



Organization of
American States



VIRTUAL PLATFORM OF THE SUMMITS OF THE AMERICAS

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CASE STUDY: SUMMITS VIRTUAL PLATFORM (SVP)

(Overview of the Initial Phase of the SVP initiative, carried out by the Organization of American States (OAS), Summits of the Americas Secretariat (SAS) to expand opportunities for participation of social actors in the Summits Process through the use of Information and Communication Technologies - ICTs)

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Case Study

Summits Virtual Platform (SVP)¹

Background

The Summits Virtual Platform (SVP) was launched to expand opportunities for participation in the Summits Process through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Based on the recognition that ICTs can play a significant role in promoting transparency and inclusion and active participation of civil society and other social actors within the Summit process, the Organization of American States (OAS), through the Summits of the Americas Secretariat (SAS)², launched the Summits Virtual Platform (SVP) in preparation for the Fifth Summit of the Americas held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009.

From September 2008 to February 2009, a series of virtual consultations on the main themes of the Fifth Summit of the Americas - as presented in the Draft Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain - were carried out. Each forum allowed for registered users to exchange ideas and develop recommendations through threaded discussions, access to relevant documents, videos and other ICT tools.

The virtual consultations provided civil society and other social actors an opportunity to use ICTs to learn more about the Summits process and to channel recommendations to OAS Member States' representatives as they negotiated the Draft Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain.

For the organization the undertaking of online consultations involves a cultural evolution of engagement with civil society that goes beyond the scope of action of the Summits Secretariat. In this regard, the SAS collaborated with the OAS Department of International Affairs (DIA) in May, 2009 in the undertaking of a virtual forum with civil society in preparation for the Thirty-ninth OAS General Assembly, held in Honduras in June, 2009.

Overview

- A total of 6 virtual fora were undertaken.
- 785 users registered, representing all 35 OAS member States.
- By type of institution, the user break down was mainly Non Governmental Organizations (42%) and representatives of Governmental Institutions (17%), followed by Academia (11%). Less represented were the private sector (9%), Inter-Governmental Organizations (7%) and Indigenous Peoples (6%).
- The SVP, based on the recommendations made in the Hemispheric Civil Society Forum (OAS, March, 2009), in addition to information derived from user surveys and statistics, proved to be a well received initiative by participants.
- Institutional cooperation, both within the OAS and with external institutional partners, was widely facilitated by the use of this virtual space. OAS and Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG) partners contributed with expert moderators and documents.
- This pilot phase of the SVP and its use of ICTs generated insight on how to foster greater participation in multilateral policy processes, which could inform future efforts to do so.

¹ Document produced by: Claudia Salazar, Consultant, Summits of the Americas Secretariat, on June 15, 2009.

² The SVP is a joint effort of the Summits of the Americas Secretariat and the OAS/SEDI Department of Human Development - through the Educational Portal of the Americas - with the support of the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas / International Development Research Centre (IDRC/ICA).

By far, the most important outcomes of this initiative are the possibility of expanding consultation and exchange between various social actors and the OAS and enhancing the Organization's institutional capacity to use ICTs to engage the various stakeholders, thereby provoking a transformation in the OAS that will without a doubt, have a positive impact on transparency and democratization.

Communications and Information tools available through the SVP:

- Virtual Discussions: on the main themes of the Draft Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain.
- Resources and reference documents: Including all Summit Declarations signed to date and thematic documents produced by the OAS and its institutional partners, members of the Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG)
- Video Archive: A selection of OAS "Videos on Demand" was made available in the SVP to showcase how the main themes of the Fifth Summit are addressed in the framework of the OAS (Permanent Council Meetings, Technical Meetings and Workshops, Lecture of the Americas series, etc.).
- Calendar of Events and News: Including those undertaken in the framework of the Summits of the Americas Process.

