

Evaluation

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It can be said that the COI III Network project was a highly successful project: all objectives have been met, and all participants were generally very positive in their feedback on the different activities.

Directly at the first meeting in Vienna in December 2006 the steering group agreed to evaluate the project activities as extensively as possible and to monitor the progress of the project closely.

The general objective was to be able to gain feedback on the individual activities, their usefulness and positive and negative outcomes, and by this obtain input on how to improve ongoing or future activities or, in the case of the COI Master Class, to assess whether the Master class pilot was successful and could be continued in the future.

Below the evaluation of the different project modules as well as of the project structure, communication and coordination will be presented. The different methods of evaluation will be described and the most relevant results will be presented.

Project structure, communication & coordination

Structure

A total of 18 organisations, both GO's and NGO's participated in the project. In order to ensure an effective organisation a separate steering group was formed, consisting of five organisations. These five organisations share a common past in the COI Network, having participated in all previous COI Network projects. It was thought that because of their commitment to and experience with the network these organisations could effectively steer the project as a whole and make sure that all activities undertaken within the project would be executed within a common, shared framework. The other partners would then participate in the different project modules.

This structure looked promising in the early stages of the project. The responsibilities of organising parts of the project were shared and all steering group members had an equal vote in the decisions to be taken and in the direction the project was moving in.

The Hungarian Helsinki Committee successfully set up and executed the Good Practice research and the Refugee Documentation Centre organised the three train the trainer seminars. But still a lot of work was done by the Austrian Red Cross ARC/ACCORD: organising both the Master Class and Seminar, coordinating most of the COI trainings and all organisational and administrative concerns were taken care off by ARC/ACCORD.

In practice however the steering group structure did not completely function as was envisaged. Most of the responsibilities remained with ARC/ACCORD, the organisation responsible for the project, while many of the decisions were taken by ARC/ACCORD as well. Issues which arose during the project were not shared with and discussed in the steering group but directly with ARC/ACCORD. And although it was not ARC/ACCORD's choice, it seems logical that things turned out like this. As the final responsible organisation, more weight was automatically assigned to ARC/ACCORD and probably others automatically expected that ARC/ACCORD would take care of issues or at least have a solution or opinion at hand.

Steering group progress reports

What did work within the steering group were the progress reports. The idea was that before each of the three steering group meetings each steering group member would fill in a progress report, summarising the tasks agreed upon for the specific period, the activities executed, the results, the problems and successes encountered, lessons learned and the planning for the forthcoming period.

The aim was on the one hand to monitor the progress of the project and on the other hand to improve preparation of steering group meetings by ensuring that all steering group members had the necessary information at hand before the meeting. The sharing of experiences, both positive and negative, and the lesson learned could be used to strengthen the steering group as a team and provide valuable lessons for future projects.

The reports were very useful for preparing the steering group meetings. The reports made it possible to make comparisons between the different modules, to ensure uniformity in reporting and all participants of the meeting could prepare themselves well and were able to start at the same level of information.

Although the progress reports were not always completed by all steering group members and not always used during discussions at the meetings, the instrument itself has proven to be a useful tool and could certainly be used in future projects.

Communication

At the beginning of the project a network discussion forum was introduced at the project website www.coi-network.net. The objective of this forum was to create a community space, a central virtual workplace for all project members to meet, exchange information, knowledge and experiences and to stay up to date about the latest project news and developments.

The forum was divided into sections for the different modules and had an area for all project partners and a restricted area for the steering group.

Initially there was quite some traffic on the forum, but after the first four months use of the forum slowed down. Finally a total of about 220 messages were posted in over one year, which is not that much for a project of this scale. It would be interesting to know why partners posted to the forum rather hesitantly. The most obvious reason probably is that people are more used to using e-mail as their primary communication tool.

Since the forum was not that intensively used it was also difficult to control whether partners had accessed new postings, new information and new documents. So finally a lot of the communication and information exchange was done by e-mail.

The concept of a network discussion forum still is a good one, but because people are so used to using e-mail as the primary communication tool the forum in practice was not used as envisaged. Nevertheless it is highly recommended to use a central virtual workspace in future projects as well. In order to ensure that people will use the forum it should be clear that all communication will only run via the forum and not via other means.

