Characterization of Dgroups
in Latin America
Final Report
Bellanet LAC
-Final Version-

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ACRONYMS

BISC	Bellanet International Steering Committee
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DANIDA	Danish International Development Assistance
DFID	Department For International Development, UK
Dg-Partners	Dgroups Partnership
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAQ	Frequent Answers and Questions
HIVOS	Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
ICA	Instituto de Conectividad de las Américas
IDRC	Institute for Development Research of Canada
IICD	International Institute for Communication and Development
Kbps	Kilo Bytes per second
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dgroups is a technological tool, which is promoted by a partnership of international organisations dedicated to supporting development initiatives around the world. In more than 3 years of operation, the platform embodies more than 630 groups and approximately 15,300 members.

This study, which has the primary objective to identify the main contributions and limitations of Dgroups in Latin America, came to the following conclusions for Latin America Dgroups:

a) Geographic coverage: Dgroups is being utilised by organisations in all of the continents, however, the creation and management of groups is concentrated in organisations of the northern countries. In Latin America, most of the groups are concentrated in Costa Rica, which is the host country for the Latin American OneWorld Centre and for Bellanet-LAC.

b) Thematic coverage: There is a marked centralization in the "information, knowledge, and communication" theme. This is due to the fact that the partners and/or members that have opened the majority of the groups are organisations who already work in this area.

c) Languages: Even though the interfaces are in Spanish, French, and Portuguese, English remains the predominant language. To transform the platform into a truly multilingual space, conceptual and technical efforts that transcend the sole translation of contents, is required.

d) Interactions: There is considerable diversity in the composition and interactions of Dgroups. Currently, many are inactive, the majority function solely as electronic lists, and there is a distinct lack of support and follow-up offered to the organisations who utilise them.

e) Purposes: The technical and conceptual characteristics of Dgroups render it more adaptable to certain types of uses. For example, it is highly recommended for internal communications and work groups; moderately recommended for the organisation of events, virtual communication between organisations, and virtual forums (depending on the methodology that has been established); and poorly recommended for virtual communities and on-line publications. As well as information technology factors, the clarity in the definition of the objectives, as well as the characteristics and potential of moderation and facilitation, are the key elements for success in the utilisation of this platform.

f) Strengths: Dgroups is a simple to use tool that has an attractive graphic design layout, requires a low bandwidth, is free of unwanted publicity, is endorsed by partnerships of international development organisations, guarantees the privacy and security of the information, is free of charge, and offers the possibility of technical support.

g) Weaknesses: Dgroups presents limitations for access and use for certain segments of the user population (accessibility standards); it has a large number of

inactive groups and broken links as well as a distinct lack of a policy to specify criteria for the promotion, planning, creation, training, follow-up, technical support, and closure of Dgroups. All of these factors limit the potential and successful utilisation of the platform by social organisations.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for Latin America Dgroups:

a) Increase the presence: implement a promotional strategy at the regional level; develop a multilingual access interface; improve the search dgroups menus (regional and national classification criteria are made more precise).

b) Expand the thematic coverage: review the promotional policy of Dgroups, which would require a more comprehensive study on the level of use and appropriation of the platform by the partners and members of the partnership.

c) Convert Dgroups into a multilingual platform: elaborate a strategy that integrates, in a cross-sectional manner, linguistic diversity as a relevant variable in the processes of virtual interaction. More than solely content translation, the strategy needs to incorporate the interactions, particular contexts and cultural sensitivities, as well as facilitation and work models, among others.

d) Improve the use of Dgroups among the development organisations: define a policy for the creation, follow-up and closure of Dgroups with clear criteria that shared between the partners and members, with a tangible protocol of procedures, responsibilities and instruments for coordination; design and implement a system of follow-up as well as permanent and systematic monitoring; intensify the knowledge on dynamics of use and the appropriation of Dgroups for the social organisations who are linked to the platform, as well as among the end users; as well, develop a more systematic process of technical and conceptual training on the use of the platform.

e) Fulfil the technical and conceptual requirements for distinct purposes of Dgroups: through the elaboration of optional applications for users who require specialized services, establish a diversification strategy of its technological inventory; as well, develop Dgroups in Open source.

f) Improve the site architecture: adjust the platform to accessibility standards, and resolve problems related to directory structures and the Web page syntax.

g) Improve the site contents: include in the creation, follow-up, and closure policy, clear criteria and work protocols that will reduce the number of inactive groups, as well as improve the availability of relevant, complete and multilingual information.

h) Improve the graphic design: review the graphic image of Dgroups in order to establish basic criteria that guide the development of customized presentations.

i) Improve promotion: design and implement policy and clear strategies for the promotion of Dgroups, with budgetary considerations as well as mechanisms for follow-up.

j) <u>Strengthen the partnership</u>: establish a membership policy that reflects the added value that the platform offers to the different categories of partners, as well as the partner's responsibilities of administration and technical support for the groups that they promote; establish a work protocol that covers design, planning, implementation, follow-up, and evaluation of Dgroups.

k) <u>Define relevant and pertinent policies for Dgroups</u>: develop more involved, comprehensive studies that investigate the utilisation of Dgroups at the global level; the level of access, use and appropriation of the platform by the end users, as well as the governance and sustainability of the partnership that promotes the platform.

1. INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of information and communication technologies into the work of development organisations is a phenomenon that is rapidly spreading around the world. In this context, Dgroups has emerged as a collective answer by a group of international organisations interested in creating a common platform that satisfies the needs and demands of allies and partners in the south.

After 3 years of operation of Dgroups, an evaluation of the platform has not yet been carried out; this study therefore represents a first attempt to identify its main contributions and limitations for the working groups that utilise the platform in Latin America.

This qualitative investigation, was developed with the following research questions:

1. What are the most relevant characteristics of Dgroups' platform?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the platform?
3. What are the most relevant characteristics of the interactions that take place through Dgroups?
4. What are the main recommendations that would need to be implemented in order to promote the access and use of Dgroups among its target population?

In order to obtain a more integral vision of the current reality of Dgroups, triangulation of techniques, stakeholders and theory, was utilised as the methodology. The principal investigative techniques employed were, document review, interviews, and field observation. As well, diverse actors such as administrators, moderators and facilitators of groups, representatives of the donors and the personnel of Bellanet (developer of the platform) were consulted. It was not possible to interview a vast number of users due to the difficulty in locating active groups who were capable of supporting the collection of information. In order to complement the information offered by these sources, a virtual discussion group with area experts was created and carried out a bibliographical review.

The preliminary results of this study were presented at the Bellanet International Steering Committee meeting, which took place in San Jose on the 16th of February 2004. The results were also distributed to Dgroups members in order to receive feedback.

Due to the difficulties that were encountered in contacting the end users and due to existing budgetary constraints, the research design had to be altered at the time of implementation. As a result, the study was limited to administrators, moderators and facilitators of the virtual spaces. In spite of these restrictions, the study helps to ascertain the contributions and limitations of Dgroups in the region. In addition, it helps to understand the deficiencies of research and the challenges at the technical, conceptual, and managerial level that must be addressed in the future in order to augment the contribution of Dgroups to development organisations in the south.

II. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

In the following section, the methodology used for the characterization of Dgroups is reviewed. A complete description of methodological design, as well as the data collection instruments, can be viewed in Appendix 2.

2.1. Study Objective:

To identify the contributions and limitations of Dgroups for the work groups utilising the platform in Latin America.

2.2. Study questions:

Questions	Categories
a. What are the most relevant characteristics of the Dgroups platform?	- Thematic coverage - Geographic coverage - Language - User population - Frequency of use - Available resource - Purposes of Dgroups
b. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the platform?	- Mission and objectives - Site architecture - Contents - Graphic design - Technical aspects - Site promotion - Administration and maintenance
c. What are the most relevant characteristics of the interactions that take place through Dgroups?	- Facilitation / moderation (models and strategies) - Participation[1] - Collaboration[2] - Utilisation[3] - Roles and functions of the participants - Contents (types and approaches) - Fulfilment of objectives - Language

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[1] Taken from the Evaluation Methodology of MISTICA, FUNREDES.
[2] Idem
[3] Idem

d. What are the main recommendations that would need to be implemented in order to promote the access and use of Dgroups among its target population?	- Mission and objectives - Web site architecture - Contents - Graphic design - Technical aspects - Site promotion - Administration and maintenance - Interactions

## 2.3. Methodological Strategy:

2.3.1. Research approach:

The research employs a qualitative approach, with the support of some quantitative analysis techniques. Originally, the study was to be based on Rossi, Freeman and Lipsey's methodological proposal of program theory and impact theory. This methodology allows for the hypothesis of the intervention of the program to be compared to the achieved results and impacts. However, it was found when commencing the process that the information available did not support the reconstruction of the program theory with the impact. The study therefore, took on a focus more exploratory in characteristic.