At the end of May 2009, the Summits Secretariat had conducted six virtual fora through the SVP. In all cases, two parallel discussions were set-up, one in English and one in Spanish:

Forum Name	Date
SVP Virtual Fora	
Promoting Human Prosperity	October 1 to 10
Promoting Energy Security*	October 27 - Nov 4
Promoting Environmental Sustainability*	November 17 - 26
Strengthening Public Security and Democratic Governance	January 28 - February 15
Virtual Gender Forum**	February 18 - 27
Pre-General Assembly Forum***	May 18 - 21

*In collaboration with the OAS Department of Sustainable Development (DSD)

**In coordination with the OAS Inter-American Commission on Women (CIM)

***In coordination with the OAS Department of International Affairs (DIA)

Potential users' base-line data:

The Summits of the Americas Secretariat conducted an initial survey as people registered in the platform. The following findings are highlighted from a sample of 196 users who answered the survey:

- **63.1% of users had never participated in the Summits Process.**
- Out of this 63.1%, **53.1% mentioned that they were not aware of the mechanisms in place for Civil Society participation in the Summits Process and 22.4% did not know what it was.**
- The 36.9% that had participated identified the most common method of participation as being an OAS Registered Civil Society Organization (35.6%) and by attending meetings of the OAS General Assembly and/or the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CIDI) (13.6%).
- **44.8% had never used virtual fora before.**
- Although over half of participants (57.1%) replied that they do use web based tools, it is worth mentioning that those who do not, implied lack of access (1.9%) and connectivity (6.5%), and 8.4% mentioned having poor computer skills.

The complete findings and conclusions of the user survey may be accessed in this link:

http://www.summit-americas.org/vp/052709_Report_SVP_Users.pdf

Relevant Information and Statistics:

Statistics for the SVP restricted site and fora: After registering in the Educational Portal of the Americas and logging-in the SVP, users have access to view and post replies in the virtual fora.

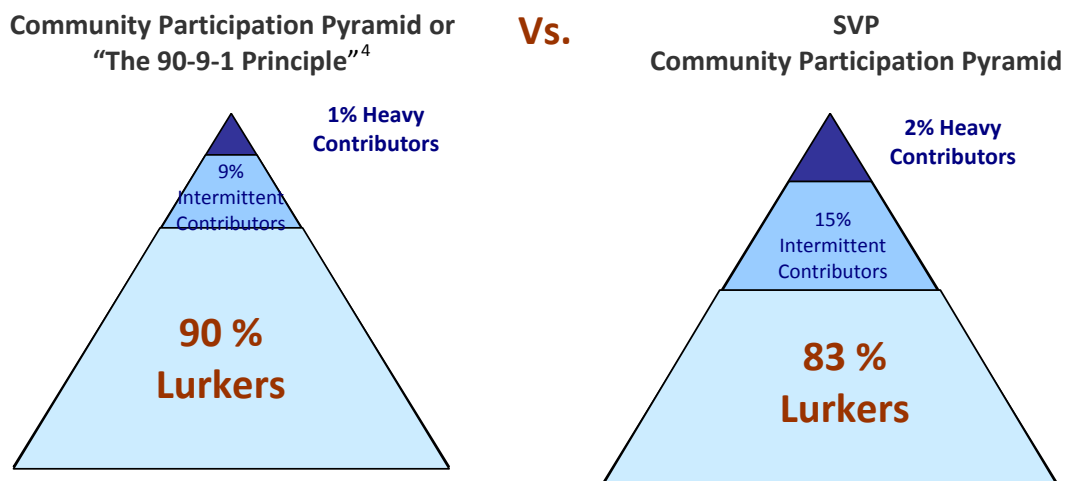
Although at first glance the overall level of participation seems low, it reflects the norm observed for most electronic participation (e-participation) websites. Furthermore, it will be argued that less active users also benefit from virtual spaces such as the SVP, where user-created information is enabled and shared with other participants and stakeholders.

The level of participation in the virtual discussions is summarized bellow:

Forum Name	Date	# SVP Registered Users	# Participants	% of Total Users	# Countries
SVP Virtual Fora					
Promoting Human Prosperity	Oct 1 to 10	317	36	11%	18
Promoting Energy Security	Oct 27 - Nov 4	399	22	6%	13
Promoting Environmental Sustainability	Nov 17 - 26	453	25	6%	11
Strengthening Public Security and Democratic Governance	Jan 28 - Feb 15	526	29	6%	15
Virtual Gender Forum	Feb 18 - 27	610	33	5%	15
Pre-General Assembly Forum	May 18 - 21	785	30	4%	16

An indicator that contributes to making an assessment of this output is the “1% rule” which in the Internet culture describes what in online communities is known as ‘Participation Inequality’: *In most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% of users account for almost all the action.*³

In Internet culture, a **lurker** is a person who reads discussions on a message board, newsgroup, chatroom, file sharing or other interactive system, but rarely if ever posts or participates.



