ORGANIZING AN E-CONFERENCE

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE E-CONFERENCE CONCEPT

Background

The Internet and email are rapidly changing the way people communicate with each other, both personally and professionally, and particularly across distances. These technologies are “shrinking” physical distances and are enlarging the possibilities for discussions among people who live in different parts of the world. The Internet allows for the transmission of nearly instantaneous messages and makes possible the creation of conversational communities that would otherwise face considerable challenges and costs in meeting and exchanging ideas.

This paper has been developed to document and discuss a particular use of email and the Internet – the electronic conference or “e-conference.” Like other conferences, the e-conference brings people with similar interests or experiences together to share what they know. Unlike other conferences, where participants travel, often great distances, to be together, the e-conference requires no travel. Participants take part in a discussion from their homes or offices, the places where they live and work, using the tools of email and the Internet to connect them with others. E-conferences are being used to facilitate communication between people with similar areas of interest or expertise who would otherwise not be able to talk easily with one another. The virtual “e-conference” allows people to adopt a common discussion agenda and to talk with each other in an organized fashion by following an agreed upon timeline and specific set of discussion guidelines.

The department of International Cooperation of the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women’s Movement in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, has participated in organising and hosting four e-conferences over the past four years: one conference focused on issues of combating violence against women, and the other three focused on issues related to gender mainstreaming in water management. These e-conferences have proved to be a powerful tool for bringing together discussion participants (e.g., academics, activists, NGOs, grassroots

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community groups, government officials, etc.) from around the globe to share information, to present case studies and research, and to discuss strategies for action to improve women’s lives in a host of different ways.

The e-conference is a relatively new communications tool, and it will inevitably change and develop in the coming years to better meet the needs of people who wish to communicate quickly with each other without having to travel great distances. While the practice itself will certainly develop, a number of basic organising principles and steps will remain important in planning and executing an e-conference. In order to preserve what we have learned and to avoid “re-inventing the wheel” in the future, this paper provides an introduction to the concept of the e-conference and the types of situations in which such a conference is most useful. Further, this paper sets forth a guide to the major steps and phases for planning and executing an electronic conference.

Our experience over the past few years with e-conferences lead us to conclude that the e-conference has great potential as a result-oriented and democratic form of information sharing. While unequal access to technology imposes some limitations on participation, as we will discuss, this form of communication is relatively egalitarian. E-conferences enable information sharing, and that alone is a worthy end. But the information sharing we advocate and with which we have had great success, is geared not just toward enlarging the general store of information to which we all have access. It is geared to helping all of us improve our work.

What is an e-conference?

An e-conference is a moderated discussion conducted via the Internet using e-mail and sometimes a website (a website is very useful but not absolutely necessary). A moderated discussion is different from other electronic “chat” or discussion forums in that it builds in a mechanism (the moderator) to ensure that participants stick to an agreed upon agenda, and it observes a strict time-line. The moderator monitors the discussion, makes sure it stays lively and on-track, and stimulates discussion, as necessary, by encouraging participants to contribute and engage with the material and each other. An e-conference can either be closed (i.e., invitation only) or open; our experience has been with open conferences. The conference is conducted for a specified and finite period of time; experience indicates that a relatively shorter period of time (e.g., six-to-eight weeks) produces better results than longer periods (e.g., several months). Experience also suggests that planning and preparation usually require as much time as the conference itself, sometimes slightly even longer. In other words, a conference of six-to-eight weeks usually requires about eight weeks to plan and set up and another two or three weeks to evaluate and bring to a close.

The e-conference is guided by an agreed-upon agenda and “ground rules” which govern participation. These agreements – guidelines for both form and content – are very important in facilitating an orderly exchange of ideas and information. All participants sign onto a listserv and send their remarks, comments and contributions to the listserv. Mail is filtered through a conference administrator who makes final decisions on the appropriateness of submitted postings.
An e-conference is held in one language, but the e-conference is ideally suited to simultaneous, parallel discussions in different languages, which effectively allow for an even broader conversation than would be possible in a single language. The IIAV held the water and gender e-conference simultaneously in four languages: English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Each participant took part in only one language, but the four parallel conferences had the same agenda and were taking place at the same time. Periodically, summaries of each language conference were made and translated into the other three languages so that all participants, regardless of which language community they belonged to, could follow the main themes of discussion in other languages. Obviously, this enlarges even further the scope of communication that is made possible by the e-conference.

