



STRONGER TOGETHER: STRENGTHENING THE DYNAMIC ACCOUNTABILITY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

SUMMARY OF OUR CONSULTATION AND PLAN FOR THE WAY FORWARD

Overview

Our in-depth consultation process ([full report available here](#)) has shown that the **Dynamic Accountability Community of Practice** (DACP) is space that is valued by its members and is of interest to wider stakeholders, even if current participation remains patchy. This suggests that the community is viable and worthy of our continued time and investment, but only if we can make the changes required to sustainably increase coordination capacity, boost engagement, and deliver more practical outcomes for community members. To do this, we now need to consider the way forward “options” outlined in the consultation report to make some collective decisions on updating DACP’s aims, approaches and structures. We also need to agree a plan for how we put these changes into practice.

This summary provides an overview of the consultation process’ findings, along with an initial proposal on the way forward from the current DACP coordinators.

This work would not have been possible without the extensive work of our research consultant Sarah Rose, and the generosity of members and non-members who gave up their time to participate in the consultation- thank you all!

Background

DACP is a space for organisations and practitioners to come together to share practices and network on this topic. DACP’s convening organisations have provided a range of formats and options for engagement, and have explored the views of DACP members to understand what does and doesn’t work. There has been positive feedback but sustained engagement is still a challenge. In March this year, as DACP approached its third birthday, we started a process to better understand the enablers and barriers for member participation, and identify ideas for securing a prosperous and sustainable future for the community.

What makes a good Community of Practice (CoP)?

CoPs are usually a loosely affiliated network of people coming together to engage in joint discussion, learning and other activities on a topic of common interest. They have a focus on action and real-life work, rather than theory. They are often voluntary and self-governing in nature. In general, effective CoPs tend to require:



1. Strong leadership.
2. Shared interest and focus on a topic.
3. People's time and capacity to engage.
4. Consistent communication.
5. The ability to grow (effectively take on new members).
6. Different opportunities to participate, and flexibility around what participating looks like

What context is the DACoP operating in?

There is increasing consensus behind the need for greater accountability in the civil society sector, including to 'shift power' to local communities and actors. Many organisations have already started putting this into practice, but overall there is still huge scope for further improvement. This presents groups like the DACoP with a lot of opportunity to support colleagues across the sector to come together on this topic, to create knowledge and share what works.

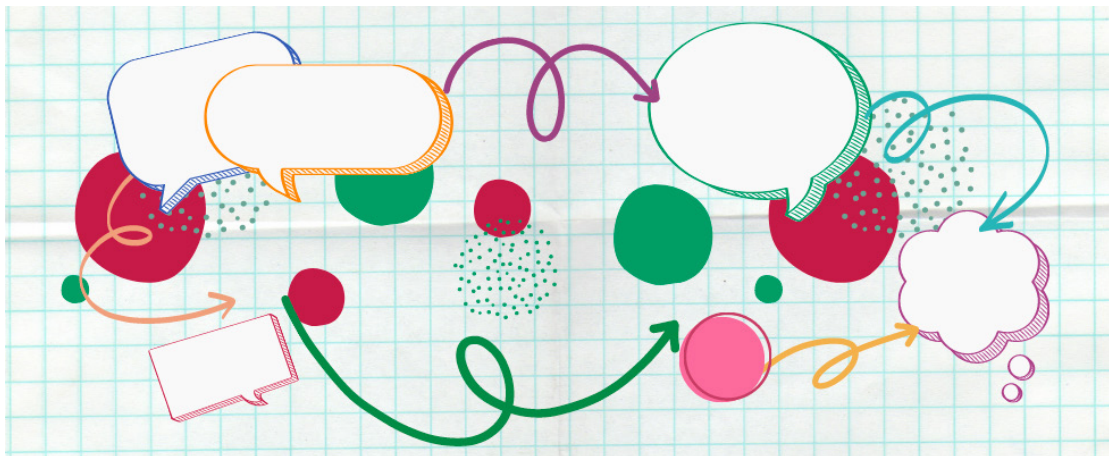
However, we are in a period of post pandemic digital exhaustion. Most colleagues are tired after an intense period online throughout the pandemic and are suffering from information overload. The result is that engagement can be low and this is not unique to the DACoP.

Most consultation interviewees shared that Dynamic Accountability was important for quality, sustainability and a resilient civic space. However, there was a concern expressed about the disconnect between rhetoric and action. Most agreed that this work takes a long time to do well.

Furthermore, the language of accountability does not always feel accessible or even possible across all languages and contexts. Shifting organisational culture and dedicating enough time to this work properly was also flagged as challenging, as well as donor priorities sometimes conflicting with practising true constituent accountability.

What do members and wider stakeholders want from DACoP?

1. A clear purpose, with a shared understanding and motivation for joining.
2. A space for professional growth, with access to mentorship and a peer-network.
3. To be set up in a thoughtful way, recognising power and allowing members to connect as people.
4. Structure: clarity on how it will work, what people can expect, and when they can feed in.
5. Useful content which is practical and available in different language and formats.
6. To be well facilitated by someone knowledgeable and trusted, who can keep conversations flowing and is constantly scanning the environment for new trends.
7. Administration: there is good communication and a format that everyone understands and can use.



Interviewees expressed that the DACoP should be an engaging space where participants have an opportunity to share and gain knowledge, and access practical resources that can be shared within their organisations. Those already involved in DACoP mostly felt that they could shape the agenda, and agreed that we are currently providing a lot of flexibility to cater for different needs and a range of content.