2.3.2. Data collection strategy:

- Bibliographic and document review.
- Observation and experimentation with check lists
- Extraction and data processing of D-groups' Web site and database
- Electronic survey of participants in d-groups
- Selection of cases from a preliminary categorisation of analysed d-groups
- Telephone interviews in order to study the selected cases

2.3.3. Triangulation techniques:

Diagram No 1

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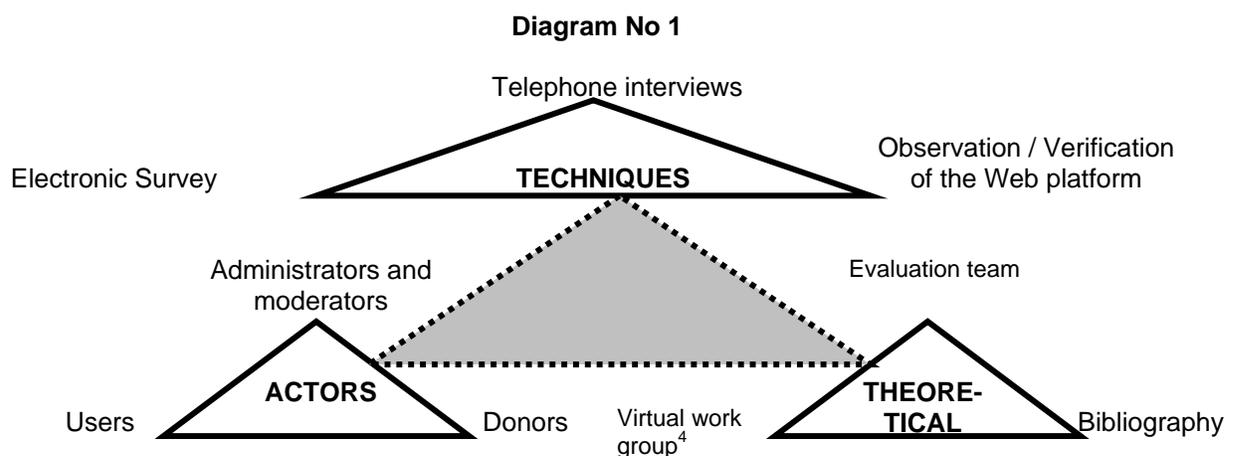
[4] This can include consultation with other experts in the development and management of platforms similar to D-groups, such as Tomoye and Yahoogroups, whenever it is possible to contact to them.

2.3.4. Sources of information

The principal sources of information used for the realisation of this study were as follows:

a) **Documents:** meeting reports, project reports, agreements, evaluations of experiences related to Dgroups, and project proposals.

b) **Web site:** sections of the Web site, documents available in specific dgroups (dg-partners), sections and statistics of specific dgroups.

c) **Key actors:** 30 individuals who have been in charge of the creation, administration, moderation, facilitation or coordination of a dgroup were contacted by electronic mail. Of the total individuals contacted, only 22 (74%) were interviewed either by telephone, in person, or via email.

   Of the 22 people interviewed, 15 were moderators or facilitators of dgroups. 53% were women. The average age was 33.4 years, with a minimum age of 25 and a maximum of 47.

   Almost half of the people interviewed reside in Costa Rica (7 individuals), 2 in Uruguay, as well as one person from each of the following countries: Argentina, Canada, the United States, Guyana, Mexico and Dominican Republic.

   67% of the people interviewed work for an NGO, 2 work for a university, 2 work for international organisations, and 1 is an independent consultant.

   The positions and areas of professional expertise that these individuals have in their respective organisations are very diverse. However it can be pointed out that 3 are experts in communication, 3 in psychology, and 2 in information technology.

   More than half of the individuals interviewed have access to the Internet through a dedicated line, whereas 4 of them access through a dial-up connection. Three access the Internet through a network.

   In terms of their familiarity with the technological platform, this population reports an average of participation in 4.53 dgroups, with a maximum of 12 groups and a minimum of 1. The majority state that they know very few of the people who participate in the Dgroup that they facilitate (33.3%), whereas 20% state that they know all of the individuals linked to their virtual group.

   In terms of their experience facilitating Dgroups, the average length of time is 10.5 months, with a minimum of 2 months and a maximum of 2 years. 67% of the individuals interviewed moderate a single group, 2 individuals moderate 2 groups, and the remainder moderate 3, 4 and 5 groups.

   The remaining 7 of the 22 individuals interviewed are personnel of partner organisations (Bellanet and ICA), or coordinators of specific projects where Dgroups were utilised as a technological platform.

III. BACKGROUND OF DGROUPS

Dgroups is an initiative created by a partnership of international organisations oriented towards supporting initiatives of civil society organisations. This alliance called, Dg-Partners, originally included Bellanet, OneWorld, UNAIDS and IICD. Subsequently, DFID, ICA and HIVOS have been integrated into the partnership. At the present time, the World Bank is also in the process of affiliation to the group.

The technological platform was created in the year 2001 as a solution to the increasing need for a technological platform that allowed development organisations to form and administer on-line groups or communities at a low cost and without relinquishing their own organisational identity.

Dgroups was conceptualised as an Internet encounter space to facilitate communications and virtual work between groups, networks, alliances, and communities interested in international development. As well, Dgroups is characterized as a "non-commercial space that is simple to use, respectful of privacy, and is directed to users in the South who have a reduced bandwidth".

Bellanet developed the technological platform with financial and conceptual contributions from the founding partners. The initial investment was U.S. $124.000.

Currently, there are 3 categories of affiliates to Dgroups[5]:

a) Partners: Partners participate directly in the governing of the partnership. They contribute U.S. $25,000, which covers 5 years of membership. They can create 35 groups in each one of the 3 customized skins, as well as a limitless number of groups within the generic skin.

  The 7 partners who compose the governing body of Dgroups are given priority for technical support and have freedom to promote the use of the tool amongst their partners' interest groups. They are also responsible for ensuring that the virtual spaces that they have opened for their partner organisations, are used appropriately.

  In order to make strategic decisions; the partnership has an annual meeting. During the rest of the year, a dgroup exists for on-going and permanent communication. Partners are responsible to finance their own participation in the annual meeting and in the process of coordination. They are also responsible for fundraising in order to finance the development and maintenance of the platform.

b) Members: Members contribute U.S. $10,000 for a 3 year membership. This entitles them to open 25 customized skins for on-line groups as well as a limitless number of groups within the generic skin. When they open dgroups for their partner organisations, they must assume responsibility for training on the suitable use of the groups.

  They can attend partnership meetings as observers but they are not eligible to vote. In order to become partners, they only need to pay the difference in the quota.

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[5] Chittoor, Jaya. Dgroups Marketing: Exploring New Members and Partners. Internal document, 2002.

Currently, there are 7 member organisations as follows: UNECA, IDRC, DANIDA, AIDS, CIDA, SDC and the FAO. Some of these organisations have membership status due to the fact that they are Bellanet donors.

c) Users: Users can utilise the service at no charge. However, they are only entitled to place an organisational logo on the generic skin. This renders it difficult for them to present an institutional identity to the dgroup. In order to make use of the platform, they must request that a partner or member creates the group and they must adhere to the policy for use of the platform.

Bellanet is the leading partner organisation in the technical development of the platform. From the onset, Bellanet has provided the system with the Internet server. Bellanet has also provided the maintenance and technical support to the partners and members and has coordinated the operation of the partnership.

Throughout the 3 years of operation, the diverse needs and demands of the users, members and partners have necessitated changes in the way that Dgroups operates. This has mainly been reflected through modifications of the interface, decentralisation of the technical support, and capacity development in facilitation.
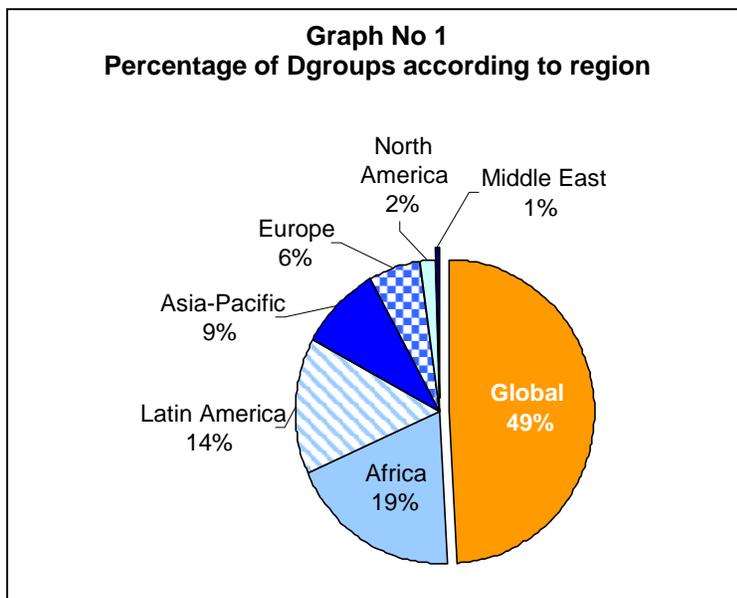
IV. RESULTS

Dgroups is a dynamic platform that is utilised daily by a vast number of individuals. Despite the popularity of the site, it does not have a system that determines the number of visits to the Web site. This study gathers some information and data that demonstrate the magnitude and characteristics of the use that this tool has had in Latin America.

4.1   Dgroups data

4.1.1   Geographic coverage

At the onset of this study, there were 528 Dgroups and 9,897 subscribed members[6]. Two months later[7], 104 new groups had been opened and there were a total of 15,235 subscribed members (an increase of 20%). This demonstrates the high level of activity in the platform's promotion. Nevertheless, this increase in Dgroups has not occurred equally in all the regions of the world

Graph No 1
Percentage of Dgroups according to region

North America 2%
Middle East 1%
Europe 6%
Asia-Pacific 9%
Latin America 14%
Global 49%
Africa 19%

Dgroups is an idea generated by organisations who have their head offices in Northern countries (Canada, Holland, England) and who carryout work at the global level. As a result, 50% of the existing groups are classified under the geographic category of "Global". Of the 528 dgroups, only 14% (71 groups) correspond to Latin America[8]. These 71 groups cover a total of 1,679 (17%) subscribed individuals.
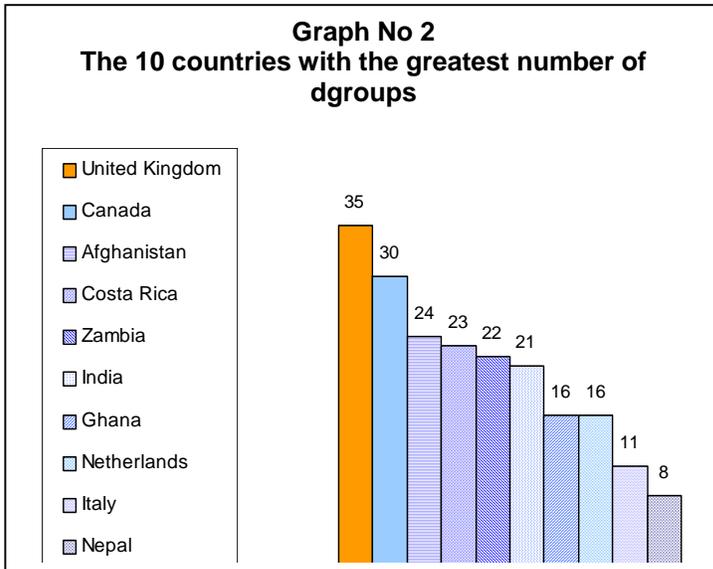
It is important to note that each group can classify itself geographically using different criteria: the country where the owner organisation of the group is located, the countries where the members reside, or, the name of a country as a theme in which the organisation works. Although this classification category is ambiguous, it is useful in terms of identifying the level of activity of Dgroups in specific countries.