³ Participation Inequality: Lurkers vs. Contributors in Internet Communities by Jakob Nielsen, October 9, 2006. Dr. Jakob Nielsen, Bi-weekly column ‘Alertbox: Current Issues in Web Usability’: http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html

SVP online community participation

- 17%** of registered users posted comments (135/785)
- 83%** of registered users never posted comments and are considered ' lurkers ' (650/785)
- 2%** of users who posted are considered 'heavy contributors' (over 10 posts) and made 69% of the comments (17/785)
- 15%** of users who posted are considered 'intermittent contributors' (from 1-9 posts) and made 31% of the comments (118/785)

Example: Statistics for most popular social-media sites:⁵

- *YouTube*: Each day there are 150,000 video uploads vs. 350 million visits
- *Wikipedia*: 75,000 active contributors vs. 200 million daily visits.

“Mostly this is just an observation, and a simple statement: social software sites don’t require 100% active participation to generate great value.”⁶

In this context, it can be argued that implementing the SVP is not only valuable as a participation mechanism, but also as an important source of information for stakeholders interested in the Summits Process.

Forum Name	Date	Views	Replies	V/R Ratio
Pre-Summit Thematic Fora				
ALL: Introduction to the Summits Process (Bilingual)	Sept 8 - Ongoing	2,419	46	1.90%
Promoting Human Prosperity (English)	Oct 1 to 10	2,864	74	2.58%
Promoting Human Prosperity (Spanish)		4,139	131	3.17%
Promoting Energy Security (English)	Oct 27 to Nov 4	1,753	42	2.40%
Promoting Energy Security (Spanish)		1,406	45	3.20%
Promoting Environmental Sustainability (English)	Nov 17 to 26	1,857	67	3.61%
Promoting Environmental Sustainability (Spanish)		1,323	41	3.10%
Strengthening Public Security and Democratic Governance (English)	Jan 28 to Feb 15	1,829	79	4.32%
Strengthening Public Security and Democratic Governance (Spanish)		2,183	86	3.94%
SUBTOTAL		19,773	611	3.09%
Pre-Summit Gender Forum in Coordination with CIM/OAS*				
Virtual Gender Forum (English)	Feb 18 to 27	1843	42	2.28%
Virtual Gender Forum (Spanish)		5244	127	2.42%
SUBTOTAL		7,087	169	2.38%
Pre-General Assembly Forum in Coordination with DIA/OAS**				
Pre-General Assembly Forum (English)	May 18 to 21	919	42	4.57%
Pre-General Assembly Forum (Spanish)		1851	75	4.05%
SUBTOTAL		2,770	117	4.22%
TOTAL		29,630	897	3.03%

*CIM/OAS: OAS Inter-American Commission on Women // **DIA/OAS: OAS Department of International Affairs
Source: Statistics provided by the Educational Portal of the Americas, OAS Department of Human Development

⁴ Ibid 1

⁵ Statistics: Compete Search Analytics: <http://siteanalytics.compete.com/> - Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About> - YouTube Statistic. Michael Wesch Blog. Posted March 18th, 2008: <http://mediatedcultures.net/ksudiqq/?p=163>

⁶ Bradley Horowitz Blog, Former VP of the Advanced Development Division at Yahoo!, Current VP of Product Management at Google. Posted in February 17, 2006: www.elatable.com/blog/?p=5

Statistics for SVP publicly accessible site: Statistics on the publicly accessible websites illustrates the fact that the availability of the SVP is in and of itself a positive output.

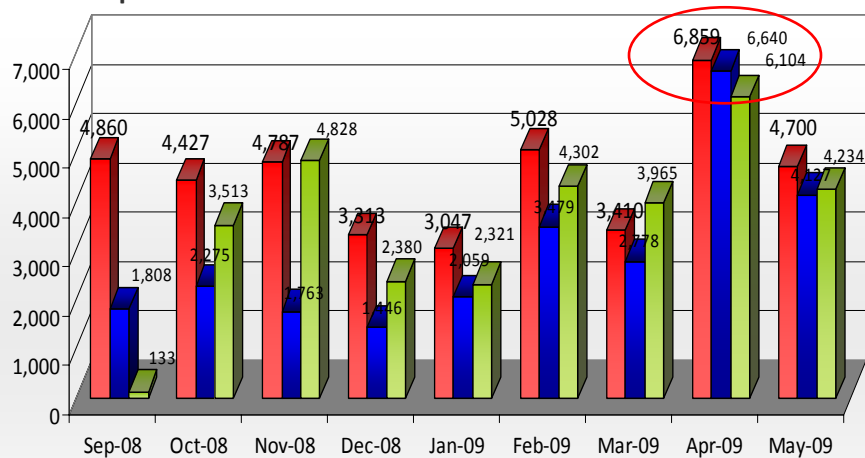
English: <http://www.summit-americas.org/vp/default.html>

