More effective online collaboration, dialogue and interaction – What works in international development?

Jorge Chavez-Tafur, Peter Ballantyne and Pier Andrea Pirani

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Key messages for more effective online interaction

✓ Mix formats and channels and tones – formal, informal, conversations, zoom and email, online, offline, and knowing when to converse and when to document

✓ Learn and innovate and experiment together, adapting styles to participants and purposes, reinforcing sharing of tacit and explicit knowhow and curating links and resources

✓ Clarify and agree goals, plans, expectations and purpose, to be really aware of any assumptions – and not be afraid to regularly revisit and adjust priorities and plans

✓ Devise processes that translate audiences who watch into participants who engage – knowing who is online, making sure they can be heard or seen, and actively facilitating interactions

✓ Make conversations and interactions as inclusive as possible, overcoming connectivity barriers, tackling power dynamics, choosing accessible applications, bringing in all the experiences of participants and giving space for new or different voices.

After 2020, when the whole development community moved online and replaced face to face interactions with virtual meetings, our lessons and insights in setting up, running and sustaining online communities and events have become more important than ever before.

As we all moved online as a result of the pandemic, between May and September 2020 the Dgroups Foundation convened an online dialogue to take stock of good practices in facilitating and sustaining online and virtual communities and interactions. This included a knowledge café in May that identified four critical success factors for online collaboration, a KM4Dev@20 workshop in July that extended the agenda (with considerations of the COVID-19 pandemic, a focus on event design and dynamics, calls for cross-community learning and, especially, for greater attention to inclusion), an e-conference to identify what really works, and a further knowledge café in September that reviewed and extended the key points emerging.

This brief proposes four critical areas for effective online interaction, summarising the main ideas that emerged from these discussions:

→ enhance participation and engagement;

→ nurture effective communities;

→ use appropriate platforms; and

→ sustain engagement over time.

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Enhance participation and engagement

One of the first points mentioned by all participants was the need to set out a clear structure, agenda and plan for the interactions helps participants follow the discussions and know when and how they can best contribute. This needs then to be adapted as the process advances, to address new issues for example, helps build group interest and ownership.

Just as important is to focus on the issues and topics important to the participants and seek ways to bring their priorities to the front.

This point was linked to the need to give voice and visibility to community members. Hearing from colleagues about their concerns, challenges and solutions can motivate group members to contribute. It also builds a sense of belonging and, when contributions stimulate responses, members are themselves more likely to contribute. Appreciating participants encourages them to contribute.

But participants also highlighted the need to recognize the different ways people interact and devise multi-format processes and approaches. A live online event may benefit people with good connectivity, living in the right time zone, comfortably speaking a language or enjoying an instant virtual interaction style.

As a result, different approaches suit different purposes, for example, whether the interaction is a one-off to share or brainstorm or a longer-term collective learning process. In projects, a mix of approaches over different phases can be targeted to specific goals.

Another discussion thread focused on the need to select people-centred platforms and technologies to suit the purpose and the participants – where and how are people most comfortable, what barriers might they face to engage, how do we make it easier to be part of a conversation?

Moreover, using asynchronous interaction channels – on email or a chat platform for example, may benefit people with more reflective or considered approaches, those more comfortable reading and writing or anyone wanting to communicate in their own time.

Key insights

- ✔ Provide clear goals, plans, and expectations that can frame participation
- ✔ Use a mix of live and asynchronous modes adjusted to different purposes and participant situations
- ✔ Adapt the tone (formal, conversational) and language to fit participant comfort zones
- ✔ Encourage and recognize active listening as a form of participation
- ✔ Mobilize additional contributions and moments as catalysts for interaction

Online engagement often works well when supporting or associated with other events – before, during or after an event. The elements can be designed as a mutually-reinforcing set of interactions.

On process, active facilitation was recommended to devise inclusive processes, solicit contributions, guide and summarise conversations and generally develop good relationships among the participants.

Lastly, while group moderators often focus on messages posted or visible event contributions, people who 'actively listen' are also important participants. Look for ways to solicit inputs and feedback and do not assume low visibility means low interest or utility.

