# I COLLABORATE, E-COLLABORATE, WE COLLABORATE

**A collection of stories about e-collaboration experiences**

*When you don't know how to ride a bike, walking is always faster!*

## FOREWORD

Have you used Skype or MSN for communicating with others located somewhere around the world? Already experienced an online conference meeting with a group of colleagues from different countries? Or watched a video on the web from an interesting conference you could not attend? International Development has always had a global character, but never before have the developments and use of web-technologies changed so rapidly. Within international development, individuals and organisations have similar experiences and similar interests, from different places in the world. Continuous socio-technological developments in the area of communication and ICT make it nowadays possible to connect with each other globally in new ways, making use of the wide range of innovations created on the web. This offers more and new opportunities for knowledge sharing, collaboration processes, dialogue, and interaction. The new range of tools, like for instance skype, do not only make communication cheaper, but have the potential to change the nature of collaboration and relationships in international development too. Physical distances can be bridged, by making use of new possibilities to communicate. But how do people in development organisations learn how to make use of new tools? And which tools are really useful? And how can we help them not to drown in the sea of new tools, abbreviations and error messages?

In this relatively new area various Dutch development organisations, large and small, are undertaking interesting experiments and try-outs which are worthwhile to make explicit and share with each other. This booklet describes 14 stories of organisations using e-collaboration in some way, varying from using Moodle as an online learning platform to Teamspeak as a software tool for having an online meeting with partners located all over the globe. We hope to inspire you with these experiences, stimulating you to take this first step, using your work as a laboratory for experimenting. The following expression might help you getting started: When you don't know how to ride a bike, walking is always faster! We hope you will enjoy the stories!

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## Content overview

**Reading suggestion:**
This booklet contains 14 stories of organisations using e-collaboration in some way. You might read from A to Z. Another suggestion is to read those stories that inspire you, stories about e-tools you are curious about, stories closely related to processes in your own work.

## Introduction

This booklet is a product of a research done in the development sector on e-collaboration experiences. We became interested in what organisations are doing with e-collaboration technologies and which questions and problems they come across. As we define e-collaboration as "the process of cooperation and communication among individuals or organisations with the common goal of knowledge sharing and mutual development with the use of e-tools", what are experiences, insights, tools people use? With this definition processes like e-learning, e-facilitating, collaboration, e-coaching, sharing and exchanging knowledge and networking are all part of e-collaboration.
For finding answers to these questions we designed a research plan, aimed to get an impression of e-collaboration stories among Dutch NGOs, in order to support and inspire organisations or individuals through the experiences of others.
We visited 12 Dutch NGOs, each with a story worth sharing, focusing on inspiring initiatives which formed an example of a possible way to start e-collaborating with partner organisations or within an organisation.

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### Learning community on e-collaboration
*On November 2nd 2005, PSO, IICD and ICCO conducted a meeting for Dutch NGOs about e-collaboration. About 30 people visited this meeting and afterwards a D-group (E-collaboration among Dutch NGOs) was started to encourage the exchange of ideas, issues, questions and knowledge. This group has grown into a community or network of people interested in e-collaboration. An e-collaboration learning community was born, which is shown by the effort people invest to keep this community alive, as well as in the meetings, at the D-group and between individual members. The stories presented in this booklet come from members of the e-collaboration learning community. These and more stories can be found on the internet:*

*http://icollaborate.blogspot.com/*

## Story 01: Sharing interesting websites

Interview with Joitske Hulsebosch from IICD. (http://www.iicd.nl/)

### The tool: del.icio.us
Del.icio.us is an online tool. Its potential is described in just 3 words on the website: keep, share and discover. (http://del.icio.us/) Information on the internet can be collected, shared and discovered online with this social bookmarking tool. All the information stored on del.icio.us is public, so everybody can see and search all the collected bookmarks of other people.

### What can you do with del.icio.us?
Bookmarks to websites and online PDF-files can be documented online. The user can assign so-called tags to these bookmarks. A tag according to the website is: "just a word that describes an item saved on del.icio.us." By assigning different tags to a bookmark, a description is provided of the information behind the hyperlink.
The bookmarks cannot be categorized, as you would in the 'favourites' of your internet browser. Instead of assigning categories to the bookmarks, in del.icio.us you can place the tags used under a heading. These categories and the tags are displayed on the first page of del.icio.us, so you quickly get a good idea of the owner's field of interest. You can subscribe to other peoples' del.icio.us webpage. Their links will appear in a separate section of your own del.icio.us webpage. With every hyperlink added you can see how many people have the same page bookmarked and who they are.

### What do you need?
Del.icio.us is online, so you need an internet connection, and it is free of charge.

### Knowledge sharing and finding people
"I've used del.icio.us for while now, since January 2006, and I think it is an ideal tool to organise all the information that I gather in and around my work. I tried it after a discussion we had online about web2.0 tools in CPsquare, but started to get enthusiastic when I talked to Peter Ballantyne and his ideas on how to use it to produce a feed with relevant links on a certain topic. At first, when I'd just heard about de.icio.us, I couldn't really picture the benefits for myself. Because of Peter's vision and our experiment with the possibilities of the tool, I started using it more intensively and invested time in learning for instance how to cluster tags. I use del.icio.us to bookmark all interesting websites I come across when looking for information for work or just to keep up. Besides keeping all the information organised I also use del.icio.us as a search engine."
Can you tell me anything about the experiment you started around del.icio.us and social bookmarking? "Around February of this year we (myself and my colleague Nynke Kruiderink, Dorine Ruter from ETC and Peter Ballantyne from Euforic) came together and decided to start a little experiment with del.icio.us to see what social bookmarking could do for us and how it could help in our work. We shared an interest in actually experimenting with web2.0 tools. Our areas of interest and work are very similar, we are all interested in knowledge management and development cooperation. So we started thinking: "why look for information separately if we can share?" We could produce a feed with the links we found by using a unique tag for resources we want to share with others. That's why we chose to make use of a special tag: km4dev_pilot and we made a habit of using this tag for all our resources related to knowledge management in development. Del.icio.us offers the option of an RSS feed for a tag, so it is very easy to create a list of the bookmarks

Centopeia » Fostering Online Communities by Tara Hunt  save this
to cursus_faciliteren_van_online_communities communities_of_practice successfactors ... saved by 2 other people ... 2 days ago

wia » home  save this
to webheads sus_nyrop cursus_faciliteren_van_online_communities ... 4 days ago

MindMeister - think together  save this
to mindmapping free_tools ... saved by 3 other people ... 5 days ago

bubbl.us - brainstorming made simple  save this
to brainstorming free_tools mindmapping ... saved by 1767 other people ... 5 days ago

Checklist » Archive » Dit moet je zien! Blogumentary  save this
65 minuten uitleg over blog als citizens journalism
to blogging video erwin_blom ... 5 days ago

ncna » home  save this
to slideshow Beth_Kanter web2.0 non_profit ... saved by 3 other people ... on feb 22

E L S U A ~ A KM Blog by Luis Suarez » Blog Archive » And Now It Will Be when We Are All Going to Explode!  save this
to widget ... on feb 22

blyberg.net » Catalog Card Generator  save this
to icebreakers post_it images ... saved by 399 other people ... on feb 22

Anecdote: Finding success stories  save this
on telling success stories
to storytelling anecdote ... saved by 6 other people ... on feb 22

Home  save this
site recommended by Grace Judson
to coaching ... saved by 5 other people ... on feb 22

that were added by our group. And Dorine used Superglu to 'glue' our tags together. This way it is possible to make a feed with bookmarks for a particular subject. We recently also created one around health and ICT at IICD. To help each other even more, we agreed that we would also add tags concerning the kind of information and the geographical area the link refers to." Helping to find interesting information on the web and share it: that's what it is all about! But how did you get together? "I knew Dorine from the e-collaboration group and we were both using del.icio.us, although Dorine was using it more intensively than me. Peter found us online through del.icio.us, because he noticed we were active taggers on del.icio.us. And I brought in my colleague Nynke who was also interested. So it's not only possible to discover information, but also people with similar interests to you! It is relatively easy to find people with certain interests using del.icio.us. If you add a bookmark del.icio.us automatically tells you how many more people have added that same link and you can quickly click to their del.icio.us webpage. Sometimes there can be around 8000 people, but if there are only 1 or 2, I often check if they've collected more interesting links."

## Easy to use

"It's easy to get started: you only have to create an account on the del.icio.us website. You need to create a username, password and provide an e-mail address in case you lose your password. Then you can get started and add your bookmarks." Is getting started that simple? "Getting started is very easy. You can add buttons in your browser, which enable you to simply add the site you are currently visiting by clicking on that button (called 'post to del.icio.us'). You add a small description, add the tags and you are done! You might want to add your old bookmarks, which can take a while, but after that they'll be nice and organised. Adding bookmarks as you work or while searching for information is also almost no trouble at all. After that you automatically go back to the site you were on and continue where you left off. Because of the ease of adding tags, you'll also add websites that are not needed at the moment, but that contain interesting information. This may be very useful in case you need to search for that subject later on. You don't need to search any more for what you have already found."

## Benefits for work

Can you give an example of how it has made your work easier? "Recently I had to prepare for a presentation about web2.0. The first thing I did was search my del.icio.us webpage with the tag web2.0 and I quickly found a lot of material I had come across earlier. It saved me a lot of work and time. I could select some of those as handouts, and had excellent inputs for my presentation. It's also very useful when a colleague comes over with a question, and I know there are interesting things to read on a certain subject. Mostly it doesn't seem worth investing the time if I have to start searching for materials that I know are interesting for that specific subject. Now I can quite easily send a link from del.icio.us with all material I have found before." Are there any aspects of del.icio.us that are harder to get familiar with? "I can't say that anything is hard. At first I didn't immediately notice that the tags could be organised in clusters, until I saw it on Dorine's del.icio.us webpage. Then I started to look how this could be done which was quite easy.
Del.icio.us doesn't have a whole lot of options, so you quickly get to know the ones available. Besides that we always have our little group where you can ask for help. We keep in touch by e-mail and Skype, where we discuss technical questions. For example, I wanted to use an RSS feed at del.icio.us for my blog. (http://joitskehulsebosch.blogspot.com/) Dorine helped me with that. Now the latest del.icio.us bookmarks are displayed on my blog."

## Teamwork

Has the co-operation between you always been this good or have there been changes in the relationship with the others in the experiment? "We have become a real team, even though we have met only once! We are all very enthusiastic about our collaboration with del.icio.us, and that leads to a sense of being 'partners in crime.' We have extended the group, but the 4 initiators are more active. We all share the fun of exploring the possibilities of the tool. That is clearly demonstrated in the discussions we're having about a new tag. We scheduled a Skype session to discuss this, because we wanted to come up with a good name. Besides that we are also more aware of the subject somebody is currently working on by looking at the bookmarks added. But if you don't have any idea about how useful a resource is, or what the others think, it won't stimulate any discussion." Are there any disadvantages or would you like to see some changes made to the tool? "I never really thought about any changes. I am used to del.icio.us as it is now and changes would only mean that you've got to get used to it again. What I did notice is that although information can be shared on the internet, you can't give any opinions or discuss any material. So, I use my blog for that."

## More people, more information

What would you like to achieve with del.icio.us? Do you see any big ideals behind the tool? "We'd like to involve more people. We just need to take care of making sure that new people aren't overwhelmed by the ease with which we use the tool nowadays. We probably need to support these people at the start. The current plan is to expand the group to seven people, but I can't tell yet how much further we can and will go.
The more people, the more information there will be, and there is a limit to what we can handle. The larger the group, the less influence you probably have over the quality or type of information tagged. We could also think about having a smaller group of taggers and expanding the users by promoting the feed.
The audience can get very big, because everybody is free to look at what the taggers have added. The taggers should consist of motivated individuals, who people can put their trust in and who are active information workers. The quality of the bookmarks must be maintained by the taggers. Also, the taggers shouldn't consider the tagging as extra work and it should fit into his or her day-to-day work."