Spanish: http://www.summit-americas.org/vp/default_sp.html

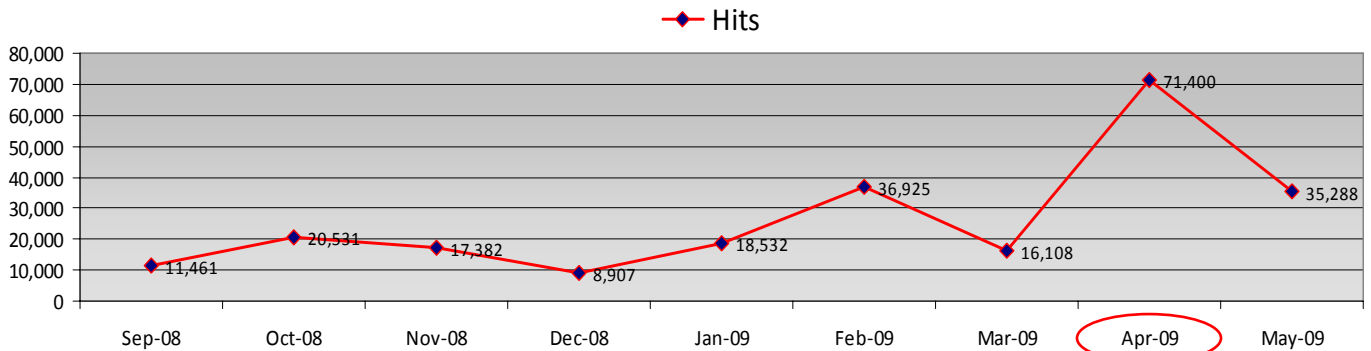
- **Visits:** the total number of times that people visited the web site during the report period. (Without necessarily clicking on sub-sites / documents within.)
- **Page Views:** the overall number of times that web pages were requested by people visiting the web site during the report period. (Implies more in-depth page navigation).
- **Hits:** the total number of requests for files that the web server received during the report period.
- **Downloads:** the total number of times that files were downloaded during the report period.

From its launch in September 2008, the SVP public sites have had a monthly average of:				*As shown in the graphs bellow, a substantial increase in all statistics was reached in the month of April, in occasion of the Fifth Summit of the Americas in April 17-19, 2009.	
- 4,492	Visits	- 3,531	Downloads		
- 2,931	Page Views	- 26,282	Hits		

Nine Month Historical Comparison:



	Sep-08	Oct-08	Nov-08	Dec-08	Jan-09	Feb-09	Mar-09	Apr-09	May-09
Visits	4,860	4,427	4,787	3,313	3,047	5,028	3,410	6,859	4,700
Page Views	1,808	2,275	1,763	1,446	2,059	3,479	2,778	6,640	4,127
Downloads	133	3,513	4,828	2,380	2,321	4,302	3,965	6,104	4,234



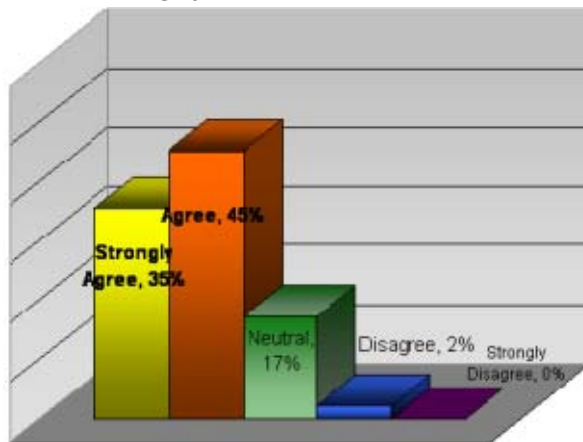
Source: Statistics provided by the OAS Department of Information and Technology Services (DOITS).