For example, Graph No 2 shows that England (35), Canada (30) and Holland (16) are the countries that have the largest number of groups. This can be explained to a great extent

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[6] www.dgroups.org, 3 of February, 2004.
[7] www.dgroups.org, 12 of April, 2004
[8] Latin American groups consist of the dgroups on the Web site that have been classified under the geographic category of Latin America, as well as the groups defined for a particular country in the region.

Graph No 2
The 10 countries with the greatest number of dgroups

Legend:
- United Kingdom
- Canada
- Afghanistan
- Costa Rica
- Zambia
- India
- Ghana
- Netherlands
- Italy
- Nepal

Values: 35, 30, 24, 23, 22, 21, 16, 16, 11, 8

by the fact that the majority of the partners and members have their head offices in these countries (OneWorld, DFID, Bellanet, ICA, CIDA, IICD, and Hivos). The large numbers of groups operating in Costa Rica (23), Zambia (22), India (21) and Italy (11) is related to the presence of OneWorld centres in those respective countries. As well, there are centres linked to Bellanet in Costa Rica (23) and Nepal (8).

The case of Afghanistan (24) deserves mention as the description of the group indicates that the country was selected in error. It is assumed that this occurred as it is the first option that is displayed on the menu for country selection.

Of the 71 dgroups in the Latin American category, or in a specific country in the region, the

Graph No 3
The Latin America countries with the largest number of dgroups

Legend:
- Not specified
- Costa Rica
- Canada
- Jamaica
- Uruguay
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Bolivia

Values: 28, 23, 5, 5, 4, 4, 4, 4

majority rely on participation from Costa Rica, or, the administrators of the group are located in this country. This appears to be a result of the intense promotional efforts that have been carried out by Fundacion Acceso, in its role as the OneWorld centre for Latin America and as representative of Bellanet in Latin America.
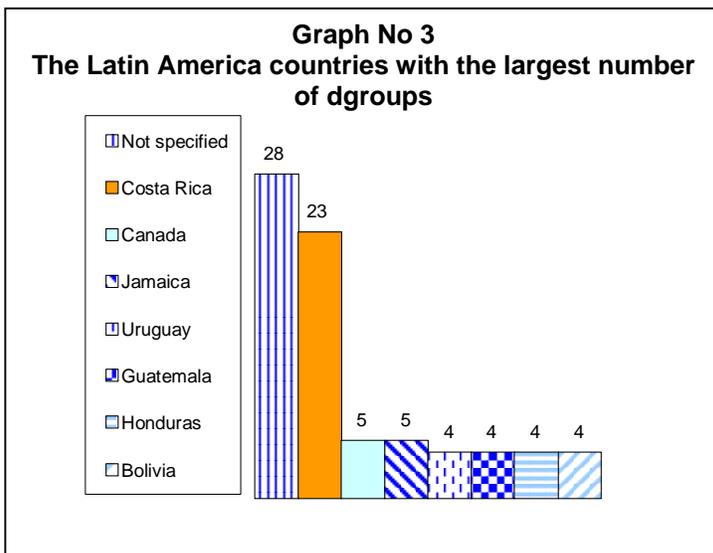
It is noteworthy that the number of groups that do not specify a reference country or countries is so high. It represents 40% of all the dgroups in the region. This is useful information for monitoring the service, and could indicate two situations:

a) There is not an efficient monitoring system that supplies and processes the data generated by the platform.
b) The individuals in charge of opening groups do not have a clear understanding of the relevance of the data that must be included when creating the virtual spaces. As well, the categories used to classify dgroups are not very precise.
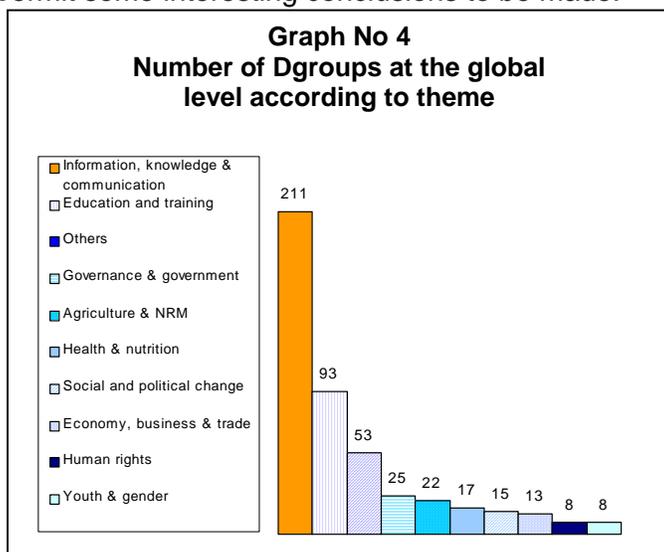
4.1.2 Thematic Coverage

The groups can be classified into 11 different thematic categories with the possibility of multiple selection. According to the records of decisions available in the Dg-partners, the thematic classification utilised by OneWorld was used as a baseline in order to develop the categories. The categories are as follows:

1) Agriculture and natural resource management
2) Economy, business and commerce
3) Education and training
4) Environment
5) Governance and government
6) Health and Nutrition
7) Human rights
8) Information, knowledge and communication
9) People, work and population
10) Social and political change
11) Youth and gender

These categories present some problems, either by the scope and magnitude of some of the categories, the fact that the characterization does not exclude one from the other, or, the combination of two subjects that are not necessarily related. For instance:

- What are the criteria that would differentiate a dgroup between the "Agriculture and Natural resource management" category and the "Environment" category?
- Why is there one category for Youth and Gender when the two are such large and distinct themes?
- Is it possible to identify themes related to development that are not linked to Human Rights? Is a category for "Human Rights" sufficiently specific?

In spite of these limitations, the data available from the thematic categories does permit some interesting conclusions to be made.

Graph No 4
Number of Dgroups at the global level according to theme

Legend:
- Information, knowledge & communication
- Education and training
- Others
- Governance & government
- Agriculture & NRM
- Health & nutrition
- Social and political change
- Economy, business & trade
- Human rights
- Youth & gender

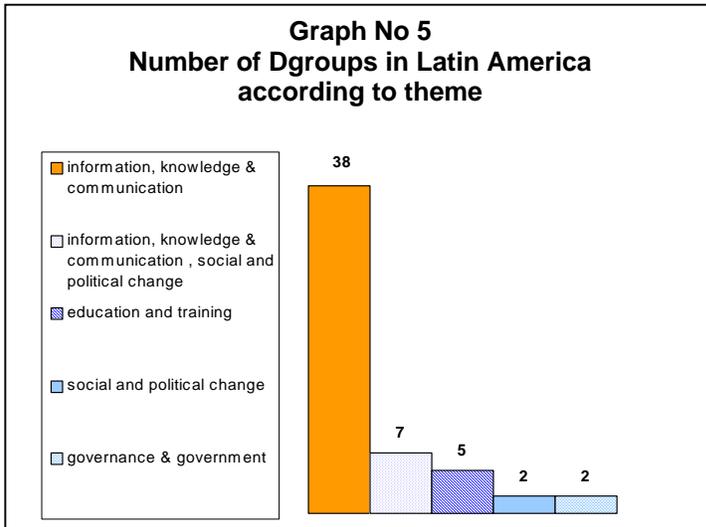Values: 211, 93, 53, 25, 22, 17, 15, 13, 8, 8

Dgroups is devised as a tool to support organisations who work in diverse themes of development, nevertheless, the data demonstrates that most of the groups at the global level (40%) are concentrated in the information, knowledge and communication category.

This is not surprising when one considers that 3 of the most active partners in the partnership (OneWorld, IICD and Bellanet) work specifically in this theme. It does however, continue to be a challenge for Dgroups to incorporate organisations whose work is not necessarily concentrated in the
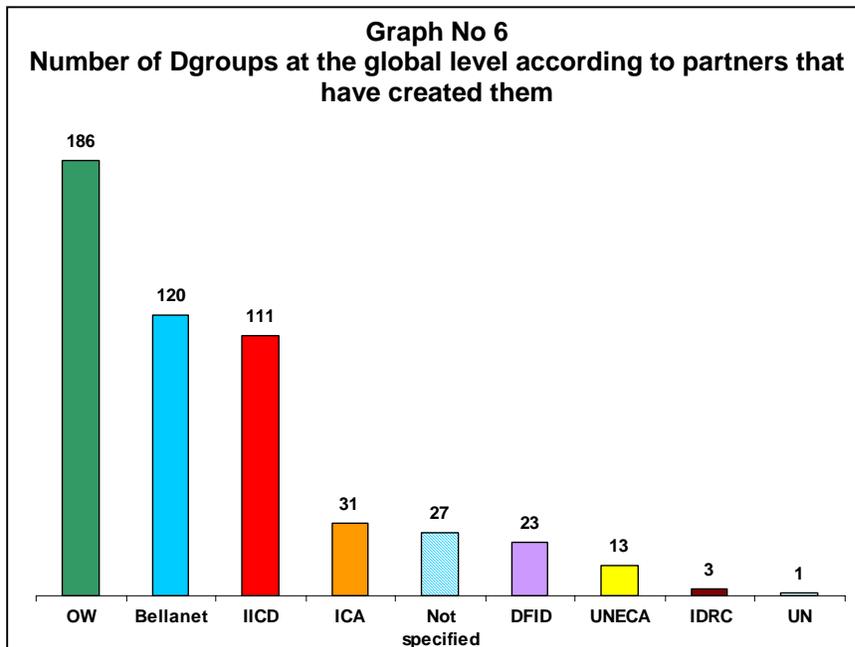
areas of information and communication technology (ICT), as they are the populations that have greater access and the necessary skills for the use of platforms such as Dgroups. This situation is repeated in Latin America where more than 60% of the groups on-line have information, knowledge and communication, as their focus.

