



POLICY BRIEF

More than a Meeting

Building effective teacher communities of practice in Montenegro

Teachers across Montenegro engage in communities of practice (CoPs) with strong interest in resource-sharing and collaboration. But there are significant structural barriers which prevent deeper participation. This research highlights how teachers engage with CoPs, what challenges they face, and how CoPs can be better integrated in sustained professional development.

KEY FINDINGS

- Participation is common and often practical. Teachers in Montenegro usually engage with CoPs to access classroom resources and to enhance teaching skills. But there is less explicit focus on professional development.
- Demographic factors do not drive engagement. CoP participation does not significantly vary by age, teaching experience or subject taught. Access, visibility and motivation are key to engagement.
- Barriers are structural, not attitudinal. Time and workload pressures are seen as the main engagement barrier, and 44% of teachers with low participation levels do not know how or where to join a CoP.
- There is demand for diverse CoP formats. There is little support for online-only formats, and in-person modalities are preferred. Many teachers seek more ambitious forms of collaboration, including regional workshops and communities.

Context

Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of individuals, in this case educators, who come together due to common interests and motivations to learn and share among one another. In the Western Balkans, significant efforts have been made to create and strengthen CoPs among teachers and education professionals, to enhance education and skills development.

This research is part of a regional partnership between UNICEF Country Offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and UNICEF Innocenti. The goal of this research is to generate actionable evidence which can strengthen the sustainability and impact of CoP-related interventions in the Western Balkans.

This brief focuses on Montenegro. In preschool and inclusive education programmes, UNICEF Montenegro has focused on regular coaching and peer support learning. The development and implementation of the Digital School (Digitalna Škola) platform has provided a new window of opportunity for creating dynamic and effective CoPs that recognize the potential of digital technologies.



Note: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory in the delimitation.

This research brief offers insight into the dynamics of teacher engagement in CoPs in Montenegro. It summarizes key findings from a self-administered online survey of teachers and educators conducted across Montenegro between December 2024 and April 2025, and from qualitative interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders, including teachers. The survey relied on self-reported data and was disseminated through Ministries of Education and UNICEF-supported networks. The survey explored participation habits in CoPs, their perceived impact, and barriers to engagement. Findings are intended to inform policy and programming that support inclusive, relevant and sustainable professional learning communities. Although the survey relied on self-reported data and a non-random sample, respondent profiles showed broad distribution of engagement levels, mitigating the risk of overrepresentation of engaged teachers.

- Of 611 survey respondents, 536 (88 per cent) were female and 75 (12 per cent) were male.
- 57 respondents (9 per cent) were aged between 18–30, 165 (27 per cent) aged 31–40, 211 (35 per cent) aged 41–50 and 178 aged 50–65 (29 per cent). The average age of respondents was 44.6 years.
- 66 (11 per cent) respondents reported 0–4 years of teaching experience, 114 (19 per cent) 5–9 years, 199 (33 per cent) 10–19 years, 142 (23 per cent) 20–29 years and 90 (15 per cent) over 30 years of experience.
- 115 (19 per cent) of respondents taught at kindergarten/pre-primary levels, 445 (73 per cent) at primary, 37 (6 per cent) at secondary and 37 (6 per cent) at vocational levels.

How do teachers engage with communities of practice?

Respondents were asked how often they engage with the following on a weekly or monthly basis:

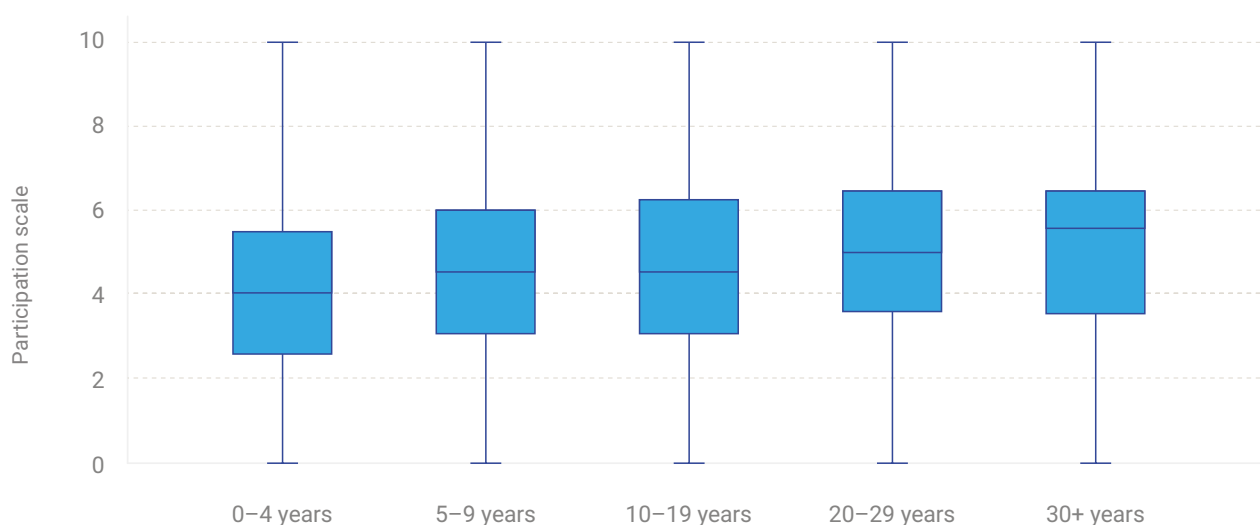
- 53 per cent report sharing lesson plans, resources or activities with other teachers.
- 42 per cent report reading lesson plans, resources or activities shared by other teachers in teacher groups.

- 31 per cent report participating in meetings or events focused on improving or innovating teaching practices.
- 30 per cent report joining online groups or forums where teachers exchange ideas and materials.
- 27 per cent report discussing teaching strategies with other teachers or education professionals.

Figure 1. CoP engagement



Figure 2. CoP participation scale by teaching experience



Responses on engagement habits and frequency were used to calculate a teacher participation scale from 0 to 10, acting as a proxy for depth of CoP engagement. The average teacher engagement scale in Montenegro was 5.3, suggesting moderate levels of CoP engagement. Compared to other countries in the region, Montenegro scored similarly (Bosnia and Herzegovina 4.6, North Macedonia 5.3, Serbia 5.6). Analysis showed that characteristics including gender, teaching level, age and experience do not appear to meaningfully influence participation in CoPs in Montenegro. Engagement levels were consistent across preschool and schoolteachers with no statistically significant differences ($p=0.645$), and between teachers of different subjects ($p=0.234$). Participation did not vary significantly across age groups ($p=0.0494$) or experience levels ($p=0.774$), with all groups showing comparable average scores with only minor differences in average participation.

A linear regression model confirmed these findings, and neither gender, age nor years of teaching experience were found to be statistically significant and thus reliable predictors of CoP participation. **These results suggest demographic and professional background are not strong determinants of CoP engagement in Montenegro, and that factors such as accessibility, perceived barriers and motivation are more salient in shaping teacher participation.**

What does CoP engagement look like?

In Montenegro, teacher engagement with CoPs is often driven by practical exchange.

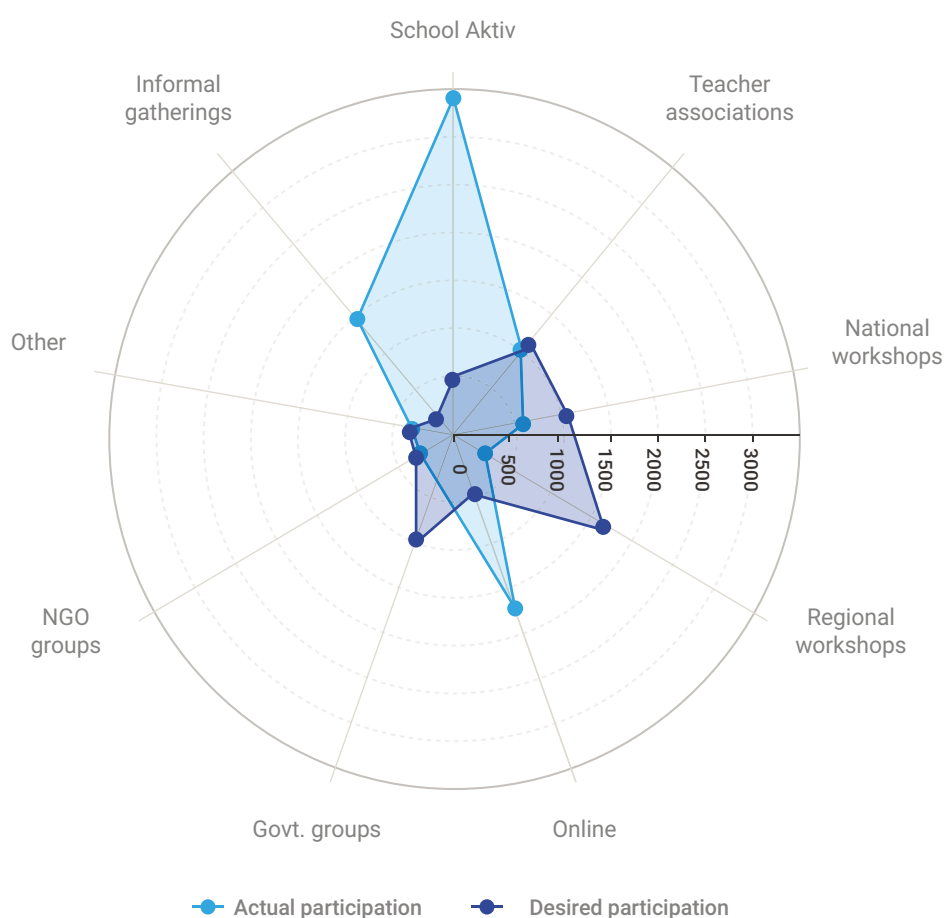
Teachers regularly participate in CoPs to access ready-to-use materials such as curricular resources (70 per cent), with fewer engaging with CoPs for reflective dialogue practices such as self-evaluation (17 per cent). Participation is largely functional, and engagement is shaped by resource access rather than professional innovation. However, analysis shows that there is meaningful appetite for deeper forms of engagement, especially where CoPs can be seen as accessible and relevant.