## Partners' reaction

Who would find del.icio.us useful? "I think everybody whose work is involved with knowledge and everybody who wants to be kept informed about certain subjects. As I already mentioned we also started an experiment with a unique tag within IICD about health and ICT, where we have come up with a new tag, 'ehealthround-table'. It is amazing to see what happens when 3 people start tagging, you find so many more useful resources than when tagging alone. We also introduced this to two of our partners in the south, and their reaction was positive, but different to what we expected. The problem was not the bandwidth as we feared before, as del.icio.us seemed to work well with them since they had broadband connections. These partners indicated that they foresaw a problem in the time involved in searching for resources, tagging them, and making use of the resources. They just have to see how easy it is and that it doesn't take much time once you get used to it. A practical introduction to tagging as a collaborative event can stimulate this. Dealing with information overflow is a real problem though, hence we might need an 'infomediary' to pre-select the best materials (short and concise)."

Interview with Gerbina van den Hurk from NIZA. (http://www.niza.nl/)

### What is Skype and what can you do with it?

"With Skype you can talk to anyone, anywhere for free. Forever." The slogan leaps out at you from the Skype homepage – Skype in a nutshell. Skype is a way to make phone calls to people on the other side of the world, for free.
What do you need to use it? The only thing you need is a (reliable) internet connection, a computer and a headset.



### Free and easy

Around 24% of the Dutch population uses Skype. Sometimes because their friends or family live far away, sometimes to cut costs. "I have been using Skype (http://www.skype.com/) for a long time and I was always amazed why no-one else used it at NIZA, my organisation. In our profession, it's ideal, because phoning partner organisations in the South is very expensive, and Skype is absolutely free. I discovered Skype through an international organisation of which I am a board member. They don't have any money, so they use Skype a lot. I wanted to introduce the programme to NIZA, but wasn't sure how to in the beginning. People thought it was a bit strange and preferred familiar means of communication. People prefer sticking to what they know. My goal was to help people find out that Skype isn't so strange at all. I'd love people to see the potential of Skype." What do you see as the potential of Skype? "Our partners are far away and it's hard to build a relationship with them when you hardly see each other and stay mainly in touch through e-mail. Skype is an easy and cost-free way of phoning. So it leaves more room for small-talk which also benefits the relationship. I think that Skype should become a standard tool in improving relationships."

### Enthusing others

"At one stage, one of our partners told us to start working with Skype. They used it a lot and did not understand why we didn't. This was the trigger for people at NIZA. I think they didn't want to lag behind their partners. Then, about six months ago, I gave a short demonstration of how Skype works. More demonstrations turned out to be needed, but people did start to understand it." Did you succeed in the end, and why? "I think that my informal introduction to Skype helped. Everyone could experiment freely and slowly get used to the tool. Official guidelines from the management may exert too much pressure and I don't think that's conducive to people's

attitude towards the tool. Also, the headsets are in my room. If people want to Skype, they have come to my room first to get one. This also gives them a chance to ask me questions, or for help if they have problems. I think it's very important that people feel they can turn to someone for help. NIZA is now using Skype, which I'm very happy about!" Are there any difficulties in getting started with Skype? "You need to download the application and create a user account, for which you need to invent a Skype name for yourself, and a password. An e-mail address can be added in case you lose your password. There is nothing complicated about that. If you want to use Skype, you just log in and you can talk with other people online. It's much like MSN Messenger: you need to add people to your contact list before you can start a conversation. If people aren't online much, like some partners in the south, you should set up a Skype appointment. You can easily schedule an appointment by e-mail or telephone, so you'll be sure you're both online at the right time."

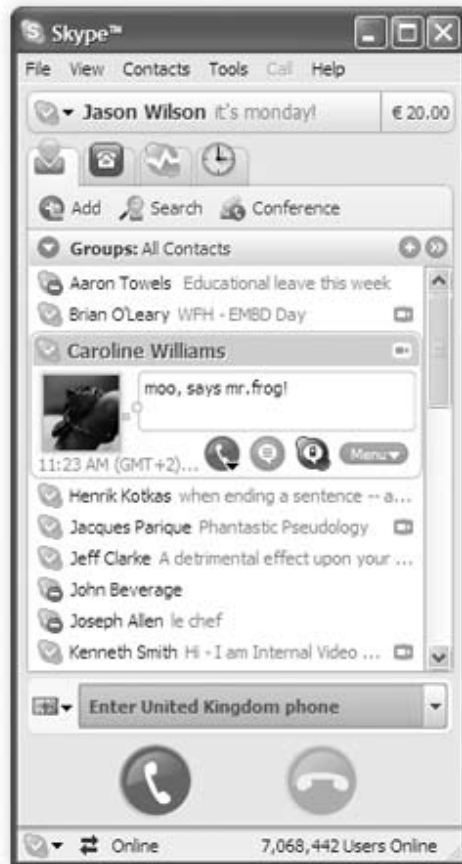### Better relationships with partners

Has Skype achieved want you wanted to achieve? "Yes I think so. At least there's more room for conversations about day-to-day things which has helped improve relationships. I am now considering introducing more e-tools. Everyone's becoming familiar with Skype now and realises that there's nothing complicated about it, and that it works. Now, I'd like to introduce del.icio.us, wikis and blogs. I'll introduce them during an informal lunch, so that people don't feel pushed. I am planning to invite some people working in the development sector, who already use the tools. Then they can explain what the tools can do, and NIZA staff can focus on the tools that will work for them."



### Another point of view

I used Skype for the first time on September 6. I am embarrassed to admit this, but I am used to chatting a lot with my friends over MSN and I don't have any friends or relatives living far away! My first experience was a conversation with a total of 5 people and we discussed the agenda for the e-collaboration meeting on September 20. I cannot say it went flawlessly. People 'disappeared' or only segments were heard of 2 people talking at the same time. I think we spent half the time talking about issues concerning the connection and whether we could hear each other properly. In the end these problems were solved as somebody else became initiator of the conversation and invited the rest. The computer of the person starting the conversation probably makes a difference to the quality.
All of this must sound awful, but in my opinion these problems can contribute a lot to a conversation if the intention is to improve your relationship. I couldn't stop laughing about everybody's: 'can you hear me' or 'who is gasping so loudly.' Ice breakers could not be formulated any better! This also provides people with a shared story and is it easy to switch over to talk about the conditions somebody is in. For example: 'do I hear rain' or 'are you gasping so loudly because of the heat.' What I am trying to say is: the more you can talk around the specific work topic, the more you get to know one another. A common framework can be created with shared stories. A webcam can also contribute to this: An image can tell you more than a thousand words.

Interview with Jan van Ansum from OXFAM/NOVIB. (http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/)



## The KIC project

The OXFAM-NOVIB KIC project is an international project consisting of an online portal, face-to-face meetings, virtual workshops, expert meetings and discussions. KIC stands for knowledge infrastructure with and between counterparts.

## The features of the online portal

The most important features of the website include: room for online communities, document sharing and locating partner organisations. (At the partner locator.) Before entering the website you have a choice of four different languages: English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Visitors can also access the site in a low bandwidth version although not all features will be accessible that way. The portal will be public, with some closed areas reserved for members only. All partners and affiliates will be granted access and interested organisations can gain access on request. The information will be kept as open as possible. All partners are provided with the option to freely upload documents. News items will be supervised by a knowledge expert to guarantee the quality. A moderator, who can give access to other people, will oversee the communities. This can be set when a new community is created: people either request access or the moderator invites people. Every member has a profile, containing information about their job description, their organisation and the field they work in. Other members online are visible and can be approached by chat or e-mail.

## Working together, sharing knowledge and finding each other

"The KIC project contains multiple components and aims to increase and stimulate the exchange of knowledge and collaboration with and between OXFAM counterparts and affiliates. The online, multi-purpose portal is part of this. (https://www.oxfamkic.org/) It offers the option of sharing knowledge at the specialist sites by uploading documents to exchange experiences. People can collaborate online in the online communities, while the portal also provides a listing, a kind of 'yellow pages', of all partners. Access to the portal is open to all affiliates and partners; around 3000 organisations in total. Visitors can also access the portal for news items and general information, but won't be able to access all parts."

## Learning from the experiences of others

How did this project get started? "The idea for the project was first conceived about four years ago. It looked as though all OXFAM processes could be better regulated and our partners asked us if we could come up with a way of exchanging experiences with other partners. They saw other partners encountering similar problems and issues in their work and wanted to share their experiences. The project was eventually developed by two OXFAM affiliates and some 30 partners." How has it progressed so far? "The portal has been online since 1 July. We don't give all partners access straight away; it's still being tested at the moment. The layout can still be improved in places, and we intend to improve it gradually. Initially, we allow access the organisations which were involved in the design process. We also give them a script for entering the page so they can explore the entire portal step by step. We also make sure they receive a feedback list so they can tell us what they like, where they have difficulties or have suggestions about things to be added."

## Practices and the partner locator

What I like most about the portal are the 'yellow pages' and the options for sharing experiences. Can you tell me more about those? "The yellow pages are the partner locator. We're planning to register all partners, counterparts and affiliates in the system so people can locate them. Only a few are registered at present, but the list is expanding. You can search the locator by area, theme and country. There's information about each partner, its location, main themes and goals. There is a 'practices' menu where people can share experiences. This is where you can upload documents, with descriptions of experiences useful for others. We refer to these experiences as 'good, bad and new practices.' A template can also be downloaded, so they can use the right format for sharing. If a document is being uploaded, the region, theme and language of the practice must be indicated. People can search for these indicators. Each of the portal's registered users is free to upload documents, so there's never a risk of bad quality documents. A peer reviewing system for documents, and "expert reviews" will differentiate between good and lesser quality documents and practices. If the KIC team finds that too many people add irrelevant documents, authorisation for adding documents can be limited." Did you take any precautions to encourage only uploading of good quality documents? "We created an option for readers to rate practices as a way of avoiding lower calibre documents. A practice is awarded a certain number of stars, depending on its value to others. This way, we hope to encourage people to only upload high quality documents. Of course we have to wait to find out if this will work."

## Motivate and reward

How are you planning to motivate people to make an active use of the portal? "We will announce it in our newsletters and suggest that people check it out. We are also working on ideas for rewarding those who share the best practices. As I mentioned, we let the users of the practices judge them themselves. We're thinking about introducing a reward for 'the best practice'. Alternatively, all practices could be published in a book. We are also considering offering people an option to chat with a manager or expert. Chat is one of the portal options. You can see who is online at any time and start a conversation with them. Offering a chance to talk to people who are not normally easily accessible might attract users to the portal. Everybody also has his own profile with their name and information about where they work. We also want to use these profiles to indicate how active people have been on the site, with information on how many documents someone has uploaded, for instance."

## 2 Months later…

Now it's almost two months since the portal went live. Has the word spread already? "No. So far only the individuals and organisations we have directly approached know of it. We're planning to send out a mailing when the holidays are over. But that's not to say we're not doing anything to publicise our portal. OGB, the OXFAM affiliate in Great Britain has field offices in the south and those people visit the partner organisations to encourage them to use online communities. They look at how their work could benefit from communities and how they could use communities to further their objectives. So we're working hard to get communities started, but so far people only find out about the portal through other people or from mentions in the e-letter." When the portal was set up, you sent feedback questionnaires to the organisations. How

did those people respond to the system in general? "Well, it took a bit of effort to get an initial response. We had to call people to get the forms back; finally, only about 10 were returned. . I guess they didn't have time to fill them in. The overall reaction was positive. People thought the layout was logical although they couldn't find much information relevant to their work; but that information will come from the uploaded practices."

## Practice documentation

Let's go through the features individually: how are the practices doing? Have any been added? "Yes, but mostly because some organisations were approached personally to ask whether they'd share one of their practices. People really have to be given an opportunity to document these practices properly, which requires time and effort. In future we want to institutionalise uploading practices more, so that it will be included in job descriptions. This way we can make sure they will be given time to make them." Do you already have an example proving the benefits of the shared practices? "I know there's a keen search on for a success story so it can be shared with other organisations. There are rumours but, because people are so eager for success, they may be reading more into it than there actually is. Another problem in searching the practices is that sometimes more than one practice is contained in one document. Which is a problem for the search option, as a number of practices cover several areas,

which means they may go undiscovered and unread." Have any practices been star rated yet? "Not yet. By the way, here at OXFAM we held an in-house rating for some new regulations or approaches for the entire organisation. We hardly got any responses to that. I think the system is still too difficult. We had already planned on dividing the rating into different areas, such as the method used in the practice and the degree to which someone could apply the practice in their own work. This might make it easier to rate a practice. This will then present us with the challenge of averaging these ratings. If everyone finds a practice mediocre but it has genuinely benefited one individual's work, which consideration will weigh heaviest?"