SVP User Perception

In an effort to gather feedback that would guide the future direction of the SVP and allow the Secretariat to continue to facilitate increased participation in the Summits Process through e-participation mechanisms, the SAS developed a brief post-user survey consisting of only 3 compound-questions. A total of 93 SVP users answered the post-user survey.

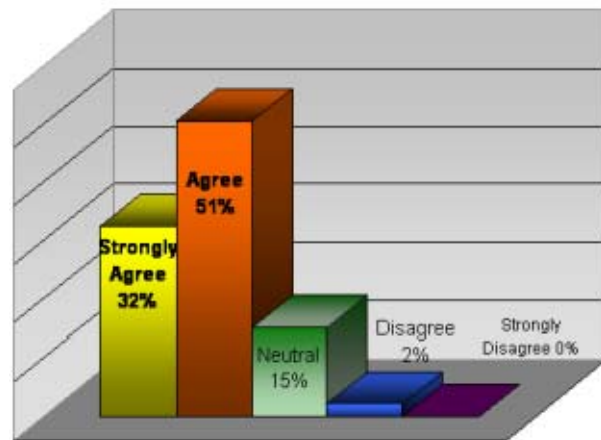
Among other questions, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

“The SVP virtual fora has improved my understanding of the Summits Process”



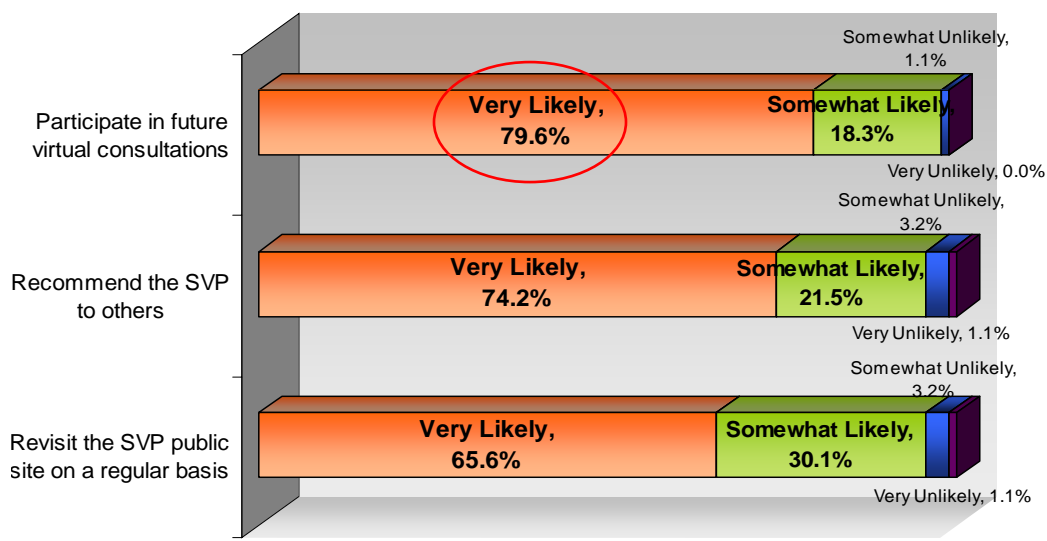
90% 'Agreed' or 'strongly agreed'

“The SVP facilitated participation of civil society and other social actors in the Summits Process”



83% 'Agreed' or 'strongly agreed'

The survey indicates to SAS that there is a high level of interest by social actors to continue the SVP initiative. When asked what the likelihood of revisiting the SVP public site, recommending the SVP to others and participating in future virtual consultations, users indicated:



The complete findings and conclusions of the post-user survey may be accessed in this link: http://www.summit-americas.org/vp/052709_Post_user_survey.pdf

A few of the *comments* made by participants who answered the survey are highlighted below:

“Congratulations in using ICTs to facilitate the involvement of Civil Society in the Summit Process. Please be sure that you use these tools to let Civil Society know how their contributions were considered in the Summit Negotiations/Declaration.”

“Very simply organized with no room for misunderstanding. The initiative should bring excellent rewards in terms of persons feeling that they were allowed to participate.”

“We appreciate this opportunity to receive and share information and ideas.”

“In this wonderful era of a knowledge-based society, I consider the use of ICTs compulsory to address, discuss and propose themes that are relevant to the region. At the same time, there should be caution to ensure that these tools are accessible to all populations, that is, that allow digital accessibility.”

“This virtual platform is very important to strengthen the leaders of native and indigenous peoples; it facilitates social wellbeing, human solidarity and sharing of experiences, ideas, knowledge, etc...”