Coordination

The function and role of project co-ordinator in such a large and complex project is not to underestimate. The project co-ordinator (a staff member of ARC/ACCORD) functioned as the oil in the machine; all lines of implementation and communication came together at the project co-ordinator.

However, in one of her progress reports the project coordinator indicated that she had to take care of too many tasks and that a lot of time was spend on doing administrative work. Another problem was that the coordination had to take over activities not executed by the persons responsible.

Since the role of coordinator is of such importance it is recommended to delegate certain tasks (e.g. project administration) to a separately appointed project assistant. Further, if project activities are not running according to planning or as has been agreed, the project coordinator should not take over the work, but should instead escalate the problem within the owner's organisation. Therefore clear arrangements with the partner organisation should be made about responsibilities, preferably before the start of the project. However, in order to guarantee the project results practical solutions have to be in place.

Training courses

At the end of the project 15 training courses had been organised, of which 11 were blended courses (e-learning phase of three weeks and a face-to-face workshop of one day) and 4 were workshops. A total of 180 COI professionals from 21 countries participated in all these trainings (including 15 international UNHCR staff).

During the e-learning phase of three weeks the participants had to fill in a progress note for each of the six modules of the e-learning course. The purpose of these notes was one the hand to stay in touch with the participants and to ensure that they had completed the different modules. On the other hand the feedback could provided could be used for improving the e-learning course and prepare the face-to-face workshop.

In the progress notes the participants were asked to provide their opinion about which topics they would like to further discuss, if there was any information which was not understood or missing, which parts they liked best and which they liked least, etc.

After the face-to-face workshops the participants had to fill in a questionnaire of 12 questions.

For this evaluation the feedback from 9 (out of 11) blended learning courses, in which 67 people had participated, was used.

Blended Learning Courses: E-learning phase

The progress notes of the six modules of the e-learning phase provided the project organisation with a wealth of very valuable, and sometimes detailed, feedback. Participants faithfully and extensively reported to their trainers, making many useful remarks as to the contents, structure and usefulness of the e-learning modules¹.

To obtain an impression of each of the e-learning modules, and thus consequently of the e-program as a whole, it is useful to compare the results of the question "how did you experience working on this module?". The participants were asked to score each module on six different aspects as shown in the table below:

	++	+	0	-	--	
Interesting						Boring
Challenging						Unexciting
Easily understandable						Confusing
Enjoyable						Unpleasant
Full of variety						Dreary
User-friendly						Difficult

The results of this question clearly shows that Module C was the module best liked by the participants, receiving, in comparison with the other modules, hardly any negative or neutral scores. The Optional module was the module least liked in that respect.

When looking at the highest score (++) given to each module, module C was by far the most interesting: 73%, while module D and the optional module only got the highest score from 37% of the participants (the optional module also scored "--" in 13% of the cases, being by far the most significant negative score).

Modules A and C were regarded as the most challenging (50 and 48% respectively), while Module B was the easiest to understand (74%). Module C was the most enjoyable (61%) and contained the most variety (60%), module B was the most user-friendly (66%).

Besides of being evaluated as the best liked module, Module C was also seen as the most time consuming of the modules. 75% of the participants spent 3 hours or more working on this module, where for other modules the maximum percentage spending more than three hours would be 50%. But the participants were also very enthusiastic about this module. From the open questions one can read that this module is where the theory meets the daily COI practice and thus makes much sense to many of the participants.

When looking at the feedback provided via the open answers many interesting and useful remarks have been made. Noticeable is that the concept of the research tree as a research method is very much appreciated (although quite often it is also said to be complicated or difficult).

¹ The modules being: Optional module: refugee law (short introduction), Basic Module (the role of COI), Module A: relevance (formulating questions), Module B: Reliability and balance (identification and assessment of sources), Module C: accuracy and currency (conduct COI research) and Module D: transparency (documentation of research results).

Blended Learning Courses: Face to Face meetings

The overall feedback on the face-to-face workshops was very positive. According to 52% of the trainees the training fully met their expectations. 76% would recommend the training to other persons, while 58% answered that the selected exercises and subjects highly correspond to problems/needs in the work with COI.