## Retrieving counterparts

And is the partner locator finished now? "Regrettably, not. It is very hard to retrieve the information about all counterparts. There's not a list of them anywhere, waiting to be printed. But the difficulty we're having in collecting information on the partners proves just how useful the locator will be. We expect it to become the portal's main attraction. Unfortunately we're also having a few technical problems. The locator isn't working as we would want it to work at the moment." How's the chat function getting on? Is it already in use? "I think it will only be used if more people join the portal. We're still considering attracting people by inviting a number of experts or gurus in certain fields to go online."

## Another point of view

The online portal of the KIC project contains many features and could be described as the ultimate e-collaboration tool. People can co-operate, share experiences and knowledge, retrieve information, communicate and find partners and affiliates of OXFAM/Novib. There are no features missing.

It is hard not to become overwhelmed due to the many available options. In order to make the best use of it you should start by looking at your own situation.

Where do the constant struggles in the process remain? What could be done more efficiently? Where is miscommunication or a lack of information? From there you can look at the portal and choose the feature best suitable for your purpose.

The many features don't have to be used all at once. The offer of so many features at once in one portal is often not recommended. Since OXFAM/Novib is such a big organization with many requirements from many different people, they have chosen to offer all of these options. It is up to the users to choose the right ones from all the options made available to them.

If you are targeting a smaller group you should keep in mind that only the features necessary need to be developed. It is important that the option to add features at a later stage is kept open. E-collaboration tools must be able to grow with their users' wishes.

Interview with Dorine Ruter from ETC.
(http://www.etc-international.org/)

### The tool: Teamspeak

Teamspeak is a software application for online meetings. The programme has to be downloaded and installed on every user's computer, and another application: the server application, has to be installed on a server. This can be an in-house server or, if that is not available, the programme can be hosted somewhere else. People need a microphone and speakers (preferably a headset) and Teamspeak is free of charge.

### Teamspeak vs. Skype

Teamspeak is comparable with Skype. Both have the facilities to make phone calls over the internet, only with Teamspeak more people can be added to the conversation. Also with Teamspeak you can broadcast an image of who is talking and the conversation can be recorded, and a chat function is available. Participants in a conversation can also be housed in different 'rooms.' This makes it possible to split the group during a discussion, so smaller groups can talk things over separately, or to hold different meetings at the same time. Teamspeak seems to work better at low bandwidth than Skype, although the quality of the sound can be reduced.

### Meeting at a distance

"Over a year ago the programme committee of RUAF (Resource Centres for Urban Agriculture and Food Security - www.ruaf.org) came to me with the question whether I knew a tool that would make it possible to conduct a meeting over the internet. The group consists of about 10 people and they are spread over different countries across all continents, i.e Peru, China, Senegal. The programme committee has one face-to-face meeting each year, during which members exchange information regarding the progress in their region and the problems they encounter and talk about how to continue the work in the coming year. There was a need, however, to meet on a more regular basis to share successes and exchange and discuss how to address problems that occured. Additional online meetings will fulfil this need, but have some practical advantages over additional face-to-face meetings: participants only have to be available during the meeting (a few hours) and there are no costs involved such as flight tickets and accommodation. The regular and informal character of the online meetings should support more exchange and closer links between the various resource centres."

### The quest

How did you handle this question? "I started trying out different options (MSN Messenger, Netmeeting, Skype). We used MSN messenger for our first meeting for example, but the (fast) typing turned out to be difficult. Besides that, chatty conversations can become chaotic really fast if everybody replies to the same message. You get double messages where both say the same thing and can lose the overview really quickly. Thirdly, some participants preferred a tool that supported synchronous conversation with sound. This would be closer to a real meeting.
I also tried using Skype, but at that time Skype only allowed a maximum number of 5 people for conference calls and that

wasn't enough.
Eventually I received a reference to Teamspeak. (http://www.goteamspeak.com/) Teamspeak is a tool that is used a lot in the gaming world, but it seemed perfect for the purpose of the programme committee. It provides the opportunity to actually speak with more people at the same time over the internet and that was just what I was looking for!"
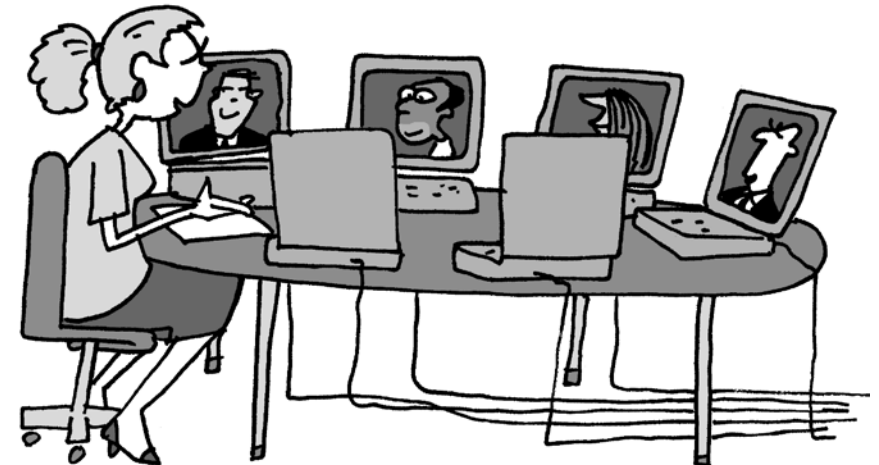
### Downloading and log in

"In order to use Teamspeak, you need a client application for each member and one server application. Here at ETC we didn't want to deal with the technical implications of hosting the server application on our own server, so we decided to let the application be hosted somewhere else. We chose a provider experienced in hosting Teamspeak. This costs us only a few euros a month.
The people that want to participate in a meeting need to download and install a client application. This application is rather large in size (5.59 MB), so in areas with low bandwidth this can take a while. A backup plan was to send the application - downloaded by us - on a CD-ROM. However, all participants managed to download the application directly." All

this sounds pretty complicated. "Oh no, that really shouldn't stop you from using the application! Software installation is something that always needs to be done, whether you are using Skype or MSN or Teamspeak. After that, the use is fairly simple.
If you want, you can try the software first from the Teamspeak website. You only have to download the client application and than you can use the Teamspeak server. All the information you need is provided by Teamspeak." What information do you need to set up Teamspeak for your group? "Participants need the usual login name and password to connect to the server address. They also need the direct number of the server, a so called IP address.
To help people set up and use the software I wrote down a step-by-step description for the participants, which contains all the data people need, (including the login and IP address) and exactly what they need to do to take part in a meeting. Even the simplest steps are mentioned in this document, since that's were things usually go wrong (e.g. Make sure you have a headset, Check that the volume on your computer is switched on). It happened to me once that I had been testing some-

one's connection and equipment over and over again, because he couldn't get any sound. It turned out that the volume of his computer was switched off!"

## Testing and preparing

Do you encounter a lot of technical problems? "No, not really. I always make sure to implement some testing time for each of the participants, about a week before the meeting will take place. New members that join a meeting for the first time need to download the application or sometimes the computer settings, which makes a firewall stand in the way, are changed. These kinds of things are still fixable at that moment.

Besides that, we ask the participants to be online 15 minutes before a meeting starts, to have a last minute check and solve some of the last problems, like a volume button that is switched off. During the meeting I am reachable by MSN, Skype and regular phone in case somebody encounters problems." All this sounds like there is really a need for technical backup. "It can come in handy if somebody, who's not taking part in the meeting itself, is around for technical assistance, so the meeting facilitator can concentrate on the actual conversation. Technical backup is not absolutely always necessary. If you just want to talk to someone or with a few people, all you have to do is login and start the meeting. But with the meetings I support, there are around 10 people involved and it already takes a lot of effort to find a date and time that everybody is available. So if you have found a moment that all can take part in a conference call, you want the meeting to go flawless."

## Sharing problems more easily

What is your experience with online meetings so far? "We have conducted a meeting with Teamspeak about three times now and the people involved are very pleased with the process and the tool. They just wanted to consult each other more often and now they can with the use of Teamspeak. People can come forward more easily with their smaller problems, because of the informality in comparison with the annual meeting. Naturally meeting over the internet (and especially meeting over low bandwidth and without visual contact) is not the same as meeting physically. Some aspects during the meeting must be kept an eye on more carefully. For example, you need to make sure the background noise is as little as possible. Teamspeak provides a 'Push to talk' mode. When somebody wants to activate his microphone in order to talk, they must press a keyboard button. When not speaking, he/she leaves the microphone muted. This reduces the noise input from those participants that are listening. This feature also visualises who exactly is talking, since you cannot always recognize someone's voice when it's digitalized. Also you have to find a way to make sure not everyone speaks at the same time. When meeting without visual contact, all cues for when to speak and when not to, are missing. When using the 'talk button', a green dot appears before the participant's name. You can use this feature to give notice when you would like to say something, a bit like raising a hand if you have a question. This prevents people from talking at the same moment and helps the facilitator keep an eye on who

would like to contribute. Still, if you want to you can talk simultaneously of course. A minor disadvantage of Teamspeak is I think the way the chat function works. To use that you have to access a menu by mouse, so it doesn't work very well while talking. If it did, like with Skype where you can talk and chat at the same time, the chat function can be used to take the minutes. Everybody can than briefly enter what they have been talking about." Do the conversations run smoothly? "Yes that is going really well. The goal is to share your experiences and problems, so people tell their story and others respond to that.

## See the team while you speak

Is there a future with Teamspeak at ETC? "I think we just continue to use it at the meetings, because it works really well for our purpose. We'll be on the lookout for low bandwidth conference software with webcam functionalities, though, since we believe this would help connecting and sharing during the online meetings."

## Story 05: Supporting an online course

Interview with Mirjam Schaap from Wageningen International. (http://www.wur.nl/)

Resource bookmarks

Change password

View my profile
Edit profile

Edit this page.
Add a new resource

CMS help & manual

Manage this site
Edit site settings

Edit page related resources.

Show public resources
Show private resources
Show backoffice resources
Show errornous resources

### Meeting place

"I work in the Capacity Development and Institutional Change Programme. (http://www.wi.wur.nl/UK/services/Capacity+Development+at+Wageningen+UR/CDIC+Programme/). I am one of the administrators of the CMS we use. We started to design this system about 4 years ago. We have different websites for the courses we provide and we were looking for a place to manage all these. We decided to design our own system, because we couldn't find any application that conformed to our needs. We have a lot of clients abroad and not all these people have access to the internet. Therefore we were looking for a system with the option to place selected contents of a website on a CD-ROM." What are the features of the CMS? "There are about 35 websites inside the CMS now and each website has a library. People can keep their own library bookmarks inside the system and they can place a profile with a photograph of themselves. The contents of the profile can be adjusted per website. That way people can see who else is taking part in the course. The website developed using the CMS is the meeting place for the course and contains all information about the course. Course participants can upload information to the website. A while ago we developed a discussion forum or actually we made a link to a forum, which is not integrated into the CMS."

### Proud of what you made

How do people respond to the system? "It is all very simple and website owners -often course leaders- find their ways quickly and easily. Besides that we have an extensive manual to the CMS. From feedback from our participants we got the impression that people like the fact that there is a place which contains all their work. It makes people proud to see what they have done. It gives a sense of: 'Look! This is what I made.' The forum isn't used extensively yet. The idea behind it was that people could stay in touch and sup-port one another after the course. During the course a plan of action is created and the participants are supposed to put this plan into action in their work situation, after the course. The forum would then be the place to talk about the difficulties or problems people come across. They can consult each other and support one another. Unfortunately, when the forum is not moderated, people do not use the forum a lot."

### Integrating the forum with the course

Have you taken steps to encourage people to use the forum? "Yes, we have tried a couple of things. What we want is that people don't consider the course to be finished after the weeks or months in Wageningen. We want people to consider the face-to-face course to be a part of a learning process of several months. The discussions on the e-forum are another part of the learning process. Right now the participants meet at the beginning of the course and the forum will be brought into use later on. What we hear is that people find it difficult to change from the relatively easy way of communicating at a face-to-face course, to the more complicated contact at the forum. This is why we want people to already be active on the forum, before the course takes place, but this is very difficult. Also we will put more effort in moderating the forum. We are also considering implementing a buddy system in the future too. Every participant gets linked to another participant for feedback and support. They should then use the forum to keep each other posted. We also noticed that calling upon the expertise of the forum participants works to increase the activity on the forum. We posted on the forum that we are working on another similar course and that we would like their input. More reactions

came through than normal, but that doesn't work for everyone." Is the forum the only option for interactivity? "We are currently looking for a chat application, which we can integrate into the CMS. We want to use an open source application, but the problem so far is that for most of the chat application to work, people have to download big files. But we want to keep the tools which support the online learning as light as possible. Downloading big files doesn't fit into keeping the use of the system accessible for people with slow internet connections. So we are still looking."

