for CoP participation. Only 23 per cent support more time allocation for CoP participation during working hours (rising to 30 per cent in Serbia, 29 per cent in Montenegro, and 27 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while dropping to 18 per cent in North Macedonia). However, qualitative data underscored time and workload as a critical barrier, alongside calls for financial and technical support:

Time allocation during working hours would help, and financial support is also important. Regarding technical resources ... I believe our schools are already well-equipped in terms of technology to support such initiatives.

Ministry of Education, Bosnia and Herzegovina

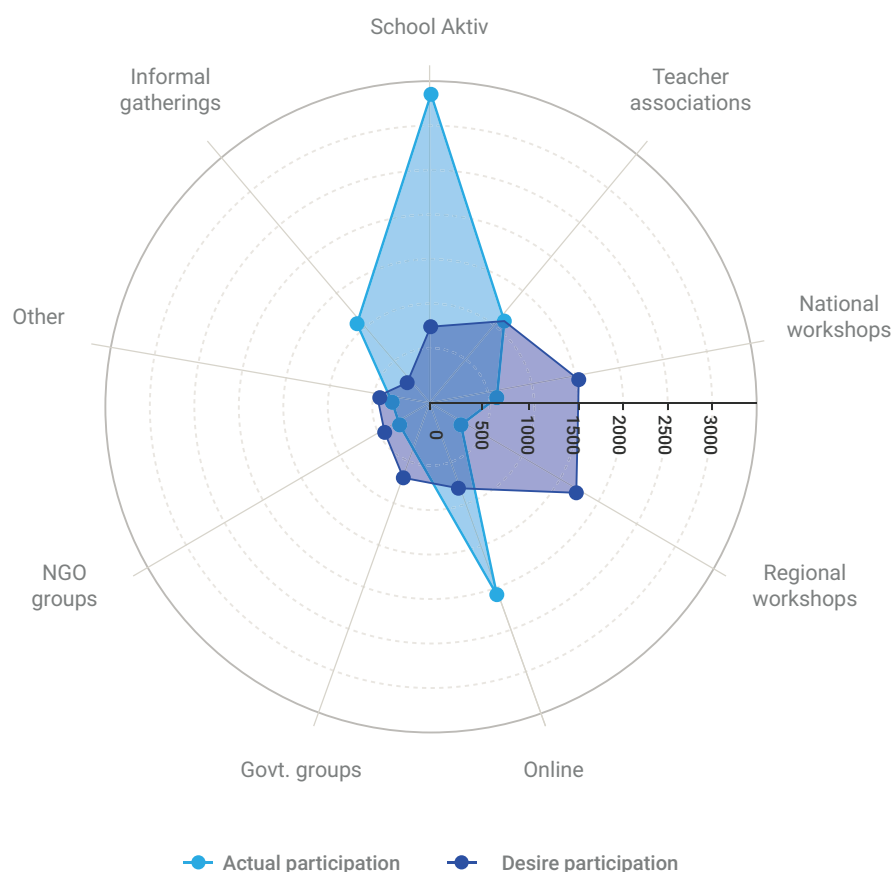
Teachers consistently see shared educational legacies as a foundation for regional cooperation, and across the Western Balkans there is an emphasis that a **common educational legacy** and **shared challenges** create a strong incentive for regional collaboration:

Every teacher is a reflective practitioner ... I believe that exchanging experiences at a broader regional level would be highly beneficial for those eager to learn.

Ministry of Education, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Teachers want more regional exchange, far exceeding current participation levels. Currently, only 9 per cent of respondents participate in regional CoPs, yet 37 per cent said they would like to (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Actual versus desired participation



Source: Aggregated teacher survey (n = 8,599)

Qualitative findings show that regional collaboration provides an opportunity to offer **long-term, systemic solutions to shared challenges:**

The educational legacy of the region is largely the same. We were all raised on the same books, and even today the same theories prevail. I'm immensely proud of this part of the world. I believe connecting teachers across the region can only do good. Almost all former-Yugoslav countries face the same challenges, mostly related to the quality of the teaching profession and the fact that society doesn't value education as it should. A regional alliance would bring about a kind of renaissance, and we see that when we give teachers the chance to share, collaborate, socialize and so on.

CoP leader, Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the Balkans ... I think that we are all stuck in the Balkans with this kind of system. I don't believe that there is anything better, considering what I follow. Maybe, let's say, Croatia.