Civil Society calls for the continuation of Virtual Fora

Yet another indication of the positive response by social actors of these types of virtual consultations was made at the Civil Society Hemispheric Forum (March, 2009), where more than 100 civil society participants from the hemisphere formulated recommendations for the XXXIX OAS General Assembly and the Fifth Summit of the Americas.

Under the theme *‘Strengthening of civil society participation in OAS activities and the Summits of the Americas Process’*, participants declared⁷:

“We call for the continuation of the OAS Virtual Forum as an ongoing instrument for network and discussion of issues across the hemisphere by Civil Society.”

Technological Considerations and Functionalities

As previously mentioned, to implement the SVP initiative with resources available, the SAS signed a partnership agreement with the OAS Department of Human Development to create a virtual ‘Restricted Space’ within the Educational Portal of the Americas (EPA), based on the existing platform used by the EPA for e-learning courses. The intention of the agreement was to maximize existing institutional resources while strengthening internal partnerships within the OAS. It also contributed to beginning the consultation process without incurring the time and costs of developing a completely new platform, which was critical for a timely initiation of the project.

Thus, the partnership between SAS and the DHD/OAS was essential to the implementation of this project and allowed SAS to carry out a pilot that provided valuable first-hand information on virtual

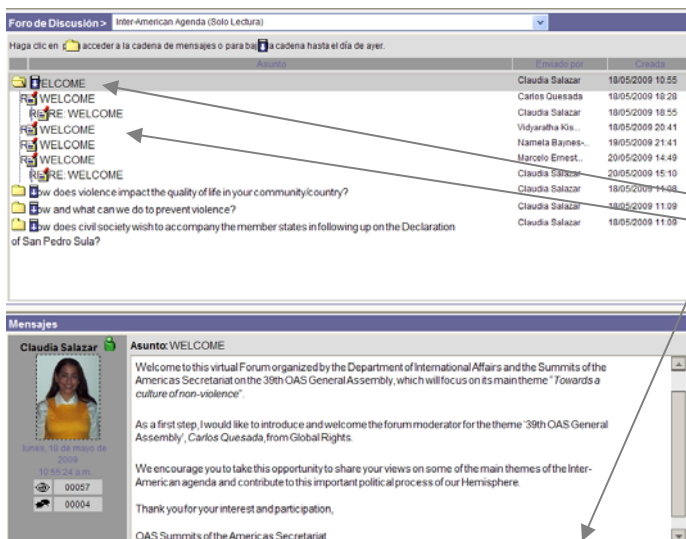
⁷ To refer to all recommendations made by civil society and other related documents, please visit: <http://www.civil-society.oas.org>

consultation processes and on the characteristics and needs of the platform’s primary users. In this regard, it is worth noting that the EPA, as its name indicates, is in fact an e-learning platform that was not originally designed for e-participation. The fact that this tool was able to serve as a pilot platform for other purposes is evidence of the creativity and flexibility towards efficiency and problem-solving of the Department of Human Development (DHD) and of the Educational Portal of the Americas team.

Nevertheless, bearing in mind the call made by civil society to sustain these means of interaction, it is recommended that the SAS/OAS consider dedicating resources specifically to future editions of the SVP rather than adapting existing technology that has not been designed for the virtual component of the Summits process. As for future collaboration with the DHD/EPA, it would seem appropriate for SAS/OAS to build on a successful partnership and engage that department’s technical expertise in training activities related to the use of new e-participation mechanisms for potential users considering that the lack of familiarity with these types of tools was identified as an obstacle in this initial phase.

Some Observations on the pilot phase Platform:

- The registration form was not customizable in a way that would allow SAS to gather critical baseline information (i.e. type of organization represented, whether or not the user had ever participated in the SOA process, etc.). In response, SAS created a survey that was sent to all users upon registration, but this is a step that could have been avoided with a simple and customizable registration form.
- The registration process is carried out manually, which makes it time consuming. For example, SAS had to manually prepare several lists of 10-20 registered users, then send it to EPA who would then give permission to the users in the list to access the SVP. Although the wait period was inconsistent, the registration process took 24hrs on average, which may have discouraged many users from actually contributing to the discussion.
- Navigation in the EPA is not as dynamic as most forum platforms. This shortcoming is in part due to dated technology and in part because, as previously mentioned, the restricted spaces within EPA were designed for e-learning purposes, not for dialogue and dynamic discussions.