## Content management

What are the most important features of the system for your purposes? "The fact that content from the different websites the CMS manages is very easily transferable or shared with another website is very useful to us. Subjects or courses are often alike or share similar backgrounds and with the CMS we don't have to create the same content twice. The most important benefit of the system though is that the content can very easily be taken and viewed offline. You can mark the different things you want to place on a CD and it is taken care of. This way we can distribute the information very easily to people without internet access and document the information. This was also the main reason why we chose to create our own system. The forum we selected to use also has an advantage: you can choose whether you want to receive the posts made in your e-mail box, like at D-groups,

or you can go to the website and check them there. If you receive them in your mailbox, you can also reply by e-mail, and you can also start a new topic by sending an e-mail. If you post something at the forum you can also add an attachment, but to keep the e-mails small, you will not receive the attachment in your e-mail box. Instead it gives a notice quoting the size of the file, so you can go view it online. These attachments can be viewed linked to the forum posts, but they are also listed in a small library."

## Basic

Are there any future plans for the CMS? "Well, we are looking for a chat function, as I have already mentioned, but you have to be careful not wanting too much. We encountered that with the forum and the library for the attachments. With every new feature you start to see a lot of other options to add and most of them don't even require a lot of work. We want to keep the CMS as simple as possible. The system now works well with low bandwidth and we want to keep it that way."

## Tools should be used

"The major challenge is to increase the use of the tools to support learning processes in our courses and projects. It is not the tools themselves that are important. We are now working on the pedagogy of our blended learning, and try to put more effort in facilitating and moderating e-collaboration. Also we plan to develop short bits of e-content which can be used for self-paced learning."

## Another point of view

The advantage of building an application yourself is the control. You can decide yourself what you want to adjust or add. The downside is that you have to do the adding and adjusting yourself. Nowadays many applications are available to choose from.

The added forum is a clear example of a feature that is not specifically developed for a clear use or need from the participants. The problems of the low number of visitors are due to the fact that the participants of the course do not need the forum at the moment to finish the course. Once a need is created, for instance, like the initiative to make couples and let them support each other, people will start using it themselves. This also explains why asking for somebody's skills only works half the time. People reply if they want to show what they know or just want to be helpful. There is nothing more in there for them, so they will only do this if they have the time and can make the effort.

You can also approach this from another point of view. Since the forum isn't used there is no real use for it, so why do you want people starting to use it? It is a choice you have to make: do you consider the process as an important stimulating feature or can you accept that the forum is not used?

Interview with Jan de Vries and Dave Hardy from HOM. (http://www.hom.nl/)

Human Rights Impact Resource Centre

### What is the HRIA Centre?
The HRIA Centre (http://www.humanright-simpact.org/) is an interactive resource centre. It is based on a content management system (CMS) and should become a platform for the exchange and retrieval of information and knowledge on Human Rights Impact Assessment.

### What can you do at the centre?
At the moment the centre is accessible to everybody in need for information about Human Rights Impact Assessment. Core information can be searched in four different areas. There is an explanation of the 8 steps for a cyclical approach towards policy development and project management, developed by HOM with material about these steps. A collection of instruments for approaching HRIA is available. There are also case studies about the subject and, finally, information on organisations working in human rights impact assessment, news on the issue and interesting links.

### What do you need to get there?
The centre is set up in such a way that everybody should have access to it. All you need is an internet connection.

### Information supply
"We came to the conclusion that there was a wealth of information on Human Rights Impact Assessment, the subject we are currently working on. However, the problem with most information is that it is targeted at a specific audience and not presented under the umbrella of human rights impact assessment, and other people have difficulty retrieving it. We wanted to create a simple, easily accessible system so people could find all this information concentrated in one place. It provides general information, like the definition of Human Rights Impact Assessment, plus tools and instruments that people can apply. About a year ago, working with a freelance consultant and a web developer we've worked with before, we started to shape the tool. We began with a questionnaire to get an accurate needs assessment and circulated it among 150 stakeholders; we received around 60 responses. We then proceeded with the outcomes. After a few months we developed a beta-release of the system that identified a number of problems, which were solved with the official release." What were your starting points? "The system had to be easy to use and clearly structured, because a wide range of people had be able to work with it. Because the system is available to people all over the world, the
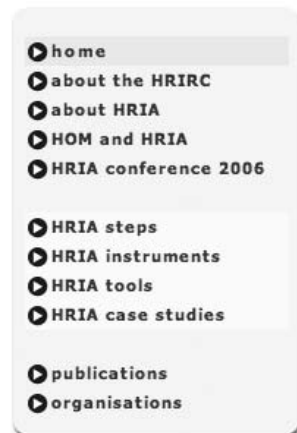


system had to be technically accessible. And accessible for those who are colour blind. It was also important to design the site so that the layout wouldn't be affected by changing the size of the text in your internet browser. This isn't always the case in all regular websites: the text size often doesn't change at all. The site is English language only, although some documents will also be in other languages. We considered a multi-lingual site, but the centre will probably hold information on topics covered by the larger organisations, and we assumed that English would be sufficiently established as the principal language there. But although the system is English language at the moment, we may well make it available in other languages in the future."

### Taking it step by step
"In the end, it took us a year to set up the centre. This is pretty fast! We use an iterative approach though. At the moment the centre is mostly a database for information retrieval. The site has now been online for a week and we are still working on approaching people and networks about the centre. We won't expand the features until our system has become more widely known. We will eventually develop a login section giving people the opportunity to upload their own documents. At the moment, only HOM has this authorisation. From then on we will fulfil a more managing part in the project. We also want to be able to provide online education modules and workshops."

### Yahoo Messenger and Groups
Do you use any other e-tools in your work? "I also use Yahoo Messenger to keep in contact with our partners in Asia. They are actually more used to tools of this kind than we are. They conduct a meeting at a scheduled time once a week, when everybody makes sure to be online so they can all take part. It seems like an ideal situation to me. In the Netherlands, it sometimes seems as though people

prefer e-mail. The technology is available, but people can't seem to find the time to get round to using it. I also used a Yahoo group once in a project, as a free alternative to a D-group. The only difficulty is that every participant has to create a Yahoo account and a Yahoo e-mail address. And there's a good chance you'll be flooded with spam. Besides the Yahoo group I also used Writerly once with someone in Italy. It's an application that helps you to work on a document with others. It's very effective for the draft version, but when completing the final document it's best to split it up. With Writely, it's hard getting a good layout." How do you think e-collaboration can benefit (Dutch) NGOs? "I think work can be done in a more effective way but, as I already said, too little of the available options are used. You really need to invest some time in getting to know new technology. I also came across the downside of the internet once at a conference. At the break, half the people headed for the library to check their e-mail and search for information. They seemed to have forgotten the value of exchanging ideas with the rest of the conference-goers. People may be drawn too easily to their computer screen nowadays."

### Another point of view
There are two ways of collecting information: collect the documents, or collect the places where you can retrieve the documents. The HRIA centre focuses on the first and del.icio.us is an example of the second approach. The way the centre has come into existence is an example of thinking from practice: A missing link was discovered and from there the design of a solution began. A question asked with a portal like the HRIA centre is: how open should it be? The more open, the more freedom visitors will have and the less work there is to HOM itself. A danger is that the overview and the structure and quality will get lost.

## STORY 07: USING AN ONLINE LEARNING SPACE

Interview with Hanneke Spaans from MDF.
(http://www.mdf.nl/)

### What is Claroline?
Claroline is an open source e-learning environment, where workshops can be shaped and participants supervised.
What are the features of Claroline?
You can set out instructions or assignments, keep a schedule. Claroline contains a knowledge bank, forum and a chat application.

### What do you need?
It is open source, so free of charge and a server application has to be installed on a server, either in-house or hosted elsewhere. High bandwidth is not necessary as the application is kept very simple.

### Exchanging information and guiding students
"MDF is a management training and consultancy bureau for enhancing management capacities of professionals and organisations in the development sector. We offer individual trajectories to people in the development sector, but also stimulate mutual collaboration. About two years ago the need emerged for an e-collaboration platform. We first started to look what our needs were. We wanted the students to be able to make an online portfolio and to exchange information and we wanted to be able to give the students assignments, instructions and exercises. We started looking at different types of open source software, but soon came across Claroline. A member of the team had good experiences with this tool and it offered all features we were looking for. An added bonus was the fact that the application didn't require high bandwidth. At low bandwidths the platform is very easily accessible as well."

- Course description
- Agenda
- Announcements
- Documents and Links
- Exercises
- Learning Path
- Assignments
- Forums
- Groups
- Users
- Chat
- Wiki

### Portfolio
What is the main use of Claroline for MDF? "Claroline is mainly used by the student to create a portfolio. In the International Advisory Trail we work with competencies: Students need to make clear which competencies they already possess, in order to create an individual trajectory for the ones they need to master. They need to be able to prove the competencies they say they already have, and that forms part of the portfolio. Documents can be uploaded here, such as word documents, excel sheets, powerpoint presentations and PDF-files by students and coaches. Unfortunately pictures, movies or sound files are not possible in the version we are currently using. These may have been added to later versions, but we are having problems with the upgrade. An advantage of Claroline, in comparison with for example D-groups, is that students can make their own categories in the files they upload. They can create folders and place the documents there. Subsequently it's easy to change the location of the documents from one folder to another."

### Subdivision
How is Claroline subdivided? "You start at a general website and after logging in you get access to your own section. Every student has their own space on Claroline, which they mostly use to upload their portfolio. Only the student and the coach assigned to the student have access to this space. The coach and student meet face-to-face at least once, which I think is essential for maintaining a good relationship in the future. A degree of trust has to be established between them and that doesn't happen very well online. Furthermore, our system on Claroline offers websites specifically devoted to the different competencies, which only the coaches can access. Here the coaches can find examples of assignments to give to their students. Also bookmarks and literature concerning the competency are available in that section." Do the coach and the student have any contact through Claroline? "No, they mostly use the telephone or e-mail. I would like to see that happening more though, because it is an easy way to keep up correspondence and store it somewhere central. Right now all discussions are stored in individual e-mail boxes and that can be awkward, especially if the coach is replaced for whatever reason. It can be difficult for the replacement to find a good overview of what has been discussed."

### Start-up and experience
Do you explain anything about Claroline to the students or provide them with a manual? "We only send them a small document, where we briefly explain what the intention is behind using Claroline and what the application is all about. This isn't a big deal. It's more like a preparation, so they know what will be next. Claroline does have a very extensive manual with a separate one for students. This manual can be downloaded by the student if the need arises. Claroline is mostly self-explanatory. The biggest disadvantage is the bugs. For instance, the forum doesn't work properly. A warning pops up when you try and make a post, so we've had to shut the forum down. However, that is also one of the great advantages of Caroline: All features can be easily activated or de-activated, so you can just show the students and the coaches what they only really need. If you just want to make use of the calendar for instance, you can just turn off the rest. It's a pity that the students don't make more use of the application. I think this is partly due to the bugs. Students upload their portfolio, but other activity is very low. We're working on integrating Claroline with our website. We will then make use of the more recent version of Claroline and hopefully the bugs will be resolved by then." So the forum is closed, but are there any more options for information exchange or communication? Like a chat-room feature? "There is an option to chat, now you mention it, but I've never tried it before. Let's try it out right now. There is a message there already, but it only shows the time and there's no date. I guess somebody has wanted to try it out before. As an administrator I can delete the message. Let's make a new one as a normal user. The text I type is displayed nicely and there is also an option to save the conversation. Oh, that's nice: A document with what I just have been typing appears in my document section. We'll have to remember this."