The facilitators of the workshops were rated positively as well. The performance of the facilitator could be scored for nine different aspects (e.g. competence, flexibility, friendliness, explanations), in all cases 77% or more of the participants gave the highest scores possible.

In general the participants were satisfied with the amount of time spend on the different subjects, with the exception of practical research issues: 62% would address more time on this subject.

I would address more/less time to the following subjects:			
	more time	less time	OK
Refugee law	23%	20%	57%
Role and standards of COI	20%	9%	71%
Legal relevance of COI	31%	13%	56%
Research tree	30%	33%	36%
Source assessment	32%	15%	53%
Practical research issues	62%	9%	29%
Presentation of research results	26%	20%	55%

Organisation of Blended Learning Courses

The organisation of a blended-learning course proved to be rather complicated, because five people were involved (two trainers and at least one local organiser, a supervisor and the project co-ordinator). It is therefore important that everyone involved should be provided with precise, detailed and mandatory instructions on organisational procedures and an exact timeframe.

The participants of the training courses have to be provided with clear instructions, both regarding organisational requirements (e.g. course subscription, ensuring having access to the forum) and content related exercises (especially concerning the feedback/progress notes).

Further it was evaluated that the technical requirements of the training course are rather high. The solution to this is that together with and update of the contents of the e-learning tool more attention should be paid to accessibility issues like web browser support.

Training course for trainers (train the trainer module)

The objective of the train the trainer module was to create a pool of skilled COI trainers from different European countries, speaking different languages, coming from governmental and non-governmental organisations in order to extend the capacity for providing COI trainings (as developed in the preceding COI Network II project) across Europe.

In order to be accepted into the trainer pool the future trainers had to have experience in COI research. They had to attend three 2-day training seminars in Dublin. They also had to act as co-trainer during one blended learning course, had to produce a debriefing report of that learning course and had to contribute to the elaboration of case studies..

The trainers-to-be evaluated the overall quality of the seminars generally positively. The most outstanding part of the seminars were the role plays in the third seminar, which received the highest score by all participants. Two important suggestions were made, one being the wish to have spend more attention to what to include in a face-to-face workshop and the other the call for a regular follow-up meeting of the trainers.

The trainees were also quite satisfied with the organisation of the event. The three seminars were received very positive and regarded as a means of team building and creating a real network.

Also the concept of a training course for COI trainers was evaluated positively. The only critically assessed point being the idea of continuous contact via the online forum. The trainer forum is part of a restricted area, accessible via the website www.coi-training.net. This restricted area also contains case-studies, manuals, exercises and training scenarios. According to at least one trainee the forum would play an important role after the training have been trained, and should therefore be used more intensively.

The trainees of course evaluated the train the trainer seminars, but they were also evaluated themselves: the supervisor of the train the trainer program wrote a feedback report on each trainee. Various aspects were evaluated, such as the trainees commitment to the trainings, the COI knowledge, the skills as a trainer and as a training organiser.

The feedback report served in the first place as a means to provide the trainees an outside perspective on their performance as a trainer. But the reports also played a decisive role in selecting the people to be allowed into the trainer pool.

The feedback reports as an assessment of individual people and their skills is quite unique in a project like this. It however proved to be a very useful and satisfactory tool for the steering group to base decisions on, but also for the trainees to obtain well funded feedback on their performance as a trainer.

COI Seminar

The 11th European COI Seminar was attended by more than 70 COI users and professionals from European NGOs and governmental organisations, coming from 25 European countries and Canada. UNHCR and independent experts presented human rights developments in Iraq and Afghanistan and discussed questions with the audience-

The seminar itself was not evaluated by the participants, because over the years it has grown into a well-established event attended and appreciated by many.

From the steering group progress reports however, some useful learned lessons should be presented:

- Check, double check and re-check room equipment to ensure everything is working properly.
- Start looking for experts as early as possible (ideally one year in advance). It takes much time to find the right persons. Also thinks of selecting replacements, in case speakers cancel at short notice.
- This time the seminar was combined with the COI Master Class. The advice is not to put large events like these in direct succession because of organisational strain and time-pressure for the organiser.