*When is an e-conference useful?*

An e-conference is appropriate to use to facilitate a host of different types of exchanges of ideas, from purely academic to explicitly activist (and everywhere on the continuum in-between). An e-conference allows people with common interests, experiences and areas of expertise who are geographically separated to communicate with each other in a timely and economically efficient manner. This form of knowledge sharing offers an inherently rich content exchange, but it also allows people to improve their own work by learning from the experiences of others with whom they would never otherwise have talked. This form of conferencing allows people from various regions of the world to converse, collaborate on projects, share ideas and plan for future endeavors. As an activist-oriented NGO, the IIAV’s department of International Cooperation has used e-conferences as a form of knowledge sharing to improve women’s lives. The IIAV and partner organisations with whom we work have used e-conferences:

- To facilitate communication on a particular topic
- To encourage conversation among geographically dispersed people
- To collect ideas to improve existing programs or create new ones
- To promote a new idea, topic or approach (e.g., the relevance of integrating a “gender perspective” in water management)
- To illustrate and draw attention to a problem (e.g., women’s unequal access to water, and control over water)
- To establish a database of ‘best practice’ examples

*Limitations to bear in mind*

**Access to technology:** While e-conferencing offers exciting opportunities for exchanging information and ideas, it does not come without limitations. The greatest limitation that e-conference planners have to confront is unequal access to the technology that makes the conference possible in the first place. One of the great advantages of e-conferencing is its ability to shrink distances and bring together people from different parts of the world relatively cheaply.
The necessary condition for communicating, however, is that people must have computers with Internet access; high-speed connections are not critical, but high-speed access does make the Internet experience more efficient. Access to technology is more extensive in wealthy, developed countries than in poor, less developed ones. Unfortunately, it is not possible to eliminate this inequality overnight, but it can be accounted for in planning that is sensitive to different levels of access to, and different ways of using, the Internet in different regions of the world.

**Issues of language:** Ironically, language can also be a barrier to communication. Conference planners, as well as moderators, should be sensitive to the ways in which language can actually obstruct, rather than facilitate, communication. Some of the types of language issues that we have encountered in our e-conferences include:

- Different styles of usage (e.g., academic vs. non-academic)
- Conversations between native and non-native speakers
- Regional differences (e.g., within a continent, or between Europe and South America, or Europe and Africa, for example);
- Cultural differences that are embedded in language (e.g., language can reflect how someone thinks about an issue, and in a multi-lingual conference, for instance, there may be real differences between the dominant paradigms being used by English-speakers and Spanish-speakers).

To keep communication clear and to optimise the opportunities for all participants to take part in the discussion, moderators and conference planners need to be sensitive to these types of issues.

**Other common problems confronted by e-conference moderators**

Access to technology and different uses of language are two hurdles with which e-conferences must often contend. Other problems that have emerged in our experiences with e-conferences include:

- Different paradigms for sharing information: in our experience this has happened occasionally when the styles of academics and activists have collided. At the risk of generalising, academics tend to be more proprietary about their information, while activists want to circulate information as widely as possible. In general, it is a good rule of thumb, then, to encourage all participants to be sensitive to acknowledging their sources of information and to quote adequately from published work.

- A lull in the conversation: the reality is that every participant in your conference was already a busy person before she or he decided to sign onto your list. It is not necessarily a sign of failure if there is suddenly not much traffic in the conference in-box, but in order to keep the conference moving and vital, such a silence must be addressed. This task falls to the moderator who needs to try to determine why people have stopped participating and to encourage them to stay involved.
PLANNING AN E-CONFERENCE, STEP-BY-STEP

Planning and executing a successful e-conference is a multi-phased undertaking. According to our experience, we can divide the entire process into seven discrete stages. The following section discusses the main activities and tasks of each stage.

Stage 1: Definition Phase

Identifying Partners: Just as the e-conference itself will become a conversation between a host of partners/discussants, the initial planning stages of an e-conference benefits from discussion. An e-conference can be sponsored and planned by one organisation, but collaboration between organisations certainly will strengthen the e-conference. The International Cooperation department of the IIAV has always worked with partners, and this model of inter-organisational collaboration has allowed us to access strengths and areas of expertise that otherwise would have been missing. One of the initial tasks then is to identify other organisations with which your organisation can partner to achieve a greater success.