### Skype
"Skype has been used here at MDF for a while. My colleagues got very enthusiastic about it as soon as they heard about the application and everybody started to use Skype. But what happened was that the in-house network was becoming very slow because of this. So, the IT section then told us not to use it any more. I've just received an e-mail this morning. They have set up a separate computer room to use tools like Skype and MSN. They've connected them to a separate server, so the network won't suffer any more. I've still to go and check it out, but I think it's very positive they have created this opportunity."

Interview with Aad Steenhorst from the Red Cross. (http://www.rodekruis.nl/)

The intranet (http://intranet.rodekruis.nl/login.jsp) at the Red Cross provides news and information to their employees and volunteers. It is closed for people outside the organisation.

Het Nederlandse ➕ Rode Kruis
Welkom bij het intranet van het Nederlandse Rode Kruis.

**Gebruikersnaam**

**Wachtwoord**

(Inloggen)

### DIGITAL COMFORT
"At a certain point in time it just becomes clear that you need to switch to digital ways of communicating and that happened at The Red Cross over two years ago. Digital information is easier to distribute and store. More and more of our volunteers also have e-mail addresses, so it made sense to use the internet more. Moreover it can be very convenient to have a collection of news and information that every professional and volunteer has access to. In the past when somebody, say a volunteer or somebody else, phoned up with a question, he would have been referred about five times: Nobody wanted to take the responsibility for answering. In 1999 the service bureau was set up to overcome this problem. Since then 95% of the questions can be answered right away. In 2006, the intranet now seems a very good medium to store all information, so that we can also refer to that and also where people themselves can find the information they need." So the intranet has arisen from the need to go digital. What can be found and done on the intranet? "There is a news section, a calendar and a place for document sharing. Those are the most important features. People have access to it from home, they just need to login. Naturally the volunteers and the professionals don't get the same access. Certain parts are disabled for the volunteers. We have different subjects on the site, which can be divided into staff information and the activities of the Red Cross. Staff information is only accessible to the professionals. The intranet can best be seen as a databank on everything concerning the Red Cross and is aimed at professionals and volunteers. One of the goals we wanted to achieve was that everybody could have access to information at their own time and place."

### REALIZATION
How did you get started from the identifying the need to arriving at a digital resource?
"We approached a company to design a system for us. I don't know very much about that, but they set it up for us. When we received the system, it seemed to me like we didn't really know what we had bought. We had to figure it out when we got it and could start trying out the options. There has been a team responsible for the intranet set-up: team intranet. There are people from communications and the ICT department, for instance, in that team." Is the intranet well set-up in your opinion? "The intranet offers great advantages and opportunities. I just think there's hasn't been enough thought gone into the people responsible for providing the content. There are web editors assigned to different parts of the content. The only problem is that these people are not given any extra time besides their normal duties. They are supposed to provide information for the intranet alongside what they have always done and that has proved to be problematical. You can see some parts of the intranet are quite active and up-to-date. It really depends on the time people have on their hands and how much they're motivated to make the effort.
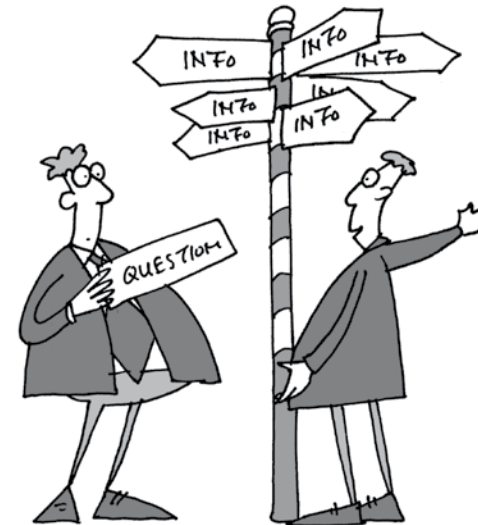
The front page of the intranet is currently not really up-to-date. For instance, some news items should have been posted in the second column. Currently it is empty. The problem is that a date is attached to the news and when it becomes too old it is sent to the archives. You can still find some news there, but it is not a really an inviting place to visit when empty spaces appear."

### INFORMATION ATTRACTS PEOPLE
What are the responses to the intranet? "Everybody was very positive in the beginning, although there were some login issues at that time. Fortunately these have been resolved now. The greatest obstacle now is the content. That should be kept up-to-date and refreshed regularly. The web editors need to be encouraged, one way or another." How do you think this can be accomplished? "Perhaps mentioning the importance of the contents in the newsletter would help or maybe when we can maintain statistics of every page. If a lot of people visit a certain area of the intranet, these positive responses can encourage you to invest more time, because you don't want people to get disappointed with the information available. If on the other hand relatively few people visit, you might possibly like to attract more visitors, because you don't want to lag behind the other editors."

### BASICS COME BEFORE GREATNESS
What kind of future do you envisage for the intranet? "I always say: Better have a living dwarf than a dead dinosaur! The basics must be taken care of. Web editors need to be given extra time to provide the information for their part of the intranet and the intranet must develop into a real knowledge centre. When somebody phones us with a question, which I mentioned was one of the goals we wanted to achieve, we should be able to say: go to this place on the intranet and you will find what you are looking for. If all that is going well, we can, for example, consider expanding its function and adding more interactive parts. Right now we have communities and polls, but the polls don't work properly yet. We need to take care of the basics first before we can go thinking ahead and we really need to start thinking about using those features too."

### ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW
The intranet at the Red Cross is a good example of how problems can cover up other things. It is comparable to an onion skin, where every layer covers another one and the core can only be reached if all separate layers are pealed away. For the intranet the technical problems with the log-in had to be overcome, before other problems became visible. The problem that then appeared is the lack of content. As far as they can see at the moment, the users of the intranet are positive about the system, taken into consideration that the information will be kept more up-to-date. As long as this is not the case you cannot say for sure if no other problems will arise. The users' attitude can be very negative or perhaps people encounter difficulty in finding the information they need.

Interview with Camillo Villa from HIVOS.
( http://www.hivos.nl/)



## What is Moodle?

According to their website: "Moodle is a course management system (CMS) - a free, Open Source software package designed using sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities. You can download and use it on any computer you have handy (including webhosts), yet it can scale from a single-teacher site to a 50,000-student University."

## Moodle

"At HIVOS we use D-groups very intensively, as well as Skype. I also use Moodle in the workshops I provide. This has nothing to do with HIVOS though." Can you tell me something about Moodle first? (http://moodle.org/) "I needed an e-learning programme, so I started searching different applications to see what my options were. Then I ran into Moodle and found it worked very well. I use it at workshops and the application is ideal to shape the content of the course. It is a very easy to use e-learning platform and doesn't require high bandwidth, since it is very basic. You can upload documents and keep a schedule. This way you can keep all the information together and the information is accessible to all course participants. Multiple courses can be simultaneously stored and the number of participants is not limited. There is also a forum area, which has the option to redirect all posts to your e-mail in case you don't want to keep checking online." Is Moodle hard to work with, or hard to get started with? "No, all options are self-explanatory. To start working with Moodle you have to install a server application on a server,

although there are websites that offer you the opportunity to work with Moodle on someone else's server. You can then create your course there. If you want to try out Moodle, you can do this very easily on their website, where they run a demo version. You have access to all the options an administrator would have, so you can make and change a course or add participants plus all the other Moodle options."

## Moodle and partners

You use Moodle outside HIVOS. Do you also see possibilities for using it at HIVOS? "Absolutely. We often have different projects going on with partners. They all have different timeframes and different themes. Moodle would be a good place to store all these projects. Especially when writing a report together or going over a proposal. At the moment people use e-mail to do that, but that means that documents are being sent, commented on and returned. This goes back and forth and the result of this process is lots of documents in e-mail boxes. If they could use Moodle for this process, all steps from the initial to the final document would be kept in one place. This is particularly convenient if a colleague is being replaced. The replacement is then able to trace the process and see what decisions have been made. Besides that, it can also be a place where presentations or photographs of the launch of a project can be kept. In that way the online environment can also strengthen the team spirit. If the information is private you can close off the entire area, but you can also make it public, depending on what you want.

## D-groups

"At HIVOS we use D-groups a lot, but that is not surprising since we are one of the founders of D-groups. We have two different ways of using the groups. One is internal at HIVOS. Every department has its own D-group, where for example announcements are posted. We also have separate D-groups for the coordination of

teams or for specific tasks like writing a business plan, for example. Besides the in-house groups, we have D-groups with different themes and groups for our partners." For what purposes are D-groups usually employed? "The idea behind D-groups was to create a low-bandwidth working space, where people could share knowledge and work together. What D-groups are ultimately used for is mostly not known. The most that we can see is the number of messages sent, but the knowledge exchanged and created within the group remains inside the group. For instance, in all the thematic groups there are hundreds of questions and answers that have been posted. This information is usually only used by the individual who asked the question and maybe some other people inside that group, but it doesn't go out of the group. I think that a tool should be developed to enable search options through these groups and make this knowledge publicly available; this could be done in combination with wikis or blogs. It is a shame that all the information gets lost inside the group."

## They are aware of the systems, but don't know how to use them

How do you think that e-collaboration can contribute to the work of Dutch NGOs? "I think working together gets easier and more information can be shared. The problem is that lots of people talk about new technologies, but don't have any idea how to use them. That's why we're planning to offer our colleagues an introduction to the new tools, so that they can become more familiar with the tools available. People shouldn't see new tools as replacements for the older ones; in some cases they are complementary. I don't think that a tool should combine all possible features available, like communities, chat functions, sharing spaces, etc. Different tools can be used to help you get all the functions you want, but they don't necessarily have to be implemented in the same system."

## Another point of view

Applications are designed for a certain purpose. There are applications for talking (Skype, Teamspeak), applications to share documents, applications to create documents together (wikis) etcetera. This does not necessarily mean though, that the applications need to be used for this purpose only. Off course they are best suitable for what they are designed for, but most of the time you can use them any way you like. Camillo has named another purpose for the use of Moodle. Originally, Moodle is an e-learning tool, so its purpose from design perspective is to shape online courses. Camillo sees an opportunity here for projects. There is a calendar, multiple users can be added and there can be added a time span to the course. These are all aspects of project and course needs. I myself once used an MSN community in a course at university to share documents, discuss roles and tasks and announce deadlines. An MSN community is not designed for courses, but why not use it for one? From my point of view this blog (http://icollaborate.blogspot.com) was not intended as a normal blog. I just saw it as a way to publish my research in a nice format, as an alternative to a website. I did not really see the need to keep it going and up-to-date like with a normal blog. What I saw was an easy way to share the interviews, where people could leave comments. As excited as I am about the idea that people are willing to keep it going, I still don't believe that people will no longer read a blogpost if it is outdated. Of course my research will be dated very soon and it is important that people who read it know when it took place. Especially in a field like e-collaboration that is evolving so quickly.

Interview with Saskia Harmsen from IICD. (http://www.iicd.nl)

**The tool: wiki**
A wiki is a website where users can easily add, delete or change the contents. For both editing and reading the website there is the option of making the wiki public or available to a specific group of people.

**What can you do with it?**
On a wiki you can add text and upload documents.

**What are the requirements?**
A wiki is an online tool, so an internet connection is essential. There are various websites where you can make a wiki free of charge, such as pbwiki.

### Exchanging knowledge
"We used a wiki during an international workshop in Zambia for trainers from Africa. (http://itrainers.pbwiki.com/) We wanted trainers to exchange knowledge amongst themselves, rather than us giving information to the trainers. We used a wiki to document all of this knowledge." Why did you use a pbwiki? (http://pbwiki.com/ ) "A wiki is a very convenient way to create content together with other people. Also, you can always change the content when you want to. That's why a wiki is very useful in collecting and saving the knowledge that was exchanged. The trainers that participated in the course are all ICT-trainers. We are proponents of the learning-by-doing principle, so in this way they could experience the tool for themselves. We used 'pbwiki' because we had tested several Wikis for user-friendliness and their suitability for the needs of the workshops and pbwiki came out on top." How did you introduce the wiki? "We introduced the wiki in a fun way. We asked participants in the workshop to tell a story about themselves. More specifically, we asked

them to tell something about the day that changed their lives, so we would get as many interesting stories from people as possible. To get the details of these stories, we also asked all participants to interview a fellow participant. That's why the stories were more in-depth. After this, everyone had to place the story on his/her own page on the wiki. We used this way of working throughout the whole workshop. As soon as people had discussed things, they had to place it on different pages on the wiki themselves. We never gave them any proper explanation about how to use a wiki. There were only a few trainers who were already acquainted with wikis, but everyone understood the 'edit' and 'save' functions. There were a few people who needed a bit more time before they started to fill their page, i.e. two or three days. I don't know if this was because they didn't know how to go about working with the wiki or if there was another reason. It is also possible that people wanted first to wait and see what others had put on their personal page, or that they weren't happy as yet with their own page."

