## OVERVIEW

### The need
The Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN) needed to scale up online networking and communication with partners and clients all over the world. So RWSN was looking for an online platform that would provide both a membership database and email based discussion groups.

### The solution
Dgroups fitted the bill for what RWSN needed. It was very simple to use - members could use it purely by email. It was independent, noncommercial, free from ads, and low bandwidth. It allowed structured discussions as well as mutual support groups for question/answers.

### The benefits
The network now has over 8200 members, distributed across different thematic communities and sub communities. Dgroups has been instrumental in the growth of the network, as well as a platform for learning and interaction in two-way exchange. It allowed RWSN to collect the different voices of its members, identify the issues to tackle and provide inputs for the creation of handbooks, synthesis papers and policy documents, to inform national and international debate on rural water supply.

# Using Dgroups to scale up online networking and communication in the Rural Water Supply Network

The **Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN)** is a global network of practitioners working in rural water supply. The network Secretariat is hosted by Skat, a consultancy based in St. Gallen in Switzerland. In 2011, **Sean Furey** was hired specifically to work with RWSN and take the network to the next level. Until then, the network really had just been a list of email addresses on a spreadsheet. Every time RWSN Secretariat tried to send out a newsletter or communication, this would crash their e-mail service. A deeply unsatisfactory situation.

At the time, other organizations such as SuSana, the Sustainable Sanitation Alliance, were facing a similar challenge and their **solution for online networking** was to develop a new website and include an online forum within the website. Other organizations were using free email groups or listservs. Others were using social media platforms, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, but none of them were really that good for what RWSN wanted: both a **membership database and a flexible discussion platform** where they could have structured discussions as well as mutual support groups for question/answers. Additionally, because RWSN is a practitioner network of people working in the field, it was really important that the platform presented as low threshold as possible.

Following the advice of colleague Bertha Camacho, a knowledge management specialist who has been using Dgroups in large communities such as KM4Dev, as well as internal groups created by Dgroups Partners such as SDC and Helvetas, Sean started experimenting with Dgroups in 2011. And **Dgroups fitted the bill for what RWSN needed**. So in 2012 RWSN launched Dgroups as their main online networking tool. They migrated the spreadsheet database and sent the invite to everyone in the old database to joint Dgroups. By doing so, people had to actively sign up - 1200 people (of the original 3000+) subsequently signed up.

## Dgroups at work

The way RWSN structured its network is to have the overall RWNS community under Dgroups. This has now more than 8200 members. The top level group is strictly controlled and used to send a quarterly newsletter and for major announcements. It is not used for discussion. Under the main group, there are five thematic discussion groups based on the strategic topics that RWSN has within the network. Within those subgroups, others are created around several more specific subtopics. The groups are coordinated by the theme coordinators in RWSN partner organizations, such as WaterAid and IRC.

Besides this more formal structure, other groups emerge and grow organically depending on where the interest is, such as on solar water pumping or rain water harvesting. Some groups have emerged organically from particular geographical areas; for example, in Rwanda there is a very active water and sanitation group, just for people within the country.

For RWSN, the flexibility in creating and structuring groups and subgroups has been really helpful. So, for example if you're a member of the solar pumping group that's within the larger groundwater group, you are a member that sub community but you also a member of the higher-level group.

## Drivers and challenges

No advertising, no commercial kind of overheads, just the message. That was the real attraction of Dgroups for RWSN!

Dgroups was also an existing platform and several people would be using it already, so they would not have to create a new login account. It is independent. And it is low bandwidth. So, adoption of Dgroups was a pretty easy sell because administrators saw the simplicity of the interface of the website and ordinary members could use it purely by email:

Network members do not need to go to the website to use it, either as a user or as a moderator. RWSN just did some basic training with their partners in different organizations. And Dgroups took off!

Finally, Dgroups aligns very much with Skat mission and philosophy. Skat is a knowledge driven organization, so learning and interaction in two-way exchange are at the core of their work. Dgroups is a fantastic platform for doing that and it really helps that the ethos of the organization behind it is very much around that, not just some top down transmission tool for PR purposes but it is a truly leveled playing field where it does not matter if you are a government minister or working or just a private individual. You can still chip in and interact and this is really useful.

## Results and examples

Dgroups has proved to be very important and useful. It is probably the main tool RWSN use as an organization for communicating with all their partners and clients all over the world.

A notable example of how Dgroups has been instrumental in RWSN work is the three weeks e-discussion which involved the then UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to water Catarina de Albuquerque. She was developing a handbook on human rights to really engage with practitioners and people working on the ground about what the human right water meant. So RWSN ran a structured discussion in collaboration with WaterAid. For the UN Special Rapporteur, it was of great value to have this broader discussion with around 150 people in about 60 different countries, in local government, in community organizations, in NGOs, in the private sector who would raise challenging questions or just ask for clarifications for such this big, global, quite important but still quite nebulous concept; what does it mean on a day to day level? RWSN was then able to bring a lot of those issues out

in a webinar so that Ms. de Albuquerque could respond to some of those issues to a broader audience. Finally, the transcript of that webinar turned into a publication. So RWSN was able to use all these different forms of communication which was incredibly helpful for Ms. de Albuquerque but it was also really valuable for RWSN network members as well.