Graph No 5
Number of Dgroups in Latin America according to theme

Legend:
- information, knowledge & communication
- information, knowledge & communication , social and political change
- education and training
- social and political change
- governance & government

Values: 38, 7, 5, 2, 2

When analysing the partner organisations that have participated most actively in the opening of dgroups, it is evident that the thematic orientation of the platform responds to their interests and areas of work.

For example, OneWorld is an organisation that leads an Internet portal on sustainable development and human rights. OneWorld has a global membership of more than 2,000 organisations and 13 promotion centres. This network uses the Internet as its main means of communication, and it is therefore not surprising that 34% of all dgroups created to date, have been opened by OneWorld.

Graph No 6
Number of Dgroups at the global level according to partners that have created them

Values:
- OW: 186
- Bellanet: 120
- IICD: 111
- ICA: 31
- Not specified: 27
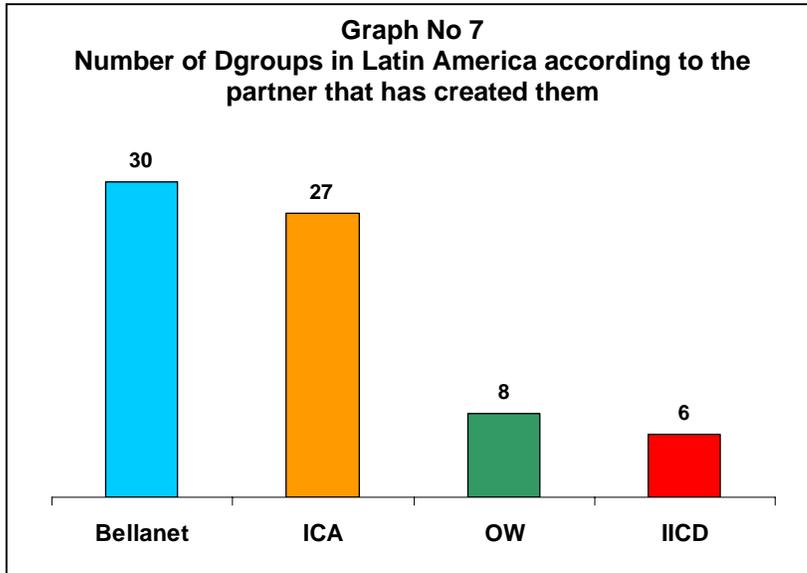- DFID: 23
- UNECA: 13
- IDRC: 3
- UN: 1

The leading question that arises from the analysis of graph 6 is; to what extent is Dgroups capable of responding to the needs and capabilities of organisations oriented to areas of development that are not ICTs?

Undoubtedly, the technological platform offers a collection of useful services and tools for a multitude of virtual groups; independent of the theme in which they work. However, there is a distinct need to reflect on the processes of promotion and training for the further adoption of the platform. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to analyse in more depth, the planning processes and management of Dgroups by partners and members who have utilised the tool to a lesser extent.

The situation is repeated in Latin America where the 4 organisations who have promoted the opening of Dgroups work in ICTs.

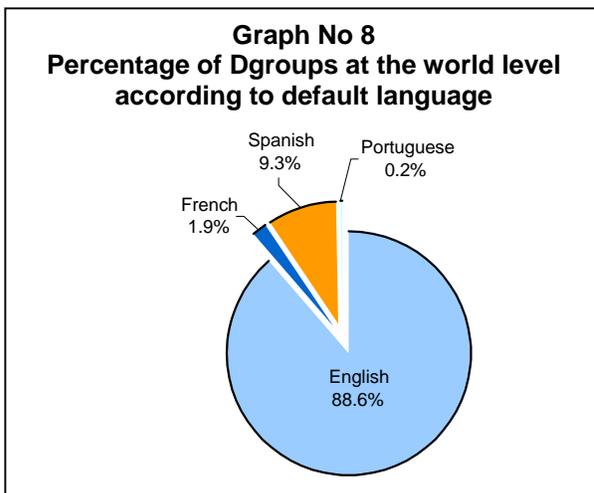ICA is the only partner whose work is concentrated in the American continent, for this reason almost all of the dgroups that it has created are in this region.

Graph No 7
Number of Dgroups in Latin America according to the partner that has created them

It is important to emphasise that the majority of the groups opened by Bellanet and OneWorld are a result of the work of Fundacion Acceso as the Centre for OneWorld in the region and as the office for Bellanet in Latin America.

## 4.1.3 Predominant Languages

From the onset, the Dgroups' platform was developed for use in English. As a result, the Web site home page is available only in this language. In spite of the existence of interfaces in Spanish, French and Portuguese, it is not possible to access them from the home page with these languages. Clearly, this creates difficulties for individuals and groups who do not dominate the English language.

Graph No 8
Percentage of Dgroups at the world level according to default language

Once a user has entered MyGroups, they have the option to select the language in which they wish to see its interface. However, the contents of the link to the different sections (Home, About, Help and FAQ) are also only in English. Only the profile appears in the language selected by the user.

In the MyGroups section, the list of groups to which the person is subscribed, or administrates, is displayed.   At the moment of creating a group, it is possible to select the language in which the web interface will appear. Once a language has been selected, it is known as the "Default Language", and in addition the selection of other support languages is permitted.

**Graph No 9
Percentage of Dgroups in Latin America
according to default language**

English
38%
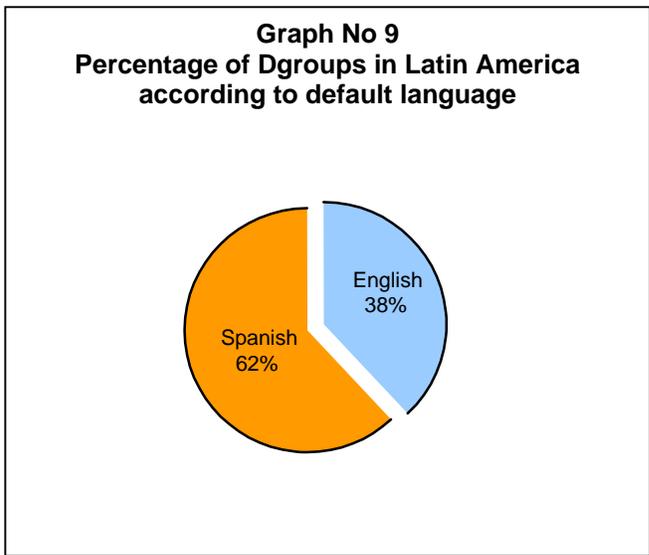
Spanish
62%

A high percentage of dgroups have English as their principal language due to the fact that the majority of Dgroups are global in character.

Even though 14% of the dgroups are Latin American, only 10% of the groups show Spanish as their principal language. This is due to the fact that a high percentage of the groups include Canadian and Caribbean members and as a result they have defined English as their default language.

Through the data available for country and language it is noted that the presence of Dgroups in the region is very diverse and weak, mainly in countries such as Brazil. In spite of having an enormous potential user population, not a single group has reported Portuguese as the default language nor is a group registered for Brazil. It is evident that the promotion of Dgroups has been limited to countries where the partner organisations and members operate.

4.2   Interactions

4.2.1   Frequency and characteristics of use

There is great diversity among the groups functioning in the platform. For example, at the membership level, the global average is 19 subscribed individuals, with a maximum of 398 in OneWorld's South Asia dgroup, which represents 4% of the total members of Dgroups. In Latin America, the average for subscribed individuals is 24 per group, with a maximum of 167 members ICA Caribbean's dgroup (10% of membership of the region).

It should be pointed out that this data corresponds to individuals registered through the Web interface of Dgroups by means of the Lyris system. At the global level, 24,433 subscribed email addresses, with an average of 46 addresses per group, are recorded through this method. For Latin America, 15% more members are registered per electronic list, with an average of 51 members[9].

According to some of the administrators and facilitators who were interviewed, a large number of the dgroups are functioning as list serves as some of the participants in their groups report multiple problems entering the Web interface (when the groups are private), and in attaching resources to the dgroup.

It is interesting to note the large number of opened groups do not have any subscribed members. At the global level, 34 groups (6%) are reported without members. In Latin

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[9] This data for members of electronic lists does not necessarily correspond to number of people, as one person can be subscribed with different electronic mail addresses.
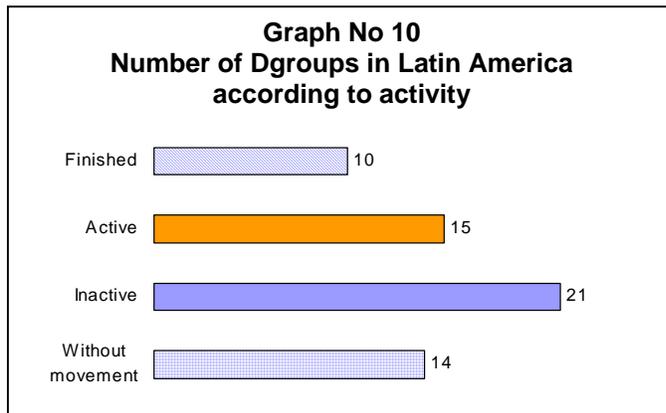
America there are 6 groups (8%) reported without members. According to the individuals responsible for opening dgroups in the region, this is due to the fact that some organisations open a space in order to test the platform, but they do not manage to solidify or implement plans for its use.