### Bandwidth and privacy
What was the reaction of participants to using a wiki? "The people read the other participants' stories and created something together. This promotes a group feeling. The initial plan was to extend this group of trainers with other trainers, but the original group decided they preferred to keep the familiarity of the initial group. They said things like: 'ok, but then these new people will also have to add their story to the wiki.' Some people are so enthusiastic that they still occasionally enter the wiki and make adjustments to their story, for example." Were there any problems when using the wiki? "We had some problems with bandwidth, especially when logging onto the wiki. It sometimes took quite a long time before you could enter. Maybe this was also due to the fact that everyone often worked on the wiki at the same time, because every participant had
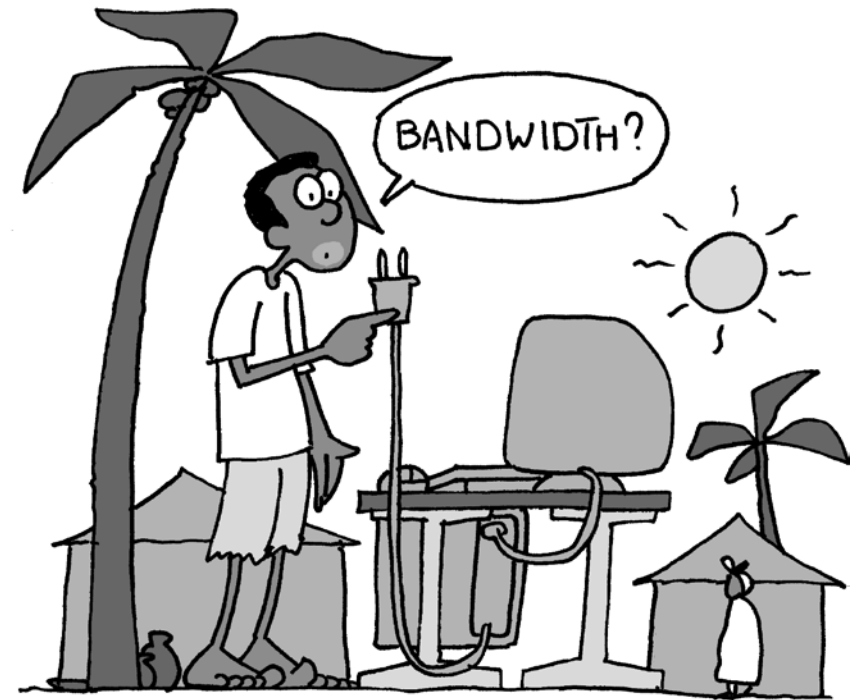


to place his/her material on the wiki after each session. In principle, we had a good internet connection, and we've not tested what the problem was. Also, occasionally the pages just disappeared. Sometimes someone had written and saved a page, but it didn't appear on the wiki. Occasionally, this was annoying if people had typed directly onto the wiki and had to start all over again. Also, for some people the fact that the wiki was public was a problem. Everyone is able to see what others have posted on it and sometimes people had posted a chain of thought that was only part of the picture or their opinion. When they placed this on the wiki this informal information all of a sudden appeared to be formal. Not everyone enjoyed the fact that their developing thoughts appeared on the wiki, in black and white, with their name beneath it. At the time, I wasn't aware that it is possible to hide the wiki from the public, so I'd like to ask the trainers whether they would prefer this. I would prefer keeping the wiki public. For me, the

wiki is a source of information and it gives me the possibility to show others what has been discussed during the workshop. It gives a very good overview of the course. It's a pity that it's impossible to get the visitor statistics to the wiki with the free version. Currently I can only see who the last ones were to make adjustments to it and to which part, but I don't know if the trainers are also using the wiki as a source of information."

### Cooperation
What opportunities do you see the wiki providing? "Besides 'saving' knowledge as we did during the workshop, I think a wiki can also be useful for jointly developing a program or policy. This often happens through e-mail, but that then results in sending different versions of a document back and forth. In a wiki the document is online and the participants can directly change things themselves. It is clearer. I see it as a book in which everyone can write his or her own chapter."

Interview with Anja Panjwani from ETC.
(http://www.etc-international.org/)

## THE TOOL: GROOVE
Operating via a network, Groove Virtual Office software allows teams of people to work together as if they were in the same physical location, through their website.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH GROOVE?
You can share files, track data and processes and get work done together with people who are not in the same location.

## WHAT DO YOU NEED?
Groove is available in different versions and different price categories. There's a version that runs on low bandwidth and a full version, available at a higher price. You can ask for price information at the Groove website. A 60-day trial version is also available; after the trial period a number of features will no longer be operational, but the core - like the document sharing feature - will still function.

## COMMUNICATION
"We wanted to improve communication with partners in the South. We've always used e-mail and telephone and now and then received a report or update on how they were doing, although it sometimes took time before we heard anything. Especially when a project plan or the like was involved, when we'd only hear from them when they were finished. It meant we never really worked together on a project, because we couldn't give our input until the final version was ready. So we started looking for a place to share documents. And discovered Groove. (http://www.groove.net/home/index.cfm) " How do you use the application? And what do you mainly use it for? "I haven't checked out all the options yet, as we've only just got the full version. We worked with the trial version before, but the function we most use is the file sharing option. Before Groove we always had reports available on the website, but that can't compare to what Groove offers. It gives us the option of sharing documents in progress, so we can work on them together. Groove now contains documents like knowledge profiles, project proposals, contracts etcetera. One of the big advantages of Groove is that all files are shared automatically, as they're stored on your own hard drive. So you don't have to be online to access them. For our people in the field, who will be travelling with laptops and won't always have internet access nearby, it's perfect. They will always have the updated information to hand. Added documents are also marked with an asterisk (*) so you can easily see how many updates and new documents there are. Uploading is simple, as Groove works from you own Windows Explorer. The options available in the standard (trial) edition include shared files, discussion, calendar, sketch, web links, shared pictures and notepad. This gives an impression of the way you can use the Virtual Office."

## JUST LIKE MICROSOFT OFFICE
How did you get started? "One of my colleagues suggested Groove, so we decided to try it out and downloaded the trial version. I think it's the best way to get to know a new application, because you can only find out if it meets your needs by experimenting with it. We've only used it with our partner in Tanzania. Our colleagues there have introduced them to Groove and shown them how to use it. At first it was all very new so we spent a lot of time trying out the different features. It's a very easy programme to use because everything is much the same as Microsoft office." Are there any rules about using Groove, or is there someone keeping an eye on the process? "Someone's responsible for the projects in each country, and they will also monitor the process at Groove a little. Different users have different rights. You can be a manager, a participant or a guest. This way there is some kind of hierarchy in Groove. We are currently working on a guideline. For instance, one partner added a lot of pictures, which are too heavy to download at low bandwidth. We have to set up parameters for this, which is what we're currently working on."

## SHARING AND CONTACT
Does Groove meet your needs? "I am very enthusiastic about it! We share files, keep it all organised and if I need one of the partners I can contact them using Groove. It constantly shows who is online and who is currently in the workspace. There's also a chat function and a message function. The latter is very similar to e-mail, but I found that contacting the partner using Groove leads to a quicker response most of the time. They probably receive a great deal of e-mail and not many Groove messages, so they can deal with those with more quickly. We do still use Skype if we need to talk, instead of the chat function. The Groove chatroom is very open, so everybody in the workspace can see the conversation. Although it's often used to say 'let's Skype'. We do use e-mail less, which is a plus for me. Before, documents were sent back and forth and that happens far less often now." Has the relationship with your partner improved? "There's far more discussion and cooperation, so I'd say our working relations have definitely improved."

## Story 12: To support and manage people

Interview with Sarah Cummings from KIT.
(http://www.kit.nl/)

**Dgroups (www.dgroups.org)**
Dgroups, or 'Development through Dialogue' is an online home for groups and communities focused on international development. The platform provided is simple, non-commercial (no ads), respectful of privacy, and targeted at low bandwidth users in the South. It currently hosts 1884 groups with 66,589 members. Dgroups was created in 2001 by a partnership of development organisations who share a joint vision of the need for a common platform for development-related online communities. Current members of the Dgroups partnership include: CIDA, Hivos, IICD, ICCO, IICD, Danida, FAO, KIT and SNV, among others.

"I have a very wide variety of roles in Dgroups. I am a researcher, creator, representative of a member within the partnership, facilitator, passive and active member of Dgroups, all at the same time. At the moment, I act as moderator for 2 groups and am an active member of about 8-10 groups. I have been interested in online communities for the past few years and have done some research in the past. Now I am starting a research project about Dgroups themselves." What are your points of interest or main focuses in your research? "It is still at the design stage but the main focus is on investigating the function, role and effectiveness of online knowledge networks in development, looking at Dgroups. I will be building on some research undertaken in 2004 but I think Dgroups are being used more strategically than two years ago and that should also prove interesting to investigate. I'm planning to look at: who are the members and the facilitators, how is gender visible in the groups and does use vary depending on continent. I am going to take a survey monkey as my main method, complemented by interviews and case studies of individual communities."

**Positive attitude**
How are Dgroups used at KIT? "We have about 20 groups here, which support specific projects or are used to keep in touch and cooperate with partners. We notice, for example, that new members of online communities are often reluctant to share their opinions, because they feel every word will be judged." With your mixed role in Dgroups you must have a lot of experience with how the system works for people. Do you have some tips for people who struggle with aspects like motivating people to post their reactions? "I would suggest that, if you start a group, you should have a clear goal of what you want to achieve with it. Then everybody will know what to expect, and what is expected of them. Next, begin with a round of introductions so that people can get to know one another. If a new member comes in, a personal e-mail with a word of welcome will offer encouragement. Your messages should also have a clear structure. Start your e-mail by briefly mentioning the subjects you're going to talk about. This makes it easier for people to scan the messages and avoids the impression of information overload. I would also advise taking a positive tone. It's important not to be critical, particularly in the beginning with inexperienced members, but if you must be critical, make it constructive criticism. If you share your opinions, try to be as clear as you can so as to reduce the chance of misunderstandings. In a discussion, it's important to make your position clear and not be afraid of making a fool of yourself. These 'tips' seem very obvious, but they're useful to keep in mind. Some people seem to have a knack for clear-cut responses, others rapidly get disorganised or write very long messages. In the end, the most important thing is that participants should realise what e-collaboration can do for them. If they don't see what they can get out of it, they'll simply say they don't have time or don't need it. Some people might even consider e-collaboration a sort of threat, because it means getting knowledge and information out in the open."

**Getting information out**
In Dgroups a lot of information is shared and knowledge exchanged. What do you think of the ways this knowledge is shared with people outside the groups? "I really like the Wiki used by KM4DEV. I even used it in parts of my research as it yielded such brilliant information – pearls of wisdom! – which I would never have been able to find anywhere else. One of the reasons that the KM4D Journal was started was to share the deliberations of the community outside the group." Could Dgroups be improved to stimulate knowledge sharing even more? "It would be nice if you could link different Dgroups more easily or could share files among groups. This, and many other ideas to stimulate knowledge sharing, are things that the partnership working on at the moment."

Interview with Maarten Boers from ICCO.
(http://www.icco.nl)

**Dgroups** Development Through Dialogue

### D-groups

D-groups is, according to the website:
"the starting point for fostering groups and communities in international development. We are a partnership which caters to both individuals and organisations by offering tools and services that bring people together. Whether you are trying to support a team, a group, a network, a partnership or a community, we hope to provide you with the capacity to do this in an environment which is simple, non-commercial, respectful of privacy, and targeted at low bandwidth users in the South."