Besides this, RWSN have run a number of e-discussions on the Dgroups platform on groundwater, on sustainable services, on an entire range of different topics. Typically, between 50 and 250 people get involved. The advantage of using Dgroups for this sort of e-discussions is that people take a lot of time and effort to input in the discussions - and this is not possible on social media platforms like Twitter, where the inputs can be very superficial. More recently, RWSN facilitated an e-discussion on the role of local government in rural water supply. This resulted in a really rich discussion, with contributions from all different countries from Ukraine to Cambodia to Honduras, really explaining how the situation works in different context, what the frustrations and the opportunities are.

A different, interesting example comes from the very specialized field of handpumps and rural water. Through the discussions and organic debate over the course of a year, Sean collated hundreds of e-mails and produced a synthesis document. This was a lot of work but it was really valuable to take that time, sit down and spend a couple of days just reading through those emails, extracting the ideas and information that came out through that organic debate. What came out was a really strong message around corrosion and iron in water. he synthesis document really brought this known issue into focus. So, this clearly came up from RWSN membership as a really high priority issue to tackle. That is also a good illustration of how Dgroups is a powerful tool - but moderators and

as facilitators need to take the time to listen deeply as well. And that's not always easy.

## Lessons learnt

From RWSN experience there are some valuable lessons on what makes an active group, and how to sustain conversation and exchanges in online communities:

❖ **Build a critical mass, with a core**
Having a critical mass within the community, in the order of 500+, will ensure that there are enough people who listen and who reply or actively ask question. But then it is also important to have a core of 10/20 people, or maybe even as few as 5, who will respond to anything. They won't always say the most sensible things but they are valuable because they will maybe say something provocative that will then bring other people into the discussions.

❖ **Don't under-estimate passive listeners**
When you have a large enough group, you probably won't hear from all the members. Just because people do not respond does not mean to say that they are not taking value from it.

❖ **Have a diverse membership**
You also need good mix of people amongst the members. For example, the RWSN groundwater communities is very active. Its membership is very diverse, with many practitioners who are on the edge or past retirement age who have a huge amount of knowledge from all sorts of drilling programs back in the 60s and 70s and 80s. It is a valuable inter-generational exchange of them being able to pass their hard-won knowledge to younger engineers. In

other communities where the topics are a lot newer and there isn't that depth of expertise yet. So, it is sometimes harder to maintain that level of engagement.

❖ **Build trust through face-to-face gatherings**

Finally, it is important to recognize that a lot of online engagement is most useful after face to face discussions and it is not a complete replacement for face to face meetings. Once people have met face to face and they come to know each other, they trust each other a bit more. In turn, this can lead to online exchange which gets to a bit more depth.

## Thinking ahead

RWSN uses a combination of tools to communicate with their partners; lately for example, they make a large use of webinars, and they have been working really well for them. Webinars (and face-to-face meetings) are highly complementary with Dgroups discussions. In five years, who knows, RWSN will probably have moved on from a webinar format onto something else. Dgroups will clearly continue to need to evolve but at same time it has a very clear, basic role and it will continue to do that.

Further, there is a risk that the digital divide will get bigger between those who have easy, cheap or free access to the internet and those who do not or have a very unreliable or expensive access. Dgroups has an active role to play in trying to bridge that gap. There is often an assumption that goes into a lot software

development, that people have the latest kit and bandwidth connection. Some countries are making that leap frog to the next generation of communications technology but an awful lot are not and we need to be mindful of those who might not be able to use communications platform. Being able to communicate through e-mail, although it is seen as increasingly so antiquated, it remains a ubiquitous tool (more people use e-mail than any other communication tool) and will continue to be an important exchange mechanism. In effect, e-mail can be described as the 'killer app': ask any audience of people working in international development how many people regularly use Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp to communicate with their colleagues, and usually considerably less than half will put up their hands; ask them how many use email for the same purpose, and almost everyone will do so.

Further, one of the biggest barriers for online networking and participation is around language - and that is an area where technology is progressing quite rapidly in terms of translation. RWSN works in English and French. But there are so many different languages. In Central America for example, in a lot of places only the men speak Spanish and the women speak the local language. If technologies developed that people can use more localized indigenous languages to communicate, they will have the opportunity to have that translated into English, French, etc. - and that will open up a whole new world of potential directions. We shall truly be realizing the Dgroups vision of 'A world where every person is able to contribute to dialogue and decision-making for international development and social justice.'

*This case study was prepared by Pier Andrea Pirani (Euforic Services), based on an interview with Saskia Harmsen (Dgroups Board) and Sean Furey (Skat Foundation and Dgroups Board).*

*Dgroups Case Studies are produced by the Dgroups Foundation to share good practices and success stories from Dgroups Partners and users. Visit www.dgroups.info for more information.*