Good online facilitation and leadership starts with clarity of purpose. With it, we can get people to interact by: bringing a process online, combining the various elements; structuring it for interaction, participation, and engagement; playing with rhythm and pace; and using plenaries to frame and breakouts to converse

[adapted from a presentation by Nadia von Holzen at the first knowledge café]

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Nurture effective communities

Here, participants pointed to the need to start from the organizational setting and goals of the community as these will shape the essential trust among members: Do members come from the same organization, to what extent do they share similar backgrounds and interests, are there shared tangible outputs, practices or goals that drive participants to contribute, which interests of sponsors align with the community? While convergence is essential, it is also necessary to encourage more diversity, less orthodoxy and less group think.

A critical mass of group members is extremely important for communities that are not time- or event- bound but rely on sufficient, sufficiently-interesting and diverse interactions. Diverse membership, including by young people, helps to provide new perspectives and networking opportunities.

On the other hand, it is necessary to set an inclusive and accessible tone, style and format that encourages contributions, builds trust and overcomes any hesitations of members to contribute publicly. Community conversations should be safe places to hold discourses without fear of attacks.

And linked to this, it helps to consider

→ a combination of online asynchronous interactions with other in-person, virtual or other interactions that bring community members together in different formats – at regular intervals or around specific milestones or products.

→ Regularly asking members what they want to discuss and learn so conversations can be co-created and adapted as far as possible. Assessing member capacities and as needed, supporting them to take on more active community facilitation roles grows ownership, relevance and ownership.

→ Organising regular structured reflection, encouraging short feedback loops, documenting the learning but most crucial, re-inject it back into policies, protocols, procedures, processes, activities, practices, and behaviours.

→ Organising time-bound issue or topical discussions within wider conversations. These give focus, mobilise expertise and knowhow, surface community interests and help move specific interests forward.

Key insights

✔ Have a critical mass of people and perspectives

✔ Make community contributions easy and accessible so members are encouraged to participate

✔ Solicit feedback and build capacities to foster ownership, ensure relevance and strengthen sustainability

✔ Show or demonstrate impact and value

✔ Mix up formats to build momentum and interest and provide milestones for collaboration

→ Documenting, recording and sharing different interactive elements so members who miss something can catch up or visit archives, and

→ Exploring opportunities to connect across different groups and communities, looking for potential shared interests, synergies and complementarities.

The discussions also showed that participation increases when members can see collective or individual value created and realized through the community, and that clear goals and value propositions help to incentivise participation and provide a basis to measure and show impact and usefulness.

Participants again pointed to the important roles played by an animator, facilitator or moderator to regularly inject content, launch calls for action, manage agenda's, summarize discussions, solicit interventions and attend to process and group dynamics.

To sustain community engagement, post regular 'asks' on specific topics, empower members to take initiative, enhance the value of the community to its members, include diverse perspectives, prepare co-hosts to proactively engage everyone, identify and motivate key participants, and actively facilitate to include everyone

[adapted from Yasmin Klaudia Bin Humam's presentation]

Use appropriate platforms

Here, participants looked at the platforms we use. Tools need to suit both your purpose and your participants, so it is crucial to choose tools and platforms that participants are familiar with. Alternatively, make time for people to learn them.

Participants emphasised the need to start with simple approaches that let most people participate meaningfully. This can require that all participants adjust to the weakest connectivity of a group member, focusing just on conversations or introducing one "shiny toy" at a time.

Equally important is to make sure platforms work for mobile devices and low bandwidth situations.

Summarising these concerns, we need to consider how people engage with a community. Email allows people to determine when and how they want to participate; but we may also want bridges to social media or other platforms. Don't lock-in to just one platform or technology but avoid using so many that people and conversations are lost in the noise. And don't forget language barriers and bridges.

Key insights

- ✔ Keep it simple, accessible and participant-focused

- ✔ Innovate and use different tools but don't leave people behind or overwhelm them

- ✔ Keep in mind where people are and what they have – mobile devices or low bandwidth, email, social media

Collaboration is about people, so they must be our starting point for platforms and technologies. While there are many different platforms – email-based, web-based, single/multi-functional – choices need to suit all the users expected to be part of the community. Assess them according to our needs, what can be added, what capacities are required, any security/ safety considerations and a platform's future-friendliness

[adapted from Riff Fullan's presentation]

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Sustain engagement through time

For meaningful interaction over time, participants need to trust one another, the process and any facilitators, organizers and their interests.