### Use of a mailing list

"I am in charge of an internal project entitled 'Capacity development, Knowledge systems and Networks'. In brief, this project aims to stimulate systematic learning both in-house, as well as with and between partners. There is no escaping from e-collaboration then. I was already familiar with knowledge sharing using mailing lists, because I was involved with the Grupo Chorlaví, a learning network in Latin-America. This network started in 1998 and its purpose is the sharing of knowledge and experiences about rural development in Latin-America. So, in that way I became familiar with the possibilities that a mailing list can offer and I saw the potential for ICCO. Forces can be joined to make both sides stronger. This is why we became a partner of Dgroups. We wanted to stimulate collaboration at ICCO and with partners." How do you use Dgroups? "Until now we have created about 22 groups of which 8 are in-house groups. The latter are mostly used for preparatory stages of meetings or to make policy plans. Real discussions are still mostly held face-to-face, because people are close by. The groups we set up with partners are mostly learning networks."

### The essence: A community

Are people eager to start a Dgroup? "I am promoting the use of Dgroups by approaching those colleagues who I assume will be interested, because not everybody will see the potentials right away and many people – not only within ICCO – seem to have some resistance to the use of "new" web-based tools. So the idea is to get the people who are already interested using Dgroups and let them share their experiences with others. In that way I hope a snowball effect will take place. Good experiences and enthusiasm from colleagues can stimulate others. Some groups were started just as an experiment, where people can go to check out for themselves what Dgroups are all about. Most people are reluctant to start one though, because they primarily see it



as a source of extra e-mail. The biggest problem is to make clear what Dgroups really are about. The basis of a Dgroup is sending e-mails to a (large) number of people with one address, but this can also be done with a normal e-mail, where everybody replies to all emails. The benefits of the use of Dgroups are that all e-mail is stored in one place together with documents and links – the groups' web-site. It is easy to retrieve a message you accidentally missed or the documents placed on the site. The website can also be accessed from wherever you are, so you don't have to go to your own computer or even ever store them in your own e-mail box." What do you see as the essence of Dgroups? "Dgroups have the potential to create communities. Unlike just sending e-mails, there is a place people can go to. The mere fact of having a name of the group itself also helps to create "community-sense" and even trust among the group members. You can refer to the group by its name."

### Dgroup etiquette

How do you see Dgroups evolving in the future for ICCO? "ICCO is decentralizing and becoming a real network organisation. There will be regional councils and regional work organisations. So I think Dgroups will be an instrument for the internal (management) communication of the

future ICCO-network-organisation. But of course Dgroups will also play an important role in the knowledge sharing among all parts of the network organisation and its partners." What do you think are the main problems with Dgroups? "Spamming is a real nightmare for Dgroups. Messages originating from the Dgroups server are often marked as spam, so people won't receive the messages in their normal e-mail. Within Dgroups we are doing everything possible to avoid these problems. Another problem is that people find it difficult to write their ideas or opinion in an e-mail to people they do not know very well, because they see it as a form of official publishing. That might be also the reason that -mostly in the South- the e-mails are written quite formally, with many lines devoted to just courtesy alone. In that way a real open discussion is very difficult or even impossible because formality "kills" open discussions. So what you see is that people use the Dgroup as an address-list. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but that depends on the initial goal the group was set up for. There should be a way to introduce some kind of etiquette for the use of Dgroups, which stimulates people to use it more loosely and so it becomes common knowledge that a message to such a group does not have to contain all formalities of a formal letter."

Interview with Wouter Rijneveld from
Woord en Daad. (http://www.woordendaad.nl/)

### A weblog or blog
According to Wikipedia, A blog is: "Blog is the contraction universally used for weblog, a type of website where entries are made (such as in a journal or diary), displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic."

### Expressing yourself
"I started my blog around March this year. (http://www.rijneveld.eu/ ) Since then, I've posted about 50 items. I started blogging because I read a lot and sometimes the things I read frustrate or stimulate me. Which urges me to express my opinion somehow and somewhere. I am quite active on the internet, so I knew about blogging. It seemed to me the perfect way to express my views." Do you want to achieve something specific by blogging? "No, it's something I do purely for myself. I simply want to be able to express my views. I don't try to change the world, which probably wouldn't work anyway with the way I blog. As you can see, I blog about a wide variety of topics: very personal things, like the birth of my son, but also about issues connected to my work. If you want to achieve something with a blog, I think you need to keep a clear focus. I realised this when I registered my blog at certain services, which make finding my blog easier. I always find it difficult to choose the categories to put my blog in." Can you describe the subjects you cover? "I blog about development, religion, general news and personal issues. You might say my main theme is unfair trade or the injustice in the world. I've considered splitting those topics into two separate blogs: private and development. But this means keeping two blogs going and people who read my blog now will have to start reading two. And because I blog for myself, I didn't really see the need." Why did you choose blogger as a blog service? "I searched options for free blogging and came across Blogger. Its very user friendly, which is an aspect I looked into. Later, I tried out a couple of other free sites, but didn't feel they offered many advantages compared to Blogger. One problem I did encounter is that Blogger does not allow putting posts in categories. But I got around this by tagging my posts at delicious."



### Other people's feelings
How is your blog connected to your work at Woord en Daad? "It isn't. I only share my opinions and as my interests concern my professional life, some subjects overlap. When I explicitly refer to development-related issues, the problem is that I then somehow have to consult or get the approval from Woord en Daad with every post I write. Since I'm only blogging for myself, I want to avoid going trough the communication department. My work does influence my blog a lot, because I come across interesting issues at work. However, the reverse hardly ever happens: my blogging doesn't have much influence on my work. The only thing might be that blogging accentuates some feelings, which I might also express in my work. I try to avoid naming Woord en Daad in my blog. I won't specifically mention anything that directly opposes the views of Woord en Daad. This also holds for my former employer. I do not want them to take offence with me. In general, I am very careful when my views directly oppose someone else's. If I read an interview, I will refer to that interview but without specifically naming the interviewee. I don't want to make personal attacks. I also avoid rubbing up someone in my own network the wrong way, although I usually take a critical stance on issues."

## To be, or not to be known

How did you get your blog publicised? "People gradually became aware of it in my own network. Half were positive while the others didn't give any specific reaction. I guess they didn't see the point in sharing your opinion over the internet. They also might regard me as too critical. People aren't always clear why I like to share what I share. I don't really promote it much. After all, my initial goal wasn't to attract a lot of visitors. Although I have to admit that I keep track of hits on my site; I'm increasingly interested in visitor numbers and really enjoy people reacting to my blog. That way you get some credit for your work. The only promotion I do is to enter the address of my blog whenever I create a profile anywhere on the internet. It is also registered with Google and connected to a website I have with a friend."

Do you get a lot of visitors? "I get around 7-10 visitors a day. It's not a huge number - the maximum is around 50 visitors a day. People seem attracted by unusual viewpoints, but sometimes they get to my blog through very weird word combinations. I can see the search words that lead them to it. Because I cover many topics, there are a great number of possible combinations. As my blog isn't in English, people who can't read Dutch will log off pretty fast. I get the idea that more individuals then organisations visit my blog."

## Corporate blog?

Do you see any potential or advantages for a corporate blog? "We did a trial and kept a blog during a field visit, but the time involved and practical questions like 'what can and can't you make public directly' and who would be interested enough in the projects to read such a blog, convinced us against continuing the experiment. But it might be continued for certain special events."

## Another point of view

I don't keep up a blog myself. I have the feeling that I don't have anything to share, so I would not know what to write. I have used a blog once for a course at the university. We had to record there what we wrote. At that time it didn't really make sense to me. I thought the teachers chose a blog just to have something else instead of WebCT Vista, which we always used. Now I am beginning to think that I could have kept up with the blog to organise all I have ever written. It is a very useful tool to show progress or a change of ideas over time.

# FINDINGS – WHAT DO THE STORIES TELL US?

We tried to cover the field of e-collaboration among Dutch NGOs as broadly as possible, to give an impression of the many different ways Dutch NGOs use e-collaboration in their work. The interviews were carried out with just one person from an organisation, this in many cases being the initiator of the project. All stories are independent and relate the personal opinion of the interviewee about e-collaboration. The interviews are the basis for these conclusions, although the meetings of the learning community and the interaction at the D-group helped in formulating the questions and problems more effectively. These conclusions have been built up in the same way as the interviews.

## Orientation and experimentation

One general observation is about the phase in which Dutch NGOs are at the moment. Overall, people are becoming curious and are seeing opportunities for themselves and for their organisations in e-collaboration. They are experimenting, exploring and trying out different e-collaboration tools. They are exploring the benefits of e-collaboration and the ways in which they can best approach and implement it. A good example of this is the size of the e-collaboration group: with 57 members it indicates that people are interested in e-collaboration, as well as in e-collaboration with others interested in the subject.

## A tool or the process as a starting point

E-collaboration is approached from different angles: people can start with an e-tool and experiment with that. Or they start from a process that they want to improve either within their organisation or between themselves and their partners. These are two different ways to go about e-collaboration, but many principles or problems account for both approaches, as well as why people start e-collaborating in the first place. The initiators are not necessarily technicians or already have experience with e-collaboration. In general, they are curious and like to experiment with ICT on the basis of their personal interest. They often know their way around the Internet, and this could be one of the reasons they can so easily see the benefit of sharing knowledge and views via the internet. If you are familiar with the different ways the Internet is used, you already have seen the way it could work. If you read blogs, make use of Wikipedia, and if you need any help on a topic you can search on Google and often end up at a forum where other people provide you with answers, so you can already see the value of sharing knowledge. These people have beliefs about e-collaboration such as, for instance,: 'It helps in communication with partners'; 'we have to follow that route in order to not lag behind'; 'it would be fun to experiment with the possibilities'; 'if he (a colleague or a friend) is so enthusiastic, then there has to be something in it.' In every organisation experimenting with e-tools, most of the time there are one or two enthusiasts, unless the initiative comes from the organisation's management. The 'man with the vision' is then harder to locate.

## The reason for 'doing' e-collaboration

The reasons for starting using e-tools can be divided into two categories. The first is centred on information, the second is about relationships.

Information sharing, searching, collecting and management. The benefit of e-tools here is the fact that information can be made accessible to a lot of people in their own homes and that they can access it at their leisure. Information is also more and more about the experiences and knowledge of others, since people see similar problems arise for other people or organisations. A question that one comes across regularly is: How can we learn

from the experience of others? How can we make this implicit knowledge explicit and make use of all the knowledge out there? Interaction among organisations and within organisations, entering into dialogue and discussion, gets more prominent with the goal of learning from each other. The difference between knowledge and information comes into the mix at this stage. In the initiatives studied there is a clear guideline as to where knowledge and where information is shared. The definition of information is that it can be easily spread and copied, and therefore it exists in static documents or text. Knowledge, on the other hand, is what people know and have learned, and this comes out in conversation, discussion and training courses. This also means that sharing your knowledge by sharing documents or reports is very difficult.

The other category is about people and relationships. E-tools create the opportunity of working in closer collaboration, to become more informed about the progress or the situation somebody is in, which itself makes cooperation easier. Overcoming time and space differences are the most obvious benefits of e-collaboration through maintaining or building relationships. Development is about working across borders, so e-collaboration can really help out there. Good relationships are also crucial if knowledge has to be exchanged and people want to learn from one another. People need to have a sense of trust in order to exchange knowledge, so the relationship building should always come before the learning aspect can commence. This is often done by meeting face-to-face. There are also practical reasons for using e-tools, such as money-saving, but improving relations or the information flow and learning from one another are the main reasons lying behind e-collaboration. The processes behind that which I came across in my research are displayed in the table.

| STORY | THE TOOL USED | THE PROCESS BEHIND |
|---|---|---|
| 01. Sharing interesting websites | Del.icio.us | • Information sharing<br>• Finding people<br>• Creating links and a network with people interested in the same topics. Linking up. |
| 02. Communicating with partner organisations through the Internet | Skype | • Improving relationships by having contact in a more informal and definite way |
| 03. Sharing knowledge with and between counterparts | KIC portal | • Information sharing<br>• Making implicit knowledge explicit (sharing lessons and stories)<br>• Establishing learning communities about certain topics<br>• Connecting people and organisations |
| 04. Online meetings | Teamspeak | • Sharing knowledge<br>• To have meetings online |
| 05. Supporting an online course | CMS | • Training |
| 06. Setting up an online database | HRIA centre | • Information sharing<br>• Collecting information about a certain topic and making it accessible |
| 07. Using an online learning space | Claroline | • Training |
| 08. The intranet as an information resource | Intranet | • Sharing information<br>• To provide a accessible database about all work-related topics |
| 09. Managing courses or projects | Moodle/D-groups | • Training |
| 10. Creating together online | Wiki | • Sharing information<br>• Sharing knowledge<br>• Cooperating<br>• Community building<br>• To collect all data shared at on a face-to-face course |
| 11. Working together across distances | Groove | • Cooperation<br>• Sharing information<br>• To share documentation with a partner |
| 12. To support and manage people | D-groups | • Sharing knowledge<br>• Debating |
| 13. To discuss or create | D-groups | • Sharing knowledge<br>• Debating |
| 14. Sharing your personal views | Blog | • Sharing knowledge To reflect about topics read about |

## Influences (from the south)

Despite all the benefits available, people sometimes have to overcome an initial barrier. This can be achieved through the enthusiasm and clear vision of somebody else, or by experiences with similar projects in the past. The influence of partners in the south is also apparent. If they start using e-tools, then this will positively influence the organisations in the Netherlands. Thus, the stimulus often comes from others. Although it can be very hard to influence others in their opinion about e-collaboration, it does turn out to be one of the main reasons people embark on it. Enthusiasm is the key. People need to be convinced to start thinking: "wow," this sounds like fun, something new and exciting and the options are endless! On the other hand this thought can also be very daunting. We will get back to this when we discuss the difficulties one can encounter.