Partners with common or related goals but perhaps with different interests, skills and experiences will nearly always strengthen the initial concept and contribute to making a stronger product. The goal is to assemble a team of people with complementary interests and skills who know enough about the subject to design a conference that will be of wide interest to the target group, whether that be professionals, academics, activists, government officials, program developers or others in the field (or all of the above). The successful team will work together to come to consensus about topic and objectives and then will take this initial concept to the second step of development: articulating a fully evolved conference design.

Clarifying Conference Topic and Objectives: An important initial step in planning an e-conference is to define the topic and objectives for the conference; this discipline will establish the basic focus and scope of the endeavour:

- What will (and will not) be discussed
- Who will be approached to take part in the discussion
- How will the discussion be “positioned” to participants
- What are the ultimate goals emerging from the e-conference
- Is extra funding needed or can it come from the running costs of the organisation?

Selecting a topic sounds straightforward, but it is more complex than it appears, and it is one of the keys to a successful conference. The topic needs to be clearly defined, and it also needs to capture interest, even to provoke. The topic of a conference must compel interest. In selecting and clarifying a topic, conference planners should consider a larger context: How will the conference fit into the existing literature of a particular discipline? What are the current terms and contours of debate and conversation on this topic? How does the formulation of the
conference topic fit into this larger intellectual and/or political landscape? Considering these types of questions will ensure that the conference topic captures the interest of potential participants.

**Identify an Internet Service Provider:** Identify an Internet Service Provider to host the e-conference. Yahoo groups provides this service for free. The IIAV has used Surfnet to date, but the service became extremely expensive and we are switching to a different provider. When looking for a provider, a few things the IIAV finds important are:

- the discussion is archived and accessible to the readers
- the moderator can add names to the list
- the participants can add their own names to the list
- participants can choose how they receive the messages – in journal form or as they come
- the moderator has an overview of who is signed up to the list.

Mailman and Majordomo are popular programs used by NGOs and are inexpensive.

**Program of Demands:** Another initial task of the definition phase is the formalisation of a “program of demands.” A “program of demands” is a formal document that is developed by the project manager, in cooperation with the initial planning team, website designer, and project administrator. It describes what the conference is about and clarifies its topic, objectives, the different phases of the conference, and the general conference agenda. Further, this document should also identify any crucial features of the website (if there is to be one).

The program of demands should include a time-line for the conference (e.g., how long the conference will last, and any different phases of the conferences). In planning a time-line for the conference, attention should be paid to holiday and vacation seasons (which may vary in different parts of the world).

Finally, a decision should also be made at this stage about which and how many languages the conference will be conducted in. If the conference will be conducted in multiple languages, conference planners also need to decide what information will be translated.

**Budget:** The budget for an e-conference can vary significantly from relatively modest to more lavish, depending on the resources of the conference initiators, the availability of funding, and the planned scope of the conference itself. In any case, planning and carrying out an e-conference will incur costs. Developing a budget is an important initial step; potential funders will want to review a proposed budget to understand the costs involved. Moreover, a well thought-out budget gives an indication to potential funders of the seriousness and professionalism with which the conference is being planned.
In proposing a conference budget, it may be useful and persuasive to remind potential funders that an e-conference is a very cost-effective means of communicating, considering the multiplying effect of email and the number of people who can be linked together in this way. This is a way of achieving real economies with funders’ money and can be an effective way to position your appeal for support.

Part of the initial planning for an e-conference should involve identifying potential sources of funding and possibly even approaching these potential funders to “sound them out” on reactions to the idea. A serious discussion with a potential funder, however, cannot be had without a reasonably detailed budget. The budget should include all anticipated costs, including all personnel costs (i.e., project manager, administrator, moderator(s), and translators), publicity and PR, and product costs (if products are to be developed as a result of the conference).

Stage 2: Design Phase

On the basis of the initial definition phase, a detailed conference plan must be developed. Writing up a draft plan can be a task delegated to one member of the initial planning team or can be shared by more than one person. The following tasks – personnel, publicity and PR, plans for evaluation, and developing a logical framework – are all part of the design phase.