COI Master Class

Methodology

The 1st COI Master Class has been designed as a pilot project for a form of continuous advanced learning for COI professionals from NGOs and governmental organisations. Being a unique project to enable advanced training to this rather small target group, an emphasis was laid upon a sound evaluation of the project.

Therefore, all participants of the Master Class were given evaluation sheets and asked to note down their impressions throughout the duration of the event. In order to enable participants to express their thoughts as openly as possible, the evaluation sheets were divided into two parts, the first of which only comprised headlines of the guiding aspects we were interested in (learning concept, networking concept, organisation and conduct, administration, workshops, marketplace, lectures), whereas the second part was designed to evaluate the single workshops the participants attended in half-open questionnaires. 38 of 52 participants (73 percent) returned the evaluation sheets at the end of the Master Class.

The first part of the questionnaire was analysed employing Mayring's qualitative content analysis; for the workshop evaluation quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis were combined (basically methods of statistical computation and qualitative content analysis).

Additionally, a randomised group of 18 participants has been contacted two months following the Master Class to be interviewed about the long-term impact they felt the Master Class has had on their work. In 15 cases, the contact tries were successful. These interviews were also analysed qualitatively.

General impression

In general, participants were enthusiastic about the Master Class as a whole. They particularly highlighted the efficient organisation of all activities and the choice of workshop topics. The Master Class was regarded as an event that meets a need amongst COI practitioners.

Many participants said to go home with many newly made contacts, with new ideas and with lots of information, gained from the workshops and lectures and from the people they had met.

Evaluation of the concept

The Master Class' learning concept is regarded by the participants as a unique concept, which should be continued on a regular basis. Especially the possibility of an exchange of knowledge and ideas and the chance to meet colleagues were strongly appreciated. Participants who were interviewed two months after the event expressed a high interest in attending a second Master Class.

The networking concept was evaluated highly positively. Many participants had not realised before that so many people across Europe are indeed working with COI. They felt they were given the chance to meet other COI professionals and thus exchange experiences they cannot always share with their colleagues at home. Many participants indicated to have established important contacts which they were keen in maintaining.

Evaluation of the Master Class activities

Workshops

The participants of the 15 workshops were asked to rate content, structure, interactivity, practicability and interest in follow-up on a scale from 1 to 4. A specification for follow-up and an overall assessment of the workshop could be provided in text.

The quality of the workshops was generally evaluated as good. The overall rating for all workshops and for all aspects is 3.23 out of 4. The three workshops receiving the highest rates were on transparency and trace ability (3.73), customer relations (3.55) and source assessment (3.52). Only two workshops scored below 3.

The main criticism was that there was too little time to discuss issues in depth and that the level of some workshops was not as advanced as expected.

Workshop	Content	Structure	Interactivity	Practicability	Follow-up	Average
Transparency & Trace ability	3,86	4,00	3,57	3,57	3,67	3,73
Customer Relations	3,40	3,60	3,80	3,20	3,75	3,55
Source Assessment	3,72	3,78	3,50	3,61	3,00	3,52
External Experts	3,73	3,53	3,20	3,33	3,13	3,38
UNHCR's Refworld	3,63	3,47	2,84	3,79	3,00	3,35
Staff Management & QA	3,38	3,38	3,50	3,00	3,20	3,29
Media Archives	3,77	3,50	3,13	3,14	2,63	3,23
Knowledge Management	3,41	3,00	3,17	3,04	3,30	3,19
Medical Issues	3,19	3,12	3,41	2,82	3,29	3,17

Style guides Assessment	3,33	2,89	3,11	3,11	3,14	3,12
Fact-Finding Missions	3,64	3,09	2,91	2,91	3,00	3,11
ecoi.net - Search & Personalisation	3,25	3,44	3,11	3,22	2,50	3,11
Credibility Assessment	3,39	3,17	3,00	2,86	3,25	3,00
Gender Issues	3,33	3,17	2,83	3,00	2,33	2,93
Judges' View on COI	3,27	2,80	2,13	2,36	3,38	2,79
Average all workshops	3,49	3,34	3,15	3,15	3,09	

Table: The average scores given by workshop participants. The workshops are ordered descending on the average score per workshop.

It is interesting to note the difference in scores between the five elements that were evaluated. Participants were positive about the contents of the workshops and also the structure was rated quite positively. The interactivity and practicability of the workshops however were rated less well, and the interest in a follow-up on the workshops received the lowest score.