## Design and implementation stage

When starting an initiative about e-collaboration, different steps need to be taken. These steps can be very different whether you start from a tool or a problem/process and whether you are on your own or your organisation has taken the initiative. The budget that is available also makes a huge difference. We will now discuss the different questions encountered.

### How to choose the right e-tool?

First of all there is the choice of an e-tool. This issue will not arise if the tool is the starting point, but if you want to improve a process or solve a problem you have to choose the tool that will be the most suitable for the job. In situations where some sort of training or course is the issue, the type of tool is quite clear: you need an e-learning tool or online learning platform. If this is not the case you need to start from the process and try to see what qualifications the tool should possess. Is a synchronous or asynchronous tool needed? Does it have to be accessible at low

bandwidth? What features does it have to contain? What is the price? Is it user-friendly? Can the tool be expanded? Is in-house technical support available? And so on. A conclusion from this research is that there were never any real problems in finding a tool. The initiators know their way around the Internet, or people make use of their own personal network. They start searching for tools and compare a couple of them. Often there is a friend, relative or colleague who has some experience with a particular tool. The smaller organisations often start looking for open source systems or for free applications. In general, larger organisations have a greater budget to spend, so they can either have something designed for them or design a system themselves. Most of the time the decision as to what tool to use is based on the opinion and experience of someone else. Very often people have tried an application. As soon as it provides all the features needed and it seems to work well, they stick with what they have found. Continuing to look further as soon as you have found something that seems to work does not really happen. This also seems to be the only way to go, as one can never compare all the tools available, and as long as it suits one's needs you have got what you want. Once you have selected the e-tool, other issues will arise. How do you regulate access, quality, openness, and moderation? These are questions that need to be answered, and the answer will come through trial and error. Organisations often try to keep their systems as open and accessible to as many people or organisations as possible in the beginning, but as soon as quality and safety issues arise, measures are taken.

### How can people become involved and motivated?

Once the tool has been selected and customised, you need to involve people. New tools have to be introduced to those who are to work with them. This can be done

by simply providing the tool and letting them figure it out themselves, or instructions can be given. Both happen just as often, but it depends on the tool and the people. Most e-collaboration tools are self-explanatory, if you have basic experience with computers and the Internet. Mostly people are approached with the tool and not for the process to be improved. The introduction of the (pre-selected) technique always comes first. This is a hurdle that has to be taken, as people are very often reluctant to try new things. This approach can work, because it is often the case that once people start to use an e-tool, they cannot then do without it. We have not come across initiatives where people are approached with a process they want to improve. We tried to look from the aspects of processes in this research, but since we focused on different e-tools, somehow an e-tool always came first. From examining the possibilities that a certain tool could provide, we looked at how this could add benefits to somebody's work. This approach is not recommended in the literature. Generally, looking from within one's own work and identifying obstacles or problem situations is to be recommended. From there a solution can be sought in e-collaboration. The experiment with del.icio.us proves that to start by using the basic facilities of a tool can work very well. I even think these types of initiatives are very valuable. Tools have to be explored to get the best out of them, and people who see the potential are the best at proving their worth. This is only workable for people who are interested, eager to explore and curious about the possibilities. People can be approached through newsletters, but mostly they are introduced to a tool personally. They will get a face-to-face explanation as to how they can use the tool in their work. Providing the opportunity for them to try it out for themselves is also a way. This can work very well, as they then overcome the first technical barrier.

After the introduction of a particular tool, people have to be convinced to start working with it. First of all, if this concerns an entire organisation, not everyone is approached at once. The people that are very likely to be interested are approached first, so that they can then help spread the word. As I have already mentioned, an enthusiastic colleague can be of great influence. The main goal is to create a positive attitude towards e-collaboration. This can be done by introducing the tools in a fun and informal way. Participation is encouraged by positive reactions to contributions that can shape people's attitude and can form a sense of trust. It is also a way of rewarding people for their effort. Another way is to reward them directly by providing opportunities for them, or to show them, in a rating or publication, that their efforts have been appreciated. This also works for people who maintain a blog. Comments can stimulate them to keep going, because it indicates that people read the blog and the topic or opinion has attracted their interest. Another important thing is (technical) support. If people can go to somebody when they need help, or if they are connected to somebody with similar usage, such as in a buddy system, then they become more comfortable. They don't have to struggle on their own. Somebody facilitating the process can also help by adding structure to it.

### What questions have arisen for the future of the projects?

Since most e-collaboration initiatives are still in the exploratory and experimental stage, they are still trying to promote the initiatives and have not yet come to the stage where they have to make sure that everything will be kept running. What you can see is that people are starting to think about questions such as: How will we expand the group, how can we make the initiative more broadly used, should we assign a moderator, which role will this moderator fulfil and when can we leave

it up to the participants? Also, rules are drawn up, as sometimes the need for some regulation appears. Overall there is a tendency to make e-collaboration more the common way to do things or even to institutionalise the sharing and cooperation with others. Another common next step is expansion, both expansion with new tools or features, as well as the expansion of people. There is never an 'ultimate goal' with regard to the range or time span. People always view the current initiatives as the start of more, which can be complicated, as they will never be satisfied this way and might overlook too quickly what they have accomplished.

## The main benefits of e-collaboration

The main benefits people find in their work are closely related to the reasons why they started collaborating in the first place: It saves time and money, information storage is better, and more easily retrieved. People can become more involved with the work of their partners or colleagues who are far away. It gives them opportunity to have contact with people working in the same field in other countries. People get connected, and the available knowledge becomes more visible, because it is stored and shared in online discussions. Some less obvious benefits are also present. Contacts become more informal and more regular. This results in better mutual understanding and better relationships. Another benefit of documenting information or work online is the value people attach to an overview. For instance, as with the Wiki on the course: it gave the initiator of the course an overview of what has been done there, the results of which can also be shared easily. Besides that, it can promote a sense of pride. Something tangible has been achieved from the effort made, which can be seen as a kind of reward to those involved. This is very evident with e-learning courses, where the students have a place to show what they

have done. Another benefit not always immediately recognised or articulated is the way e-collaboration can contribute to a sense of community. There is a place (which is virtual, although it is also visible and accessible to all) where people come together and create something. This place, the name of the group collaborating and the fact they all share a goal, all create a sense of group feeling. People can be in this group for different purposes: for enriching someone's knowledge or creating a specific plan or document, but if the group works as it should, a feeling of trust is formed, as well as reciprocity between the members. This can be very beneficial in future work, because social capital has expanded and entry points to knowledge or skills are acquired.

## The difficulties

We expected people to experience difficulties in finding the right tool. Nowadays, the range of products available is so great that it is difficult to decide which tool to choose. Many of the applications available are free, and comparing them all is very time-consuming. However, technical difficulties are sometimes encountered. Obvious obstacles are problems such as bugs or other technical issues, for example low bandwidth or spam. These have to be solved (or accepted!) before a good overview can be achieved. Another problem we expected concerned the collaboration with partners via the Internet. What we found was that partners are less reluctant to try new e-tools than expected, although in some instances they are even ahead of us. Of course there are problems with bandwidth and other technical issues, but all partners within the scope of this research are very positive. Another thing that people come across is the difficulty to make the essentials visible for others. The benefits, the possibilities and all the other advantages that e-collaboration can offer have to be made clear. These are the visions the initiators were attracted

to. Unfortunately these are not the most tangible aspects. In addition, a great deal of time and effort has to be invested before the results are perceptible. This can very easily hold people back. They can only see the additional work involved or the number of e-mails to be read, and the benefits seem to lie far away in the future. The fact that the benefits are not easily visible and the fact they are also difficult to make visible can also cause problems with the employer. Time invested cannot always be justified, and often this time is not taken into account in the job applications. Another issue is trust. Trust is one of the main requirements for building a relationship, according to the theory about social capital. Unfortunately, no explanation is provided about how trust can be gained or established. What can be seen from this research is that the lack of trust, trust between people, or with the tool or with another culture can result in the incorrect use of an e-tool. This is particularly clear when it concerns people's opinions or thoughts shared in a Wiki or a D-group. The feeling can be that sending a message to a D-group or placing a thought on a Wiki is a form of official publishing. Therefore only balanced opinions or completely elaborated considerations are shared, and not ideas in progress; this can really be an obstacle to fruitful discussion.

## Issues to consider: recommendations

When embarking on an e-collaboration initiative some things must be kept in mind. They may seem to be quite obvious, but this does not detract from their importance. First of all: make sure you know what people want, or have a clear picture of what kind of process you want to improve, and how. Is there a lack of information about a certain subject? What subject? Are relationships in need of improvement? And in what way: personal or closer co-operation? More sharing, or sharing of a higher quality? These types

of questions should be addressed in the initial stages, after which you can adjust your strategy to meet their wishes. The next step is to formulate a clear goal and to make clear agreements so that everybody knows what to expect and what is expected of them. The goal should be specified in the best way possible, with a specific time span, which people are involved, and the quality and quantity of interactions, et cetera. The tool used must be appropriate to meet the intended goal and, more importantly, should be integrated within the process. If it is not used, then it probably did not have a clearly defined purpose or need. Tools or other features should not be added simply because they are available. Every feature must have a purpose or, if it cannot be hidden, the choice to omit it must be made clear. Additionally, people have to be given sufficient time to get used to the tool, plus time to sustain its usage. People cannot be expected to e-collaborate at the same time as carrying out their normal duties, unless this replaces part of them. The organisation sometimes has to adjust its policy in order to create the opportunity to work with these kinds of tools. Furthermore, you should be sure that the foundations are solid. People should not be overloaded at the outset; one or two features should first be introduced initially, and only when people are used to them can expansion begin. A feature overload should to be prevented at all times. People will become overwhelmed too easily and will not know where to start. If e-tools are to be introduced within your organisation, then the best option is to start informally and in a fun way. Let people try out the tool for themselves in a face-to-face meeting, and do not forget to emphasise the benefits that e-collaboration can bring. People need to have a vision about what it can mean for them and their work, and backup and support should be provided where they can subsequently get help. The initiators in this

research always have a positive attitude towards the use of e-tools, but they can come across people with a negative attitude or negative experiences. Even if you are – or want to be – the initiator, you can experience feelings such as: I will never get people motivated, it will only cost me a great deal of time, and it will never work. In this research we have not met such people, but these issues do arise in the e-collaboration meetings. From our point of view, the main point is to keep yourself enthusiastic and keep being inspired by what you see in e-collaboration. Focus on small successes and try to get some people on your side. There are always those who are prepared to try new things and, if this is not the case, you should 'infect' them with your enthusiasm. Do not think that e-collaboration necessarily involves engaging in a large project: There are many opportunities open to you, and the trick is to choose the option that is right for you. Simply starting to use Skype can already create a major advantage for you and/or your organisation. Do not underestimate this. Once you get familiar with one simple tool, the following step is very small, but does not necessarily have to be taken. The concept is: take what you can use and leave the rest! You should also bear in mind that the first step is just the beginning, and there is still a long way to go after you have implemented and introduced the tools. The facilitation of the process comes next, which can easily be forgotten at the beginning. This is all about thinking about what you are going to do, how you plan to do this and how you plan to keep it going.