Over time, membership of a community will evolve so maintaining relevance, constantly communicating and re-visiting purpose, connecting interactions, and inducting new members are important elements.

The discussions pointed to the need to mix interaction modes so a community may regularly share update and links, hold more in-depth thematic conversations, run polls, or associate with specific events or other products (like a journal).

They also showed the benefits of paying attention to metadata, documentation and archives so all messages or resources shared remain accessible over time and can be used by new members or re-visited when people may need them.

Participants argued that time is a variable so 'sustaining' can be needed for a long- or a short-term initiative, or also for one with no end date. Every online or virtual interaction, lasting from 30 minutes to 30 years, has its own pace and rhythm, rising and falling according to issues and interests and shaped by facilitation other inputs.

Shorter durations usually get much attention to design and facilitation and may have very precise goals and objectives that can be checked when they end. Where conversations, communities or other interactions are spread over longer periods, indicators of success are different. Where a purpose is achieved, or the purpose is no longer needed, then closure is not necessarily failure.

In this way, adapting, adjusting or re-inventing an online community can be more important than driving it to continue and be 'sustainable' at all costs.

Where a community or other interaction is intended to be a more 'permanent' tool, continuing engagement requires more sustained commitment and support, as well as a clear and present purpose that attracts and motivates participation and, as important delivers benefits to an evolving community over time.

Key insights

✔ Build trust in people and processes

✔ Evolve, adapt and adjust to stay relevant

✔ Design processes, interactions and indicators to match goals

✔ Closing a community space does not mean it has failed

Over time, trust facilitates online interactions, helping to generate and reinforce a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Members can build pressure through collective voice, save time and resources, come together on equal ground and facilitate cross-learning. Trust is reinforced by recognizing and reinforcing the different capacities of participants, addressing power imbalances, and avoiding jargon or linguistic overload that creates insecurities in some participants

[adapted from Saskia Harmsen's presentation]

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Our own dialogue

This exercise comprised three facilitated virtual workshops on Zoom to identify and discuss an agenda, a moderated e-conference to explore insights and lessons more deeply, a wiki to capture and organize insights, blog posts and video reports of the discussions, as well as synthesis products.

Some 'successes' from our own dialogue seen by participants were:

✔ Actively inviting and encouraging people to take part: engaging people behind the scenes and reaching out individually to encourage and appreciate people's participation.

✔ Having a dialogue that was well-organized, structured and focused, time-bound and a sense that it is brought together for a purpose/outcome.

✔ Considering the importance of trust – which can be reinforced through interactions and getting to know and appreciate others.

✔ Building horizontal interactions and networking: getting to meet people, find people and share in their knowledge – all needing good leadership and facilitation

✔ Encouraging people to take part by mapping their knowledge, providing conversational spaces, fishbowl type meetings and video interviews. Zoom calls can build trust between people and email/wiki provides the space for analysis and thinking.

✔ Learning, innovating and experimenting together, adapting styles to participants and purposes, reinforcing sharing of tacit and explicit knowhow and curating links and resources

✔ Clarifying and agreeing goals, plans, expectations and purpose, being aware of any assumptions – and not being afraid to regularly revisit and adjust priorities and plans

✔ Devising processes that translate audiences who watch into participants who engage – knowing who is online, making sure they can be heard or seen, and actively facilitating interactions

✔ Making conversations and interactions as inclusive as possible, overcoming connectivity barriers, tackling power dynamics, choosing accessible applications, bringing in all the experiences of participants and giving space for new or different voices.

The 2020 Dgroups Foundation dialogue ran from July to September 2020. It explored online collaboration, dialogue and interaction and what works in international development. It intersected with KM4Dev 2020 community activities where the Foundation sponsored 3 online workshops within the wider cycle, discussing what works – and what doesn't – when collaborating and acting together online.

dgroups.io/g/dg-dialogue-online

The Dgroups Foundation was established in 2009 to facilitate and provide governance to the Dgroups 'partnership' - a group of organisations committed to enhance online collaboration and interaction in development, human rights and humanitarian aid. From 2002-2018, the partners created and ran the dgroups.org community platform. Since 2019, the Foundation brokers simple, effective and affordable solutions, knowledge and expertise to enhance collaboration among organizations, projects, networks and campaigns in international development.

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