Since interactivity is an essential element of the set-up of a workshop and practicability was one of the objectives of the Master Class, this is something which should be taken into consideration by organising a second COI Master Class. Chairs of future workshops should receive clear guidelines on these two aspects of the workshops; they should be asked to pay more attention to involving the participants and should also include as many practicable examples and case studies as possible.

The workshops were generally assessed to have had a measurable impact on the daily work of the participants. During the telephone interviews conducted two months after the Master Class, a wide variety of effects were mentioned, ranging from new rules for customers of COI units to the revision of work methodology. The highest impact was noted on the use of sources and the style of writing query responses. The workshops on external experts, knowledge management and Refworld were mentioned most often in respect to their impact on the participants' daily work, credibility assessment, and ecoi.net were also mentioned more than once.

Lectures

Two lectures were included in the programme, one on how to organise and conduct a fact finding mission and one on the preliminary results of a study conducted in the scope of the COI Network III project on legislation and jurisprudence of appeal and higher asylum authorities of EU countries and European courts which contain provisions relevant to the use of COI standards.

Both the format, the number of lectures and the choice of topics were positively evaluated. There were some negative remarks, however, on the level of interactivity, the possibility of discussion and the structuring of the presentations themselves.

For a future Master Class, the objectives of the lectures should be reconsidered with an emphasis on the exact purpose of the lecture as a form of knowledge exchange and on more precise instructions for the lecturers regarding the level and format of the presentation.

Marketplace

The marketplace was set up in between lectures and workshops to offer participants the possibility and timeframe for informal exchange and a place where they could present COI products from their organisations.

The concept of the marketplace was generally seen as being good and useful. In practice, it was mostly used as a place to network during coffee breaks, some participants even agreed upon staff exchanges. The idea of having a marketplace where people could “sell” and “buy” information products did not work out as planned. More attention should be paid to this concept in a potential second Master Class.

Continuation of the Master Class concept

The question if the first European COI Master Class was a successful event and should be continued has been generally answered affirmatively. All participants were very positive about the concept and the initiative taken by the COI Network III project. The Master Class seems to fill up a gap in the needs of COI professionals across Europe to extend their knowledge and to expand their networks.

Since there is no other platform where COI professionals normally meet, the Master Class could fulfil an important role in the ongoing education of COI professionals and add to the professionalisation of COI practice across Europe.

Good Practice of COI

This activity comprised a research and analysis of legislation and leading jurisprudence containing provisions relevant to the use of COI and its standards from appeal and higher instance asylum authorities of all EU member states, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

The research has resulted in a comparative study, which may serve as a helpful tool to contribute to EU Member States' efforts to establish a single asylum procedure and common standards in refugee status determination, in the spirit of enhanced practical cooperation measures as defined in the "Hague Programme".

No evaluation has been done on this research, but the progress notes of the steering group mention some successes. There has been for instance a high level of interest from various actors and great interest was shown in the final report. The research partners were successfully motivated and the communication with research partners was quite effective (all agreements, forms are sent back on time, all e-mails answered, etc.).

The most interesting success from the project's point of view is the synergy which was created between the different project modules: preliminary results of the study were already built in ongoing training activities and the research results also served as a basis for a lecture at the COI Master Class.

Conclusion

As was already said in the first paragraph of this evaluation, the COI Network III project can be regarded a highly successful project. All project objectives have been met and the feedback received on the different project activities was mainly very positive.

The COI Network III project was the third in a series of ERF funded projects where the central theme has been how to professionally use and work with COI. Therefore the daily practice of COI units has been surveyed, standards developed and defined, training methodologies set up and trainings executed and finally new means of knowledge exchange were tested.

All three projects were successful and warmly appreciated by the organisations and people involved in these projects.

The only downside of the project(s) is the sustainability of the project activities. Over the years the COI Network has produced some fine results, but for the participating NGO's right now it is difficult as how to go on with the activities initiated. In order to ensure fair asylum procedures in the light of the Common European Asylum System the access to COI and COI services for all parties involved is a cornerstone. Therefore the European Commission and its member states are responsible for allocating respective resources in the future.