Although there are similar levels of engagement within subject areas, teaching levels and age groups, patterns and routines of participation vary between backgrounds. For instance, **preschool teachers are more likely than schoolteachers to access curricular resources** (74 versus 51 per cent), and **younger teachers are also significantly more likely to seek out curricular content**, with 75 per cent of those aged 18–30 doing so compared to 50 per cent of those aged 50–65.

- **Engagement is often practical and resource-focused:** Most teachers (70 per cent) join CoPs to access curricular resources, and 55 per cent seek interactive lesson plans. Only 17 per cent use CoPs for self-evaluation, and just 9 per cent participate to build professional relationships.
- **Most teachers engage in one or two CoP modalities, and few engage across formats:** Participation is common, but only 29 per cent of teachers report involvement in more than two types of CoP. School-based groups such as School Aktivs* dominate, with lower uptake of national, regional or NGO/government-led initiatives.
- **Participation and effectiveness diverge:** Despite frequent engagement in online platforms (45 per cent participate), only 27 per cent find online modalities effective. Similarly, although 84 per cent report active involvement in School Aktivs, only 54 per cent currently recognize them as an effective modality.
- **Informal modalities are popular, but unrecognized:** Informal teacher gatherings with colleagues are engaged with by 37 per cent of respondents, 42 per cent of whom consider informal participation an effective modality. Although informal groups are one of the more common formats, they are rarely highlighted in policy or programming, and there is opportunity to emphasize informal CoPs in future policy decisions.
- **Actual and desired participation modalities diverge:** Many teachers desire to engage in more diverse CoP formats, including 43 per cent who want to participate in regional workshops, and 30 per cent who seek further participation in teacher associations. Currently, only 8 per cent join with regional events, pointing to latent demand for more diverse and ambitious CoP formats.

* 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.

Figure 3. Actual versus desired participation in CoPs



What motivates CoP participation?

Teacher motivations to participate in CoPs are rooted in skill-based development needs and collaborative values. Although traditional links to teacher professional

development (TPD) are more limited, with only 17 per cent participating in self-reflection and 9 per cent joining CoPs to build professional relationships, broader motivations reveal CoPs are often seen as vehicles for the practical growth of teaching skills. For example, 74 per cent participate to improve teaching skills or student learning, 85 per cent are motivated by gaining fresh perspectives and feedback, and 50 per cent are motivated by the opportunity to collaborate with peers.

Although teachers highlight the importance of practicality and tangible teaching outcomes, **qualitative data reveals motivation can be highly individual.** Several teachers noted that even when access is provided, structural factors can inhibit participation, and that personal drive, perceived relevance and surrounding school cultures might limit deeper engagement. For some teachers, CoPs feel abstract or disconnected from teaching realities unless explicitly supported by school leaders or peers.

“I think motivation is the main ... obstacle ... If we don’t have motivation, everything is useless, no matter how accessible it is ... If motivation is absent, it’s a really, really limiting factor.”