An example of some navigation shortcomings:

Once users entered a forum, they found that there was only one reading pane. This made it necessary to click on every discussion chain to read the introduction and then on every reply to read what each user had posted.

Thus, when users jumped from one post to the next, all other posts would automatically close, and finding a posting that may have created interest implied clicking on all postings again. This cumbersome process may have stalled or discouraged participation

*Most fora platforms allow you to skim through all postings without clicking on every answer.


- In addition, it was difficult to update users on the current status of the discussion as there is no possibility to send an RSS feed⁸ to a mailing list. It should be noted that this was an issue that was anticipated and the EPA created a 'digest' as a response (a compendium of all comments posted in the fora). The 'digest' allowed SAS to send out an e-mail of the postings made within a selected time-frame. However, the format was not kept when users had their e-mails set-up as 'plain-text' and many thought these were spam e-mails, which resulted in SAS receiving some complaints from users. In addition, the 'digest' did not include a link for users to jump into the dialogue, which could have hindered the impulse to respond to other participants' posts. The use of the digest was therefore discontinued.
- Finally, networking by participants was hardly promoted through the SVP as the information available in the user profiles was usually very limited. Although this was a personal choice made by most users, it may be argued that this was in part caused by the restricted functionalities available, such as lack of space for the users to write a short résumé, the possibility to identify users with similar interests, and the display of statistical information about users.

It is important to keep in mind that in order for this tool to be inclusive and promote broad participation, the future platform to be used for the SVP should cater to a wide variety of users and connectivity levels. Even with provision for training, the latest and greatest technology will not necessarily facilitate the kind of environment that is needed, nor will it work on all the computers and internet connections being used.

Conclusions:

The SVP is considered a successful first attempt to engage interested actors in the Summits of the Americas Process through the use of ICTs, and specifically e-participation. Some evidence to support this statement is:

- Demand and participation grew systematically through the project's initial phase.
- Anecdotal feedback was very positive.
- There is a direct call made by civil society to the OAS to continue this initiative.

⁸ RSS: Really Simple Syndication. RSS is a format for delivering regularly changing web content such as news. Many websites and online publishers syndicate their content through RSS feeds. To indicate content offered as an RSS feed, most sites will display a small icon and/or the acronym RSS, XML, or RDF. The most common icon indicating that an RSS feed is available is:  International Telecommunications Union.

Next Steps:

1. Inform stakeholders of the results of the initial phase of the SVP in order to promote future engagement and gather additional inputs that would enhance the ability of the SVP to respond to user's needs.
2. Define the future role of the SVP or a similar e-participation tool in the follow-up process to the Fifth Summit of the Americas, as well as in preparation for the Sixth Summit of the Americas to be held in Colombia in 2012.
 - a. Engage Colombia as VI Summit Host,
 - b. Explore options to use the platform to further and strengthen inter-departmental coordination, particularly with those conducting Inter-American Ministerial Processes, and
 - c. Explore options to use the platform to enhance civil society and Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG) activities.

Recommendations:

- Buy-in from the relevant political authorities is fundamental to use online platforms to effectively inform the Summits Process. Undeniably, the impact of civil society's contributions and recommendations to this process would have been most valuable if the evolution of the draft Declaration was made public as the negotiations evolved (participants commented only on the initial July 2008 draft of the Declaration).
- The final outcome of a forum should go beyond providing a final report to Member States. It is important to create a feed-back loop to inform civil society on Member States' response and consideration of their comments and suggestions.
- Particularly for civil society consultations, an effort should be made to link virtual consultations to institutional face-to-face civil society participation processes.
- Institutional structures must be put in place to channel valuable comments to the pertinent areas of the General Secretariat. It is recommended that each relevant area have a designated moderator tasked with participating and providing valuable information on policies and programs being undertaken in their area and guiding users to places where more information may be available.
- There is a need to train actual and potential users on the use of such tools to facilitate and motivate participation. It is recommended that the training be half technical (how to use the tools) and half political (why its important and what they will benefit from contributing).
- The OAS/GS as a whole and Member States could greatly benefit from virtual fora and other types of ICT supported participation (e-participation) to respond to constituents and enhance openness and transparency levels of the organization and of all political processes undertaken.
- Use these tools to increase coordination and awareness of the linkages between the Summits and the Inter-American Ministerial meetings process.

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