An analysis of the quantity of messages transmitted by Dgroups to date, demonstrates the diversity in the frequency of use of the virtual spaces.

Of the 45,685 messages that have been circulated at the global level, 15% correspond to messages sent to Latin American dgroups. In terms of the average messages per group, Latin America shows greater activity than at the global level, although the percentage of groups that report 0 messages is slightly higher in the region than at the global level. The percentage of Dgroups with no activity is quite elevated (18% - 20%). This demonstrates the need to improve the criteria for opening groups, and to establish parameters for the closure of inactive dgroups. This will allow the server to only host those spaces that are really being utilised by the organisations.

Table No 1
Comparative number of messages sent to Dgroups

At the global level		In Latin America
45.685	Number of messages	**6.803** (15%)
87	Average messages	**96**
9.617 (21%) Bellanet Staff-cl	Maximum messages	**1.242** (18%) ICA Caribbean
95 (18%)	Dgroups with 0 messages	**14** (20%)

Graph No 10
Number of Dgroups in Latin America according to activity

- Finished: 10
- Active: 15
- Inactive: 21
- Without movement: 14

A more in-depth analysis of Latin American dgroups provides interesting information on the activity level of these spaces. In graph No 10 it is shown that only 21% of dgroups in the region are active. The large number of groups that are inactive or do not register movement, is almost 50%. This generates many questions about the factors that would cause organisations to request a dgroup, but never use it, or, who after a time have stopped using it.

- Are the organisations trained - technologically and methodologically - to effectively utilise the tool?
- Do the organisations know and correctly apply methodologies for generating participation and interaction among the members?
- Are the work objectives clear?
- Do the organisations have a defined project or program or a concrete need that dgroups is supporting?
- What are the policies for the dgroups that are not being utilised?

As shown in Table No 2, Latin American dgroups are more likely to allow members of the group to send messages without the need for prior authorization.

Table No 2
Comparative data for type of access to dgroups

A the global level		En Latin America
76 (14%)	Access to write	**26** (37%)
165 (31%)	Access to read	**9** (13%)

According to Bellanet personnel, it is much more likely that massive shipments of unwanted mail (Spam) occur at the global level. To avoid this, many administrators require that messages receive prior authorization in order to be sent.

In terms of the reading of messages, open access greater at the global level than in the region. This indicates that the majority of the Latin American groups are private or closed discussions for a set group of people.

The prior statement that **many dgroups are used as electronic lists** is supported by the fact that a high percentage of the dgroups do not use the available tools to attach additional resources to the mail messages. More than 40% of the groups, as many at the global level as in Latin America, do not register any documents, links, or notices in the resource section of their on-line group.
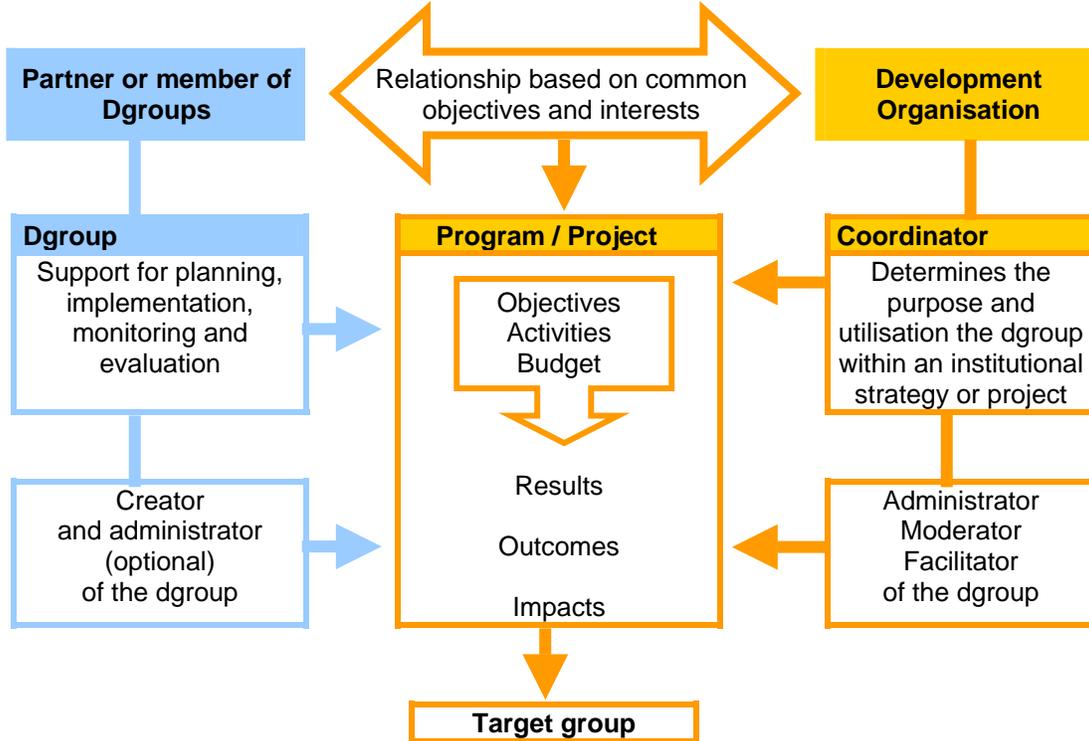
Dgroups report an average of 8 on-line resources per group with FIPA Public having the greatest amount of documents and links, with a total of 290. In the Latin American region, ICA Caribbean's resources represent almost 20% of the total resources placed by Latin American groups.

Table No 3
Comparative data for available resources on

Global level		In Latin America
4.331	Available resources	**654** (15%)
8	Average resources	**9**
290 (7%) FIPA Public	Maximum resources	**125** (19%) ICA Caribbean
217 (41%)	Dgroups with 0 resources	**31** (44%)

The following diagram was developed by the research team in order to better understand the interactions that operate within dgroups. The relationship between the partner or member of the partnership of Dgroups, and the virtual space created to satisfy concrete needs of a target population, is described.

Diagram No 2
Interactions of key actors linked to a group

| Partner or member of Dgroups | Relationship based on common objectives and interests | Development Organisation |

| **Dgroup** Support for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation | **Program / Project** Objectives Activities Budget | **Coordinator** Determines the purpose and utilisation the dgroup within an institutional strategy or project |
| **Creator and administrator (optional) of the dgroup** | Results Outcomes Impacts | **Administrator Moderator Facilitator of the dgroup** |

Target group

According to the original conceptualisation of the platform, the partner or member, in alliance with one or more development organisations (with whom they have common objectives and interests) decide to develop a program or project[10]. As with all programs and projects, there are tangible objectives, activities and a budget in order to produce desired results, outcomes and impacts for a specified target population.

Through the work realised by the partners and members of the partnership, the Dgroups platform is available for a specific program, project or concrete need. It is the partners and members' responsibility to support development organisations in the planning, implementation, follow-up, and evaluation of the work carried out through dgroups, for which, one or several people, are in charge of the creation, maintenance and technical support for the group.

The development organisation is responsible for the coordination of the project or program and to determine the role that the dgroup will play in order to achieve the desired results for the target population. As well, the development organisation must determine the operative methodology for the project, including the work methodology for the virtual group. The dgroup is administered, moderated and/or facilitated by a member of the organisation that is coordinating the project or program. This allows them to integrate the dgroup into the general coordination of the program.

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[10] In this diagram, only the interactions for a dgroup that supports programs or projects are included as, when dgroups support concrete needs, the interaction is simpler and does not require the intervention of so many actors.

It should be stressed that the dgroup does not constitute the project or program in itself, but is a tool that supports a concrete work proposal, where dgroup is identified to fulfil various functions. Dgroups does not always provide this desired support. A lack of clarity in the roles and functions of the key actors as well as gaps in the conceptualisation of the contribution that the platform can offer to the different programs or projects, were detected by the study as reasons for this shortfall.

Even though each partner and member makes a commitment to provide the technical support to the dgroups that they have opened or promoted, Bellanet has assumed a large portion of this work along with the design, development and maintenance of the platform. However, as the partnership does not have financial resources available exclusively to offer this support, further disparities in the "thematic slant" of Dgroups, is created.
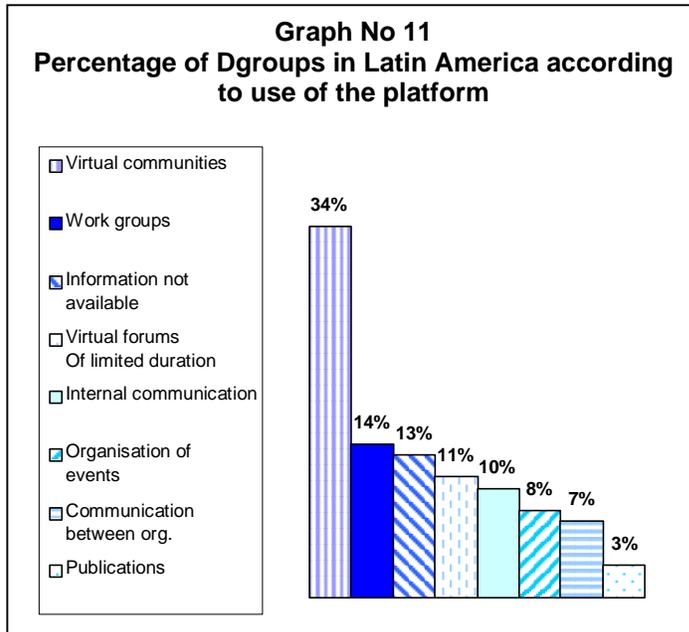
Due to the lack of resources available for technical support – at the information technology as well as the facilitation level - Bellanet has tended to open dgroups for organisations who require less support and follow-up, specifically, organisations who work in ICT themes. Bellanet – LAC has had limited opportunity to respond to requests from organisations working in other areas of development due to the unavailability of resources necessary to provide adequate support.