But catering to a wide audience, and therefore multiple different realities and preferences is very challenging. It also tends to mean that smaller, usually Southern actors who have less time to engage and a harder time connecting, get left behind. And this is especially probable if DACoP is only operating in English.

So there were conflicting views about whether DACoP should remain a flexible versus a more structured and planned space. While the former is likely to be less resource intensive, the latter would probably encourage more sustained engagement. **This is therefore essential for the coordinating team to consider whether DACoP should cater more to a particular audience, and how this relates to the financial resources and human capacity available for this work.**

Enablers and barriers to engagement

When the DACoP is working well and enabling participation it is because of a clear purpose, good content, and practical outputs. An inclusive and well facilitated process is also essential, where convenors take the time to keep conversations going, keep the wider group looped in (including by creating knowledge products) and make connections to broader issues in the sector. Some of this is working well within the DACoP but with further resources it could be strengthened.

Barriers include time, technology constraints and providing options for different time zones and languages. But also smaller, less well-resourced organisations flagged that they sometimes felt less confident or able to claim the space, and that DACoP resources often weren't appropriate for them. More targeted resources and financial support for their participation would therefore be welcomed. Furthermore, some members acknowledged that they needed to secure greater buy-in and prioritisation of this work from their leadership teams, as without this their DACoP engagement would be more about talk than real action.

This suggests that the DACoP can't assume members will participate in an active way because there is good content and because it's an important conversation. There also needs to be practical and administrative drivers behind engagement.

Deepening engagement

To encourage quality engagement, DACoP should focus on good communication, keep abreast of member needs and continue to adjust topics accordingly. There needs to be a mix of content and relationship building, and there is a desire for deep dive topics which result in knowledge products. Popular discussion topics would likely include accountability jargon-busting; accountability in resource poor environments; and accountability in restricted civic spaces; securing greater buy-in at your organisation; and how to influence others to catalyse action on accountability.

More existential topics to engage the membership on are how to reaffirm the purpose and vision of DACoP; and how to recognise and address the power imbalance between different contributors. Facilitating safe spaces where members can be honest, vulnerable and authentic, will be particularly important for these conversations, with the facilitators helping the group to agree on principles and ground rules, encourage self-reflection, and prioritise trust building. Smaller, grassroots, and community based organisations should also receive some financial support to participate, otherwise their involvement will remain limited. But in practice, this will be dependent upon securing new funding.

Practical steps to support engagement include sending discussion questions in advance, capturing discussions and agreeing next steps while people are engaged. Professional development is also important, so the group should explore ways to support this. A more structured annual content and communications plan could support deeper engagement, as participants will know what is coming.

Governance

Giving members a greater role in the delivery of the DACoP will keep it relevant. But options for governance will depend on resources and the DACoP's decision about whether to opt for a formalised space and/or a more flexible space for discussion. Either way, a clear, more inclusive governance system will likely start with refreshing the mandate, purpose and principles of the coordination group, including how it can include more members. And greater resources for coordination are critical, so that more time can be dedicated to regular communications, inducting newcomers, and curating content.

Growing and diversifying the membership

Many existing members have existing networks which could be tapped into for this. But DACoP needs to be deliberate about why it wants to grow, and go beyond diversity to look at inclusion, decolonisation and intersectionality. A bigger membership will require increased resources. It could also exacerbate power dynamics between large and small organisations. So an option could be to focus more on deepening engagement and let growth happen organically.

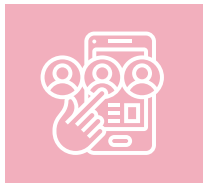
Our proposed plan

Based on findings and recommendations from this research project, the DACoP coordination group proposes that it spends the next 3-4 months focusing on these short-term aims and activities:



1. Keep the momentum from this process going by following up with both all who participated and wider community members, including to confirm new volunteers to support or lead these short-term priority activities.
2. Renew the purpose and structure of DACoP, so that it can better serve its priority audiences and deliver a more organised programme of work, whilst still providing flexibility to account for changing needs, contexts, and new opportunities.
3. Create a plan for expanding a new-look coordination group which has clearer commitments and roles, and ask DACoP members to reconfirm its mandate. This could include ensuring a diverse mix of members joins the group on a rotating basis.
4. Use this process to try to move passive actors to be more active, but also reaching out to some new actors from our priority audiences to join the community.
5. Update our communications to clarify the DACoP's vision is, who it is for and what it does. This will be accompanied by a new induction process for all members.
6. Re-launch the DACoP via an online event around October 2022, to showcase and solidify the progress made on the aforementioned aims and activities.

Longer-term aspirations (after October 2022)



1. Develop an annual plan for 2023 focused on exploring the additional themes raised by this project, via the likes of learning groups, webinars and training opportunities.
2. Devise a system for matching community members with each other based on common interests and characteristics.
3. Work with the community to collate existing knowledge products, and produce new ones off the back of our focus areas and learning groups.
4. Explore an advocacy agenda focused on influencing policies and practices of member organisations and wider civil society actors (including donors).
5. Develop a costing plan for these medium- and longer-term ambitions, and pitch it funders.
6. Explore moving to a more networked or regional model, where local actors can set a more context-specific agenda and engagement (including the development of resources) can occur in more languages. And increase funding to sustain this approach.



We really hope you will join us on this journey!

Please do let us know what you think about the report, or if anything is missing, via an email to the DACoP Google Group, or by contacting btranle@accountablenow.org. We will also be in touch soon with more information about how to get involved in the next step activities. And if you're not yet a member of the DACoP, you can [join up here](#)!