e²FocusGroup Participatory Session

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Abstract: Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are increasingly becoming more pervasive of peoples lives, both for individual and collective usage. Hence, it becomes tempting to develop quality tools that can be used in the context of societal debates on public policies.

The e²FocusGroup (http://alba.jrc.it/eFG/) is a multimedia platform that allows a small group of people to meet, through internet connection, in a virtual room and discuss a predefined subject or topic.

Each discussion group is composed of at least by one moderator and by several participants (ideally not more than twelve). The virtual room offers the participants the means for a successful debate.

During the participatory session we demonstrated all the functionalities of the e²FocusGroup platform and explore how they can be used in remote and distributed focus group sessions.

Keywords: Electronic Focus Group, ICT, Public Participation, Water governance

1. INTRODUCTION

The e²FocusGroup (http://alba.jrc.it/eFG/) is a multimedia platform that allows a small group of people to meet, through internet connection, in a virtual room and discuss a pre-defined subject or topic.

Each discussion group is composed of at least by one moderator and by several participants (ideally not more than twelve). The virtual room offers the participants the means for a positive debate.

The e²FocusGroup has the following features:

- An area for Introductory Presentation, where the Organiser of the debate may include a short PowerPoint presentation about the issue under discussion.
- A Participants Table, which is a graphic metaphor of a table with all participants and moderators participating in the debate.
- A Discussion Chat, where participants can write their own opinions about the topic being debated. It is in this area where the main discussion takes place.

- A Virtual Library, where is possible to store material and links essential for the debate.
- A Collaborative Whiteboard, where it is possible to contribute with real time drawings.

2. PARTICIPATORY SESSION DESCRIPTION

The objective of the participatory session was to demonstrate a focus group session using the e^{2}FocusGroup platform, explore its functionalities and gather user's feedback. In order to do this, a fictional water governance issue was elaborated. To each participant of the focus group session, a specific role was attributed, representing a different social actor with specific interests, which will be described in the remaining of this paper. The aim of the focus group session was to reach a basis for discussion, among all social actors in search of options for the water governance issue, using only the functionalities of the e^{2}FocusGroup. The discussion was supported by fictional material, including documents, reports and images that all social actors had access through the e^{2}FocusGroup platform and could use them to support their points of view.

The participants of the focus group session were randomly chosen from the list of the conference participants and were contacted / invited to participate in the session 'a priori'. They were informed about the way the e^{2}FocusGroup operates and got acquainted with the fictional argument under discussion. In this way, each participant had time to identify with the assigned role and also view the material available for the session.

During the focus group session, the participants were connected through the Internet using different computers, being in contact with each other only through the functionalities provided by the e^{2}FocusGroup platform. The e^{2}FocusGroup platform is freeware and accessible by Internet, not being necessary to make any type of download or installation in the computer. Once the participant has been registered by the organiser of the session, he/she just needs to login with a previously assigned user name and password.

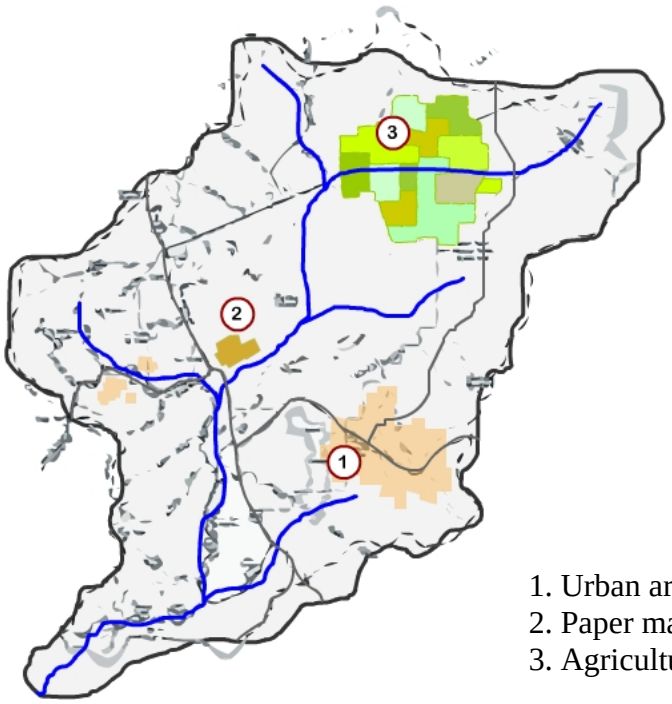
The full discussion is automatically stored in a database and can be saved, printed and analysed later on by the Moderator. Unlike face-to-face focus groups there is no need for audiotape transcriptions.

2.1 Context

"The Northwest River is the longest river in the Republic of Laguty, having a great importance from an environmental, social and economic perspective in the development of the country. Activities based on the river, such as paper manufacturing and agriculture, are fundamental to the local and national economy.

In the last years, especially during summer, large blooms of toxic cyanobacterial have appeared in the river, compromising its quality. The reason for their appearance is still being studied, but all the social actors are aware of the importance of this problem and are committed in achieving a resolution that can be beneficial for all.