4.2.2 Purposes

Based on interviews, written questionnaires, and the analysis of the dgroups' descriptions, at least 7 different ways that the organisations utilise the platform, were determined. The uses are as follows:

   a) **Internal communication:** facilitates the exchange of messages and the storage of information for individuals working in the same organisation.
   b) **Communication between organisations:** provides a tool and a common space for information, communication, and the coordination of actions between organisations.
   c) **Organization of events:** supports in the coordination, notification, planning, information, and follow-up of events and activities.
   d) **Virtual communities:** is a permanent space for the exchange and mutual generation of knowledge.
   e) **Virtual forums of limited duration**: allow for the presentation and reflection on specific themes over relatively short periods of time.
   f) **Work groups:** facilitates the coordination between individuals and teams in the implementation of a specific task (research, project proposal, etc).
   g) **Publication:** acts as a distribution list and publication space for news and notices, bulletins, or other informative formats.

Graph No 11 reflects the most frequent uses of dgroups in Latin America.

Graph No 11
Percentage of Dgroups in Latin America according to use of the platform

- ☐ Virtual communities
- ■ Work groups
- ◪ Information not available
- ☐ Virtual forums Of limited duration
- ☐ Internal communication
- ◪ Organisation of events
- ☐ Communication between org.
- ☐ Publications

34% 14% 13% 11% 10% 8% 7% 3%

The majority of the groups on the Web page, define themselves as virtual communities since they serve the purpose for permanent discussions and exchanges of information.

A significant number of the spaces constitute work groups (10%). Also notable are: the use of the platform for the implementation of virtual forums of limited duration (11%), internal communications (10%), and for the organisation of events (8%).

Through interviews with facilitators and through the analysis of concrete cases of particular dgroups, some of the potentials as well as the technical and conceptual limitations, which the platform has for fulfilling the expectations of the different groups, have been determined.

For <u>internal communication</u>, Dgroups appears to be a useful and effective tool. For example, the Colectiva Feminista Pancha Carrasco in Costa Rica has utilised a dgroup to facilitate the coordination, decision making and communication between the 10 associates of the group.

They assigned an administrator and facilitator who dedicate at least 3 hours per week to fulfil their activities. In addition, they established minimum rules of participation. As the group is small, they have a strategy of open facilitation with no restrictions on sending messages. The key factors for success in this case, have been clear objectives and clear understanding of the capabilities of the virtual space for the fulfilment of concrete tasks.

The group values the platform as it is user friendly, does not contain unwanted publicity that opposes their principles, and because it allows depositions or statements for the decision making process. However, they also indicate that they have had some difficulties with the tool due to a lack of training and the fact that the service was off-line for a few days.

The dgroup LAC-ISC-CIVICUS was analysed in order to study the effectiveness of the tool for <u>communication between organisations</u>. The facilitator states that the space has not fulfilled its objective to generate interaction between individuals who participated in a particular event and who are attempting to implement a regional project.

Technically, the platform is capable of fulfilling this objective, however in this particular case, the following factors appear to contribute to its lack of success

- There is a lack of clear, immediate, and concrete objectives in order to orient the work of the virtual space.

- The participants' interests do not concur with the objectives defined for the dgroup. The project is in the process of fundraising, a task that each organisation is pursuing individually. It appears that there is no interest in discussing the funding theme, although this is the objective that was originally put forward for the group.
- As well, the facilitator states she/he does not have sufficient inputs or tools to moderate or facilitate the space and therefore she/he has not managed to generate the motivation and participation of the members.

A significant number of dgroups have been utilised for the <u>coordination of events</u>. The facilitators for these virtual groups state that the group is most effective when the tool is appropriately used as part of a general strategy for the overall coordination of the event. In this sense, the objectives and work methodology for the dgroup are established from the objectives and dynamics of the event.

It appears that the platform is moderately suitable for the coordination of events. It allows the group to discuss and make joint decisions, coordinate the agenda, and disseminate information. However, one of its limitations is that it does not allow for simultaneous communication, which is important in the coordination and organising of events.

Some recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the platform for this purpose follow:

a) If the event is large and complex, creation of sub-work groups or committees with their own, independent dgroups, is recommended.
b) The person in charge of the general coordination of the event should facilitate the organising committee (key participant's dgroup), so that she/he can orient discussions towards the strategic aspects as well as establish closer ties with these participants.
c) The Internet virtual space is not adequate to cover all of the communication needs. It is therefore important to complement the virtual space with other modes of communication such as, teleconferences, telephone calls, faxes, and face-to-face meetings.

As observed in Graph No 11, most of the Latin American groups have defined themselves as <u>virtual communities.</u> However, the analysis of these spaces indicates that the majority of them are inactive or have never managed to generate sufficient participation. According to the individuals interviewed, some of the limitations that Dgroups has in supporting virtual communities, are:

a) The interaction resources that Dgroups offers are quite basic. For example, it does not support simultaneous communication.
b) The generic interfaces of dgroups does not provide differentiating or original characteristics for the groups, which would help to generate a sense of identity and property for the members of the community. Even when dgroups have customized skins the URL of the group remains generic.
c) To create and maintain a successful virtual community, intensive and permanent facilitation is required. However most of the dgroups analysed do not have access to sufficient financial resources to cover the expenses of facilitation.
d) The organisation of information is very important in a virtual community. However, the dgroups platform does not have sufficiently flexible tools for the maintenance and administration of the Web by the facilitators. The items placed on dgroups

appear in chronological order and Dgroups does not permit the creative or strategic organisation of the contents and visuals. In addition, the platform does not have a tracking system for visitor statistics , which would offer useful information for the administrators, regarding participants use and habits.

The Dgroups platform has been a medium for various <u>virtual forums of limited duration</u>. Participants in experiences such as the ICA Web Forums have positively evaluated the results of these forums. The evaluation of the project shows that the main challenges for achieving a successful forum are: realistic expected results and goals, a work methodology that is consistent with the particular characteristics of the virtual interaction, and strategies for proactive moderation and/or facilitation in order to generate participation and to intensify the relevant discussions.

Technical limitations of the platform, mainly in the form of administrative limitations are also detected. The chronological ordering of the messages is not always the most desired way of organising the information of a forum. This inflexibility in the system constitutes the main weakness of the platform in order to fulfil the requirements of this type of use.

According to the individuals interviewed, Dgroups offers multiple advantages in the support of <u>work groups</u>. In work groups, there is usually a specific task or activity that a team of experts wish to develop in a limited time. The platform is successful in meeting the needs of these groups, as it allows documents to be shared, the coordination of tasks, and follow-up of a work plan.

When there are previously defined objectives and activities, which are not directly related to the virtual space, the role of the dgroup is limited to one of a support tool. This is very important as the efforts can then be concentrated on obtaining the objectives of the project, and not as it happens in some cases, on the performance and actions of the dgroup itself. In this way, if dgroup does not adapt to the needs and characteristics of the work group, they are able to look for other alternate means of communication and coordination.

As with other uses of Dgroups, the role of the project coordinator is vital in guaranteeing the strategic use of the dgroup. The facilitation of the virtual space must be carried out by the coordinator and not be delegated to another member of the team.

Lastly, two organisations in the region have utilised the platform as a means for <u>publication of news.</u> For this purpose, Dgroups has demonstrated little effectiveness, as the inflexibility of the system does not allow the elimination of sections that are not needed for the type of publication that is desired. In addition, it does not permit to change the layout nor does it permit that content formats are modified.

In addition, the platform lacks a monitoring system that would allow the editor to track the visits and users. This is vital for any publication system on the Web.

In conclusion, Dgroups is not a useful and effective platform for all of the purposes for which it is being used in Latin America. The technical and conceptual characteristics of Dgroups render it more adaptable to certain types of uses. According to the cases analysed, it is highly recommended for internal communications and work groups; moderately recommended for the organisation of events, virtual communication between

organisations, and virtual forums (depending on the methodology that has been established); and poorly recommended for virtual communities and on-line publications.

Moreover, clearly defined objectives for the space, as well as moderation and facilitation characteristics become the key elements for the successful use of the platform.

4.3   Strengths and Weaknesses of Dgroups

In order to determine the strengths and weaknesses of Dgroups technological platform, 7 basic components that all Web systems available on the Internet have, were analysed. The strengths and weaknesses of the system were determined through observation by an expert panel, as well as by the perceptions of the user population interviewed for this investigation.

4.3.1   Mission and Objectives

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The Dgroups Web site specifies the purpose of the platform, as well as the advantages that it offers to the users.	- The descriptive information of the platform is only available in English.
- It also outlines the target population of the Web site.	- The mechanisms and procedures for an organisation or individual to solicit a dgroup are not clear. Only if the visitor goes to the FAQ section (FAQ section is only in English) will this information be found.
- The names of all Dgroups' partner organisations are listed on the footer of each page. As well, the FAQ section details the roles and responsibilities of these organisations as those who are in charge of the opening and administration of groups solicited by other organisations.	
- In general terms, the development organisations believe that the platform's philosophy agrees with their values and philosophies: "It does not use unwanted publicity that is contrary to our principles... I believe it was created for organisations like ours". (Costa Rican feminist organisation).	

4.3.2 Site architecture

It is important to distinguish between the two levels of Dgroups' Web site architecture. One level is related to the Web site as a whole, where there is a home page through which all of the groups enter the platform. The other level refers to the structure of each one of the groups that work in Dgroups.

    a) Web site and home page:

The main page of Dgroups relies on a principal navigation composed of 5 sections:

- http://www.dgroups.org/about/
- http://www.dgroups.org/groups/
- http://www.dgroups.org/admin/
- http://www.dgroups.org/help/
- http://www.dgroups.org/faq

In addition, 4 languages are indicated as options for the interface, but the version is only available in English.

The home page offers a secondary navigation where the names of new groups appear, as well as a section for shared resources and links to documents on different development topics.