Teacher

Montenegro

These findings suggest that to encourage deeper engagement, CoPs may need to offer more than just resources or meeting spaces. CoPs should appeal to a range of teaching skills that are clearly linked to classroom practices in ways that are relevant to local professional cultures and teaching needs.

What are the key barriers to engagement?

Despite widespread enthusiasm in Montenegro, participation is hampered by structural and knowledge-related barriers. The most cited reason for not participating in CoPs was a lack of time or workload (59 per cent). Among those reporting they experienced barriers to engagement, **32 per cent stated that not knowing how or where to join CoPs was a key barrier**, with this **figure increasing to 44 per cent among those who demonstrate no or minimal CoP engagement**. However, even among teachers who show no or minimal CoP participation, 75 per cent continue to recognize CoPs as valuable for TPD.

“We’ve commented before that teachers might find it difficult [to find CoPs] because they look for information in different places or connect in different ways. It would be good if everything were implemented into a single online community.”

CoP manager

Montenegro

These findings suggest non-participation is **driven less by lack of interest, and more by limited visibility and systemic constraints**. Barriers such as information and communication technology (ICT) skills were cited much less frequently (by only 8 per cent), indicating access modalities are less of a concern than coordination or clarity on how to join in the first place. Addressing structural constraints and strengthening the link between CoPs and TPD is key. Notably, **53 per cent of teachers with no or minimal CoP participation support the idea of recognizing CoP involvement as a formal part of TPD** or developing more structured opportunities linking CoPs and with TPD, pointing to practical entry points for bolstering engagement.

How can we encourage engagement?

CoPs offer a practical and scalable model for TPD in Montenegro. There is an immediate opportunity to expand CoP use by institutionalizing teacher groups within the education system and TPD pathways. Authorities should lead by adopting targeted, accessible approaches that remove participation barriers and build individual motivation, while working closely with schools and drawing on UNICEF's technical and coordination expertise.



1. Leverage school-based structures: School-based platforms are widely used and are accessible, but there is an opportunity to increase their effectiveness. A total of 84 per cent of teachers report actively participating in School Aktivs, with 72 per cent considering them accessible and 54 per cent seeing them as effective. Aktivs are the most embedded CoP modality in Montenegro, and these existing structures can serve as a foundational site for more sustained, peer-driven collaboration for broader local CoP activity. By activating the latent potential of school-based groups, policymakers can provide a familiar gateway to deepen CoPs within TPD.



2. Address knowledge barriers and improve visibility: There is a mismatch between enthusiasm for CoPs and a lack of clarity about how to access them. Among respondents experiencing barriers to participation, 32 per cent state they did not know how or where to join a CoP, a figure which rises to 44 per cent among those reporting no or minimal CoP participation. Improving awareness and streamlining access via centralized information platforms could help unlock demand among less engaged groups, helping those teachers who want to engage but do not know where to begin.



3. Broaden the purpose of CoPs: Many teachers engage with CoPs as resource-sharing platforms and to strengthen practical teaching skills, but there are fewer forms of engagement explicitly oriented to TPD. While 70 per cent of teachers engage in CoPs to access curricular materials and 55 per cent to find lesson plans or activities, only 17 per cent engage in self-evaluation or reflective practices. There is a valuable opportunity to emphasize that CoPs are spaces not just for tools, but collaboration, feedback, and pedagogical and personal enquiry.



4. Motivate participation with structured development and recognition:

Teachers indicated support for recognizing CoP participation as a component of structured professional development. Among all respondents, 43 per cent support linking CoPs to TPD opportunities, with this figure increasing to 53 per cent among those who demonstrate no or little participation in CoPs. Incentive structures that seek to increase individual motivation, such as aligning CoP membership with professional development frameworks, could meaningfully raise engagement.



5. Promote engagement with regional collaboration: There is a mismatch between actual participation in CoPs and aspirations for more diverse formats including regional learning exchanges. This dichotomy provides valuable opportunity for exploratory initiatives at the regional level. Currently, only 14 per cent engage in government-facilitated groups, and only 9 per cent in national events. Only 5 per cent advocate for online-only formats, while 96 per cent show a preference in-person or hybrid modalities. Given that 43 per cent of respondents highlight support for regional CoPs and workshops, cross-school regional learning is well-supported. While any regional initiatives must be grounded in formats that teachers already trust and engage with, namely hybrid or in-person participation, there is a strong demand for regional learning which local leaders can look to tap into to proliferate participation.

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