A focus group session is being organised by the Ministry of Environment with all the parties involved or with interests in the affected area. The aim of this meeting is to explore the problem and possible approaches by taking into account the economic, social and environmental aspects of the issue."



1. Urban area
2. Paper manufacturing industry
3. Agriculture fields

Fig. 2: Northwest River basin

2.2 Social actors involved

For this fictional focus group meeting the following social actors were imagined:

– Moderator

The Moderator was contracted by the Ministry of Environment to conduct the Focus Group session. His/her goal for this session was to establish a shared ground for discussion regarding which future measures should be taken to improve, and maintain, the quality of the Northwest River.

The Moderator was instructed to try to identify, with the help of the others participants, what were the main questions and concerns about the issue being discussed and then, to focus the discussion in exploring possible solutions by helping the participants to reach a consensus about a possible solution or solutions. During this process he should always be alert for possible partnerships that might be explored in a latter stage.

– Municipality

The Municipality is willing to put all means into practice in order to stop the algae booms. However, for this social actor, others issues are also important, like unemployment and urban development, so all options have to be carefully studied, especially because this year budget is low.

The Municipality proposes to stop the algae booms focusing on two strategic measures. The first one consists of improving the old water treatment plant, once it is becoming insufficient to treat the sewers of the city due to the increase of the municipality population, while the second measure consists of creating “protected zones”, around the most sensitive areas of the Northwest River, where any type of activity is possible.

The Municipality was instructed to always have a firm position in defending his interest, once any measure or solution that might be studied will eventually need the approval or support of the Municipality. He was also aware of the economic importance of the paper mill in the region.

- Environmental NGO “Protect Earth”

For a long time, “Protect Earth” has been alerting the local authorities for this problematic situation and argues that, if the river is not protected and severe restrictions are not applied to all activities within the river basin, all live in the river will be lost.

They argue that as a first step, a secure perimeter should be built around the Northwest River, where any type of activity, including agriculture, shouldn’t be tolerated. If not properly managed, fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides, and animal wastes may pollute groundwater and the river. Introducing plants and animals that compete with native species further alters the environment.

A new water treatment plant should be constructed once the old one is already insufficient to treat the current city sewers and the paper manufacturing company should be obliged to treat its own sewage and forced to improve their production line with new and less polluting technologies.

A strict legislation should be placed, penalising polluters even more.

- Paper Mill Representative

The paper mill near the Northwest River is one of biggest and most productive in Laguty, having a market share of 75%. The paper mill employs more than 400 persons, being the main employer located in the Northwest River basin. The paper mill has a strong economic position that should not be neglected and that can be used for negotiate what is most suitable for the future of the industry.

The representative of the Paper Mill, argues that the paper mill is not responsible for the growing cyanobacterial blooms, and therefore, should not be penalised in any way. For more than 50 years that the paper mill has been in activity and only in the last years this kind of phenomena started appearing. Also, there are evidences of algae bloom upstream of the paper mill.

The paper mill production line could be improved but currently there are no available funds for that. They are only wiling to consider this option if there is some financial support.

- Farmers Association

Agriculture is one of the main activities developed in the margins of the Northwest River. In the last years, the use of pesticides has continuously increased. Farmers use pesticides to increase crop production and produce insects and blemishes free fruits, vegetables and grains. This allows them to obtain and maintain competitive prices and have a strong presence in the market.

The Farmers Association is aware of the problems that the high use of pesticides can have in the surrounding ecosystems. If not properly managed, fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides, and animal wastes may pollute groundwater and the river. For them, the challenge is to maintain

the high agricultural productivity in the long term, without producing adverse impacts in the ecosystem.

They defend that the government should encourage and subsidised farmers to produce pesticides free crops or to use as few chemical pesticides as possible, and to explore alternate methods of reducing the number of crop pests. However, they are also aware that the farmers can not be held as the only responsible for the increase of the algae boom. The paper mill is also one of the main responsible once their production line is “out of date” and a large amount of its sewers are not properly treated. Also, the algae blooms are more intense south of the paper mill.

3. FINAL REMARKS

The participatory session allowed us to observe the reaction of the users to the tool and obtain feedback on its functionality and usability.

It is obvious that given the little preparation of the participants and time constraints, consensus among participants about what measures to apply in order do solve and prevent the algae bloom in the fictional case was not achieved during the focus group session. Even as a fictional case, the *problematique* is complex and needs careful examination; the focus group helped with preliminary exploration of each participant’s line of reasoning. That is surely in line with the overall objectives of such platforms.

The participants provided us with comments on the platform and possible improvements. Their suggestions and comments were related with available and desirable functionality. As an example, they suggested that integration of audio and video as a supplementary means of communication and the possibility of having private conversations between the moderator and the participants could add value to the platform and differentiate it from existing products in the market. These suggestions are being taken into account in the development of the second version of the e^{2}FocusGroup platform.