Teacher, North Macedonia

Regional similarities make cross-border exchange invaluable, and existing networks suggest there are many educators already exchanging in the region. Although research shows that participants are realistic about the practical barriers to participation such as time and recognition, these barriers can be addressed while also pointing to the valuable opportunity for regional scale-up of CoPs.





CHAPTER 5

Conclusion: Emphasizing communities of practice within professional development

Teacher CoPs are powerful spaces for professional growth, collaboration and peer support. This study has demonstrated that while teachers value CoPs for their practical relevance and impact on classroom practice, further participation is often stifled by structural barriers such as limited time or a lack of information, and social barriers that shape individual motivation to participate. Potential pathways to address these barriers were identified, including further embedding CoPs within TPD frameworks, ensuring entry pathways into CoPs are clear and providing sustained support.

Given the shared educational legacies of countries in the Western Balkans, and regional appetite to collaborate, respondents reported a desire to scale up CoPs across borders.

This research has highlighted the central role which CoPs play in supporting TPD. In the Western Balkans, teachers consistently recognize CoPs as spaces

where professional learning is relevant, practical and collaborative. The evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia shows that CoPs equip teachers with new skills and resources, foster confidence, enhance collegiality, and build stronger professional identities.

CoPs are more than a meeting. They empower teachers, bridge gaps between policy and practice, and create sustainable peer-driven learning cultures. Ministries, schools and education practitioners should look to invest in CoPs, not only to strengthen local teacher capacity, but to build the quality of education systems.

5.1 Policy and programme recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, this report makes six recommendations for future programme and policy initiatives. These recommendations are not mutually exclusive. They should be understood holistically and integrated as comprehensively as possible.



1. Develop and communicate accessible databases of recognized CoPs. Ministries of Education, pedagogical institutes and key stakeholders such as UNICEF should establish national and regional databases of recognized CoPs. Databases should be user-friendly (in dashboards or official portals) and include details on scope, membership, participation modality and focus area. Clear quality standards such as relevance, inclusivity, peer-led interaction and regular activity should guide inclusion. Alongside database development, institutions should actively communicate how teachers can access these CoPs through targeted outreach and information campaigns, teacher unions, School Aktivs, and leadership channels.



2. Develop quality assurance standards for CoPs. Findings from the validation workshops suggested that policy and programme leaders should work to introduce guidance and quality standards for CoPs to enable them to effectively support and advertise CoPs. These standards could include minimum interaction standards, collaborative planning and the extent of peer feedback expected in CoPs. Any criteria should be co-developed with teachers, CoP leaders, and ministries and institutes responsible for TPD. This would allow ministries to ensure

that any recognized community of practice meets an agreed set of minimum standards, and in collaboration with users it could ensure these standards are outcome-oriented rather than driven by rigid process measures. By working with teachers to develop these standards, stakeholders can strengthen teacher ownership and motivation, while also creating a space within which to guide investment and interventions of CSOs for more impactful TPD.



3. Embed CoPs into professional development pathways. Teachers reported that they see value in CoPs, but given the time required to participate a more formal recognition of their efforts would provide more value and motivation for their engagement. To address this need, ministries and professional development institutions should consider formally recognizing CoPs as an integral component of TPD, ensuring their value is embedded throughout a teacher's career progression. This would require institutional recognition and incentives such as awarding CPD credits, career progression points, or mentorship and adviser titles linked to sustained CoP engagement.



4. Allocate time and resources for participation. Ministries and schools should consider policy directions that allow for dedicated time for CoP engagement. This is particularly the case for early-career teachers who benefit strongly from peer support, and those teachers who hold additional caring responsibilities that inhibit their capacity to participate outside of working hours.



5. Support inclusive CoP leadership and facilitation. Education partners including UNICEF and pedagogical institutes can work to provide training opportunities to CoP facilitators on moderation, inclusion and collaborative methods. This could encourage shared leadership models so that the responsibility for managing CoPs is more equitably distributed, rather than relying solely on individual leadership.



6. Foster regional exchange and collaboration. There is clear appetite for regional participation and developing or supporting a Western Balkans regional CoP hub could help to connect national networks and build on shared language and educational legacies. There is also scope to pilot regional thematic CoPs (e.g. science, technology, engineering and mathematics [STEM], digital pedagogy, inclusive education) to share good practices in the region.

Acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
CoP	Community of practice
CPD	Continuous professional development
CSO	Civil society organization
FGD	Focus group discussion
ICT	Information and communications technology
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TPD	Teacher professional development

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