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The home page has a clean and simple graphic design. The platform logo is clearly identified in the main navigation. The main text is clear and concise (1 paragraph) and specifies the site objective. The main sections contain the necessary instructions for proper use of the site.	- The home page and the principal sections are only available in English. The MyGroups section allows the change of interface to one of the other 3 languages. However, although the links to the principal sections are in the selected language, their content continues to be in English.
- The navigation of the Web site is very consistent, as the main sections are accessible from most of the pages housed in the platform.	
- Some of the resources available from the home page are open access, which facilitates the consultation on the part of the users.	- The majority of the new groups recommended on the home page are closed. When the user tries to enter she/he is denied access and is not given instructions on how she/he can integrate her/himself into the group.
- The site works well with version 4.X and 5.X navigators or Browsers.	

- The search mechanism by sector, region and country facilitates the search, however it does presents some problems for the users (see weaknesses). The section My Groups is very useful in quickly locating and accessing the groups to which the user is subscribed.	- The Global classification within the region has 10 pages with more than 200 groups. Although they are alphabetically ordered, the vast number makes it difficult to locate groups. - The sector category, that has thematic reference as a base, creates problems of consistency and ambiguity in the classification criteria, which were mentioned in section 4,1,2 of this report. - In search results, the information of dgroups appears in English, even though the default languages of many of the groups is not English. As well, the main language for the group is not mentioned.
	- In terms of the directory structures and the syntax, at the second or third level, links with the following reference exist ../ ../../ ../../…/[11] - Some pages contain the code "%20" in its links to pages or files. This code means "blank space" and is not an acceptable standard for the name of a page or file[12] - Some pages in the "About and FAQ" section do not have an HTML title.
- Generally speaking, the users maintain that it is easy to find information within the Web site, although some also mention difficulties (see weaknesses).	- The Web site was not designed with accessibility standards[13], therefore, it is difficult for people with visual problems or other physical limitations to utilise it. Some examples: - The images do not have ALT attributes, which would provide an alternative text for users without sight. - There is a low contrast between the font colour and the background for the navigation bars. This renders it difficult to read for those with poor eyesight. - The selection "Browse" for attaching files, cannot be accessed via the keyboard. This makes access difficult for those who have problems handling a mouse.

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[11] The incorrect use of file names and references can cause a search engine to not take into account a page or an entire web site, which can affect the promotion of the site.
[12] It is suggested to use "_" in place of the space bar, preferably small letters the name of the resource.
[13] For more information on accessibility standards: http://www.w3.org/WAI/,
http://www.w3.org/WAI/References/QuickTips/

	- The oral text for some of the buttons is not clear. For example, in the section Events, there is a button that reads ">>". For those who "listen to" the site, the text indicates: "button greater than greater than". It would not be clear to the user what this is.

b) Structure of each group:

In addition to the generic skins for the on-line groups, there are at least 40 customized skins that have been developed for the different members and partners of the partnership. Due to this diversity, the variants in structures of each group were not analysed in great depth but were limited to recovering the most relevant elements.

In general terms, the generic skins are concurrent with the Web site in general, nevertheless, there are some important differences worth mentioning.

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The interface for each dgroup has language options, the list of groups where the user is enrolled, and a search field of free text in order to locate information within the dgroup.	- The contents in the sections About, Help and FAQ are only in English.
	- The interface for entering a dgroup is in English, which makes access difficult for those who do not dominate the English language. One of the most frequent consultations that administrators and moderators receive, is the recuperation of an entry password, therefore, it is apparent that the link "Retrieve a password" is not completing its function.
- The documents attached are in the common formats of Microsoft Office (doc, ppt, xls), PDF, and images with JPG format. This facilitates their access. The type of document is also indicated which is very useful for the user.	
	- A limitation for some facilitators and moderators is that "there is no way to divide the group into various lists. If several lists are made there is no way to have them interacting simultaneously"

4.3.3 Contents

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The site's home page is permanently updated with the number of dgroups and members, as well as the announcement of new groups and resources.	
- The site does not have typing errors, and in general, the fonts are consistent.	
- The site is designed so that users can easily attach documents and resources.	- The users do not always complete all the fields of the forms. For this reason the description of contents of the documents is incomplete at times. - Some documents in the section "Shared Resources" do not have abstracts, which are important for locating documents and creating interest for the users.
- The credibility of the contents is high as Dgroups does not have publicity and the platform is associated with development organisations who are recognised globally. As stated by one facilitator of a group: "..in Yahoo our work group could be next to the fan club for some singer"	- There is a large number of inactive dgroups without contents or members. This reduces the credibility and the seriousness of these spaces, and the platform as a whole, by the lack of more rigorous criteria for selection.

4.3.4 Graphic Design

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The graphic design of the Web site is simple, friendly, and pleasant to look at, however there are some problems with consistency.	- The Dgroups logo is not consistent in all of the interfaces of the customized skins. For example, in the group http://www.dgroups.org/groups/HIVAIDS clearinghouse the logo appears in a different colour and with different dimensions.
- The navigation is consistent and the icons make sense. The names of the sections are adequate.	- Some of the customized skins have problems with their design. Examples are: headers that are not adjustable to the width of the screen, navigations with blocked buttons, very long section labels, and no explanatory text on the space.
- The font size and type is appropriate..	- The graphic design scheme is consistent, but the use of some colours reduces the legibility of the fonts. For example, the grey and sky-blue tones are pleasant at the design level because they soften the appearance of the page, but they make reading the text difficult.

4.3.5 Technical Aspects

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The time to download the home page was from 5 (at 28,8 kbps) to 2 seconds (at 56 kbps). This is highly acceptable for sites directed to countries with low bandwidths. Similarly, the first level pages had a maximum downloading time of 5 seconds at 28,8 kbps. - Some randomly selected pages, showed slightly higher, but still acceptable, downloading times (from 8 to 4 seconds).	
- The site does not have bothersome characteristics such as, "in construction" signs, caricatures, frames, blocked back buttons, banners, or the need to download "plug-ins" in order to read certain sections of the site.	- The analysis of broken links demonstrates a large number of pages with access problems. In some instances, this is due to the directories structure and the syntax used, which was previously mentioned in the site architecture section. Details about the broken links appear in Appendix 5.
- "... the privacy policies are better, the storage capacity of Dgroups is more flexible... "	- "... the tool does not allow for simultaneous work."

4.3.6 Promotion of the Service

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Each partner or member organisation is responsible for the promotion of the platform. This decentralisation is important in terms of the appropriation of the tool on the part of the partners.	- Although it is clear that the partner organisations work to attract new members and users of Dgroups, there is no policy or clear strategies for the promotion of the platform, nor a budget dedicated exclusively for this work. This is significant as the sustainability of the proposal depends, to a great extent, on the promotion and positioning that the platform attains among its target population
	- The platform does not have a monitoring system to facilitate the identification of development opportunities for the partnership or its services. Visit statistics are fundamental for increasing knowledge about the habits of the users of the platform.
- When searching on 8 different search	- When the search was carried out using

Strengths	Weaknesses
engines, using the words "Dgroups" and "Development Through Dialogue", www.dgroups.org appears first.[14]	other less specific but linked key words, such as "grupos de trabajo en línea", "comunidades en línea", "on line groups", "on line communities", www.dgroups.org did not appear within the first 50 references. This situation could be explained by the lack of "tags" and keywords defined for the Web site and its different pages.
- When analysing sites linked to the Dgroups Web site, 14 different sites appeared [15]. Among these are, notably: Bellanet, Fundacion Acceso, Itrain Online, APC, OneWorld and ITU.	- The majority of the Web sites for the partners and members did not have links to Dgroups.

4.3.7   Administration, maintenance and work methodologies

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The possibility for technical assistance was one of the advantages of the system that was pointed out by many of the users interviewed. The platform has a solid technical team in charge of the development and maintenance of the system (Bellanet), as well as a network of partners who assume the responsibility for the decentralised technical assistance.	- The technical support policy has changed over the years. Due to the users' high demands for support, each partner must now assume responsibility for technical support to their own groups. This decentralisation policy does not always function well, as many group administrators, moderators, and facilitators state that the response to their consultations has been slow, or in some cases, never been sent/received. In addition, some state that the individuals/teams responsible for technical support " have not been technically qualified"; for the handling of the tool.
	- For a new user, it is difficult to identify the person or organisation in charge of the Web site as only the names of the

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[14] http://www.google.com/, http://www.yahoo.com/, http://www.altavista.com/, http://www.metacrawler.com/, http://www.search.com/, http://www.mamma.com/, http://www.lycos.com/, http://www.excite.com/.
[15]http://www.itu.int/wsis/links/listing.asp?lang=es&c_type=ac, http://www.idmlinitiative.org/index.cfm?op=dsp_join, http://www.acceso.or.cr/publica/Impacto/impacto1/productofinal/Manual.pdf, http://www.e-democracy.org/center/eweb.html, http://home.bellanet.org/showtopic.php?topic_id=11, http://www.advocacynet.org/news_view/news_230.html, http://www.itrainonline.org/itrainonline/english/communication.shtml, http://www.apc.org/english/capacity/training/communication.shtml, http://www.balancingact-africa.com/news/back/balancing-act_152.html, http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/frontpage/306/4666, http://www.thinkofit.com/webconf/hostsites.htm, http://www.iconnect-online.org/base/ic_page1?sc=112, http://amlat.oneworld.net/article/view/33655/, http://www.elearnspace.org/managing/community.htm

			partners appear. In addition, if the user does not know that the dark blue icon corresponds to the administrator, moderator or facilitator for each group, it is not possible for them to identify the person responsible for the space
-	The Web site has a manual to support the users with the successful use of Dgroups.	-	The manual is in English and concentrates on the technical aspects, not on aspects of moderation and facilitation, which are critical for guaranteeing the good operation of a dgroup. "It does not have a simple summary, that is brief and effective and that includes the technical and facilitation aspects for the handling of the tool."
-	The platform incorporates many of the recommendations received from the partners and users. This indicates the ability for improvement, flexibility, as well as a sensitivity to the needs of the users.	-	The available budget, the existing procedures, and the decision-making process do not always allow for the changes that the organisations have requested. The interests and diverse uses that the platform maintains are vast. There is a permanent struggle between the need to maintain a system with very basic tools and the demands for more sophisticated services for populations with more experience in the use and appropriation of ICTs.
-	The majority of the individuals involved in the implementation of Dgroups are conscious of the need to differentiate the various roles that exist in the implementation of a dgroup (creation, administration, moderation and/or facilitation)..	-	There is no explicit definition of the responsibilities and functions for each one of these roles. For the majority of the groups on-line, clear objectives, definition of scope and responsibilities, as well as the definition and appropriation of the work methodologies on the part of the participants, are lacking.
		-	Follow-up of the dgroups by the partner organisations and members is lacking and protocols do not exist that would help them to carry out this role.
		-	It continues to be a challenge to obtain "real dialogue or exchange of opinions that goes beyond the exchange of documents". Some facilitators are not conscience of the fact that "effective mechanisms in order to create participation, demands a lot of time and energy on the part of the facilitator".

