



## ReFOP

### E-Discussion - A tool for the ASEAN forest policy dialogue

#### What is an E-Discussion?

An E-Discussion is an organized event using the facilities of the internet to allow geographically apart individuals to discuss various topics amongst each other. E-discussions are either email based where participants are subscribed to an email-list or web-based. People add their comments by posting a block of text or documents to the designated forum. Others can then comment and respond. Various other terms exist such as e-conference referring to a virtual conference and e-consultations referring to a advisory events via the internet. For simplicity reasons we will not distinguish between them and are using E-Discussion for all three of them.



#### Why holding E-discussions?

The most compelling reasons include lower costs and access to a regional audience. An E-discussion can serve as an effective tool to complement face-to-face events in the context of forest policy dialogue in ASEAN. It is an ideal tool to prepare face-to-face workshop or serve as a follow-up mechanism, keeping communication alive in a structured and transparent matter. It can bring together a larger and more diverse group of people than most other events, at almost zero costs. Its extended duration permits a level of sustained interaction and reflection on the chosen subject that is often not possible with a face-to-face event.

An E-Discussion can either be moderated or not. ReFOP prefers the moderated approach since it gives more focus on the outcome. Both approaches can be supported by

the ASEAN Forest Clearing House Mechanism, the information platform located at the ASEAN Secretariat. In an E-Discussion, designated experts are invited to the event. The participants are assigned a username and password, and register for the E-Discussion. A moderator facilitates the discussion and guides the process according to agreed rules and procedures. ReFOP recommends the division of moderation between a Technical Moderator, for instance located at the ASEAN Secretariat addressing only technical issues and a Content Moderator, for example a respected ASEAN subject matter expert from a ASEAN Member Country.

#### What does moderation involve? (A moderation guide)

1. Filtering messages -- not all messages are meant for the entire group; dealing with profanity; making sure messages are relevant
2. Editing messages and providing suggestions to participants about improving their messages
3. Approving messages
4. Focusing/synthesizing/animating/stimulating the discussion particularly if it slows down
5. Not allowing the same voices to dominate
6. Controlling time frame
7. Sorting out what to do with attachments/documents sent by participants
8. Writing regular summaries (and introductions to new topics or questions)
9. Taking care of administrative requests
10. Providing overall responsiveness and consistency
11. Summarizing the discussion
12. Evaluating the event

#### Structure of an E-Discussion

##### The Preparation

- A topic of common concern is identified by ASOF and there is agreement that an E-Discussion is the best forum to address the issue
- A pool of experts are identified. They signal a clear commitment that they will contribute to the discussion.

### Base Camp

- The division of labor is clarified between the content and technical moderators.
- A virtual space on the ASEAN Forest CHM is created for the discussion.
- Relevant background documents are uploaded and the content moderator posts a welcome message usually containing the first week's topic and/or overall schedule.
- Guidelines for participating experts are posted.
- Participants then respond. The technical moderator facilitates the discussion according to the moderation guide at the front page.

### The Ascent

- The content moderator introduces new topics and questions.
- Participation is encouraged through positive feedback.
- A weekly summary, is written by the content moderator.
- Based on agreed rules and procedures the technical moderator deals with "problem participants" those, usually very few if any, who are overly pro-active or are trying to post ads or out-of-context messages.

### The Summit

- The moderator signals the closing of the discussion.
- A final summary is written and posted.
- An evaluation survey is sent to participants.
- The discussion is "closed down", the results are archived in the ASEAN Forest CHM by the technical moderator and communicated to decision makers.

#### Success factors for E-Discussions: Always keep in mind:

1. Have a clear final product of the E-discussion
2. Signal clearly, and regularly, the objective and tone of your discussion.
3. Moderation is key.
4. Capture the progress of the discussion, and make it easy for others to access.
5. Define a clear time frame.
6. Involve the right people.
7. Set aside enough time and resources to organize the event
8. Don't be afraid to learn.

### Sources and further reading

Worldbank E-Discussion Toolkit:  
<http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/index.html>

Knowledge Management for Development  
<http://open.bellandnet.org/km/index.php>

Knowledge Sharing: Methods, Meetings and Tools,  
Canadian International Development Agency. (CIDA),  
November 2003



#### Project Contact:

**Bernhard von der Heyde (Principal Advisor)**  
**ASEAN-German Regional Forest Programme (ReFOP)**  
The ASEAN Secretariat  
70A, Jl. Sisingamangaraja  
Jakarta 12110  
Indonesia  
Tel : + 62-21-724-3372 Ext. 429  
Fax : + 62-21-739-4214  
E-Mail : [bernhard.heyde@aseansec.org](mailto:bernhard.heyde@aseansec.org)  
Web Site: <http://forest-chm.aseansec.org>