V. CONCLUSIONS AND GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

a) In terms of the geographic coverage, Dgroups is being utilised by organisations in diverse countries around the world in practically all of the continents. However, it is evident that the opening and handling of the platform is concentrated in Northern organisations. Generally speaking, an explicit strategy for promoting the tool in the South does not exist. The Southern countries that host a centre or office of a partner organisation, or member of the partnership, have a greater presence in the platform. In Latin America, most of groups are concentrated in Costa Rica, host country for the OneWorld Centre for Latin America and of the Office of Bellanet-LAC.

b) In terms of the thematic coverage, there is a distinct centralization around the information, knowledge and communication themes. The partners and/or members that have opened the greater amount of groups, are organisations who principally work in this area. This raises the questions: To what extent is Dgroups an ICT tool, and does it adequately respond to the needs and realities of organisations and/or individuals who do not work in ICTs?

c) Dgroups has endeavoured to provide access to non-English speaking users through the development of interfaces in Spanish, French and Portuguese. However, to transform the platform into a truly multilingual space, conceptual and technical efforts that transcend the sole translation of contents, is required.

d) There is a great diversity in the composition and interactions of the Dgroups. Currently, many of the groups are inactive. It appears that the links and the work processes that should be established between Dgroups' partner organisations and the allied development organisation, are not always clear. This creates diverse difficulties in the operation of the platform. The large number of users who register directly through Lyris without passing through the Web interface, results in diverse facilitators who are not necessarily appreciative of the uses of the web services. This is a factor in the predominant use of the tool as an electronic list. In addition, due to the classification and search mechanisms for groups, it is difficult for the users to easily locate the topics and individuals of their interest.

e) Dgroups is utilised for diverse applications, nevertheless, it is not a useful and effective platform for all the purposes for which it is used in Latin America. The technical and conceptual characteristics adapt more to certain types of uses than to others. Beyond the technological information aspects, the clear objectives of the space, as well as the characteristics and capacities of moderation and facilitation are the key elements for the successful use of the platform.

f) Dgroups is a tool, which is simple to use, requires a low bandwidth, is free of publicity, and has the endorsement of a partnership of organisations working in development themes. These are all characteristics that make it an excellent choice for an important group of social organisations. The security of the information, the ideological integrity, and the adaptability for limited accessing Internet are more significant factors for the social organisations than the technological sophistication

of the platform. Nevertheless, for those who work daily with ICT themes and tools there are significant weaknesses that should be addressed:

- The process of promotion and opening of Dgroups, along with the information available on the Web site, limit the users ability to understand the implications, scope and limitations for the adoption of the platform as a work tool.
- Some aspects of the site architecture, mainly the ones related to accessibility standards, present difficulties for access by specific groups of user populations, such as individuals with physical limitations.
- The large number of inactive groups or groups that have never had movement, along with the considerable amount of broken links, affect the credibility and the seriousness of the platform.
- The lack of a policy that outlines criteria for the promotion, planning, opening, training, follow-up, technical support, and closure of Dgroups, has become a significant factor that limits the potential of the platform and its successful use by social organisations.

5.2. Recommendations

a) In order to increase the presence of Dgroups in Latin America it is necessary to make the following improvements in the services and tools of the Dgroups platform:

- Implement a regional promotion strategy, emphasising countries whose activity in dgroups is relatively low but where the Dgroups' partners and members have programs and projects. Countries such as Mexico, Peru, Brazil and Argentina widely utilise the Internet nevertheless, there are few dgroups operating in these countries.

- Develop a multilingual home page, where the home page and the main navigation sections are available in Spanish, French and Portuguese.

- Improve the information registering system with more precise criteria for region and countries. The individuals responsible for opening groups must clearly understand these criteria and ensure that the information is registered appropriately in the database.

b) In terms of the thematic coverage, the system for thematic classification needs to be improved in order to better understand the contents of the work groups. Analysing the areas, or lines of work, of the partners and members of the partnership can determine the basis for the classification. In addition, it is necessary to revise the promotion policy of Dgroups. In order to accomplish this, a more in-depth investigation on the level of use and appropriation of the platform by the partners and members of this partnership is required. The study could provide interesting inputs for the reformulation of the membership policy.

c) To convert Dgroups into a truly multilingual platform, not only is translation of the home page and main sections of the site required, but also, a specific work strategy that integrates, in a cross-sectional manner, linguistic diversity as a relevant variable in the processes of virtual interaction.

Multilingualism is not solely content translation but incorporates relationship and interaction dynamics, contexts and particular cultural sensibilities, work and facilitation models, among others. If Dgroups wants to offer a multilingual platform, it must have a better understanding of the technical and conceptual implications of its proposal. In addition, Dgroups has the challenge to not follow the inclination of considering English as the "universal language", if its work is oriented mainly to countries in the South.

d) In relation to the frequency and characteristics of use of the platform, the following measures should be considered:

- Design and implement a monitoring system for registration and follow-up of opened groups that illustrates their objectives, scope and interactions. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to improve the registry of information for dgroups that are currently available on the web. In addition, it is important to implement a system of visit statistics, periodically process and analyse the existing data, and to generate permanent discussion spaces for the individuals responsible for creating dgroups.
- Define a policy for the opening, follow-up and closure of dgroups with clear criteria that is shared between the partners and members, that will reduce the number of inactive dgroups, and that will increase the impact of the active spaces.
- It is necessary to have better understanding and knowledge about the use and appropriation of dgroups by the social organisations who are, or have been, linked to the platform. Many questions remain about the level of inactivity of opened groups, and the relationship between this and the group's objectives, the facilitation models, and the conditions and capacities for the handling of the technology on the part of the end users.
- A more systematic process for training and follow-up so that organisations utilising the platform can clearly discern the contribution that dgroups can make to their projects and programs, is indispensable. In this sense, the development of a work protocol that outlines the procedures and responsibilities for various dgroups' stakeholders would be very useful in illustrating the relationships between partners/members and development organisations interested in using the platform.

e) The platform could establish a diversification strategy of its technological platform in order to resolve the limitations in fulfilling the technical and conceptual requirements for the diverse uses by the Latin American organisations. For example, it could promote the utilisation of the current platform for those users in which it has proven to be an effective tool, and develop new optional applications for users who require more sophisticated or specialized services. As well, the development of Dgroups in Open Source would be a way to augment the adaptation of the platform to the specific needs of the organisations.

In order to ensure that dgroups is an effective tool for interaction and dialogue, improvement of the moderation and facilitation of the virtual spaces is an important area to attend to. The development of these capacities is not only related to the technical handling of the platform, but also to the processes of conceptualisation, planning and follow-up of the planned objectives.

f) It is important that the platform describes the scope and limitations of the tool to its potential partners, members and users, in order that the organisations can adopt

Dgroups with a comprehensive understanding of what it can and cannot accomplish. The outlining of the procedures, responsibilities and mechanisms of coordination are essential to ensure the successful use of the platform.

g) In terms of the site architecture, a detailed revision of the accessibility standards and of the directory structure and the syntax of the Web pages, must be carried out. The adoption of accessibility standards needs special attention in order to guarantee the accessibility of the site to people with physical limitations. The adjustments that need to be made are relatively simple to implement, with relevant information about the standards, and with the permanent consultation of individuals or organisations working in this area.

h) A large part of the credibility of the platform depends on the management of the contents. It is essential that the opening, follow-up, and closure policy for dgroups includes clear criteria and work protocols that will help to reduce the number of inactive groups. It must also include relevant and comprehensive information, in the language of each dgroups, in order to provide the users with a sufficient guide for integrating themselves into the spaces available. As well, the groups' classification criteria should be refined in order to increase the usefulness of the search mechanism.

i) A more in-depth revision of the graphic image of Dgroups is recommended in order to establish basic criteria that guide the development of the customized skins. Linked to this, and due to the possibility of Dgroups in Open Source, it is necessary to develop training processes that will ensure that the graphic interfaces developed coincide with the needs and possibilities of the platform.

j) Design and implement clear strategies and a promotion policy for Dgroups so that the partners and members have an adequately financed work plan that allows them to reach the target population and to follow-up on the results that the organisations are obtaining through the system.

k) The membership policy must clearly define the responsibilities that the organisations of the partnership have for administrative and technical support to the groups that they promote. Establish a work protocol that covers each phase of the process of design, planning, implementation, follow up, and evaluation of the dgroups that the partners sponsor. This is essential to support the adequate operation of the platform and to confine the scopes of action for each key actor.

l) A more in-depth study of the users of the platform with the goal of better understanding their perceptions on the potentialities and limitations of Dgoups and therefore, have more comprehensive inputs for defining policies for Dgroups, is recommended. As well, a valuation of the partnership as a whole, would help to discern the governance and sustainability of the alliance

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VII. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Evaluation design and instruments

Appendix 2: List of people interviewed

Appendix 3: Dgroups statistics at the global level

Appendix 4: Dgroups statistics in Latin America

Appendix 5: Observation of Web site results

Appendix 6: Presentation of preliminary results