**Personnel:** A range of personnel is necessary to carry out the variety of functions that will make an e-conference successful. Not all team members must be identified immediately; indeed, some will of necessity be identified sequentially, and it is also possible that some members of the initial planning group and sponsoring organisation will function in some of these capacities, until funding is secured, or even thereafter.

**Project manager:** The project manager is responsible for overall management and coordination of the e-conference. This includes making sure that the project stays on schedule and within budget. The project manager will communicate with, and facilitate communication between, the sponsoring organisation (original planning group), funders and other key project staff members (e.g., moderators, conference administrator, etc.). He or she will also be centrally involved in hiring decisions.

The project manager will also be responsible for creating the portfolio of background information that will be provided to participants at the beginning of the conference. She/he will decide whether or not a background paper needs to be written, and if so, will determine who is the best person to write it. The project manager may also wish to have someone compile a common glossary of terms that will help to provide a common language for the conference is another task related to putting together a background packet of information. This list of terms (which can be related both to the technology of e-conferencing as well as the subject matter of the conference) should be distributed to all participants before the conference begins; a glossary of terms is an especially good idea if the base of participants in the conference is varied (e.g., in terms of language, or experience).

The project manager should possess strong skills in the areas of planning and coordination. In the case of the e-conference on combating violence against women, the project manager developed a
work/planning document which laid out in great detail all of the tasks for a successful conference, virtually day-by-day, over a period of seven months. It also identified both internal and external staff who would be responsible for completing each task and a column for status remarks and notes. This type of a document is extremely useful in keeping track of the many details involved in planning and organising such a conference. This sample covers just the first two weeks of a seven-month document.

**Table 1. Project: NOVIB-VAW Project of Sharing Knowledge to Combat Violence Against Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME PERIOD</th>
<th>TASK</th>
<th>INTERNAL STAFF</th>
<th>EXTERNAL STAFF</th>
<th>STATUS &amp; REMARKS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 8 – 12</td>
<td>• Novib-VAW face-to-face Meeting at Callantsoog</td>
<td>Lin, Zuki</td>
<td>NOVIB, ISIS, OXFAM and Novib/Oxfam Partner organisations</td>
<td>• Meeting held with Novib, Oxfam and their Partner organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Formation of the Reference Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A Reference group was constituted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 13</td>
<td>• Meeting of IIAV and ISIS Project team</td>
<td>Lin, Zuki</td>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>• The meeting was held in Amsterdam after Callantsoog to discuss job descriptions of the project team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 – 16 January 2001</td>
<td>• Develop Ground rules and ToR for IPS and Reference Group</td>
<td>Zuki</td>
<td>NOVIB, ISIS</td>
<td>• ISIS drafted the ground rules, Lin commented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Zuki drafted the ToR for IPS and Reference group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 January 2001</td>
<td>• Follow-up with NOVIB on budget for translations</td>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>NOVIB, IPS</td>
<td>• Lin is following – up with Novib/IPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Awaiting Novib and IPS response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Alternative Translators sought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 January</td>
<td>• Meeting on establishment of the listserv</td>
<td>Evelien, Zuki, Lin</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Done</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**E-conference administrator:** The conference administrator is responsible for managing the day-to-day exchange of information in the e-conference. All mail, commentary and documents shared through the conference are routed through a dedicated mailbox to the conference administrator who checks submissions to ensure that they meet conference guidelines. In consultation with project manager and moderator(s), the administrator develops detailed and explicit guidelines that describe what is relevant to the conference’s agenda and what will be posted. Guidelines should also be developed that set out how messages should look and be formatted, any technical specifications that should be considered, etc.

When the conference is underway, the administrator reviews all submissions to determine their appropriateness and then posts relevant submissions to the conference (either on the conference website, or mailed to all conference participants). Conference designers, including the administrator, should determine the most efficient way to post or send out information. For example, topically related messages, or multiple responses to a particular posting, can be
consolidated into one message for distribution to all participants in the conference. This streamlines the process and relieves the volume of email that participants receive.

**Conference moderator(s):** The conference moderator gives a “face” to the e-conference and maintains a presence during the conference. She or he drafts the agenda for the online meetings/discussions, officially opens the conference, and periodically sends email to comment on what is being discussed during the conference. The moderator may also contribute messages to signal that one agenda item has been sufficiently discussed and to direct participants’ attention to the next agenda item. The moderator can function, as necessary, to direct participants’ attention to questions or issues of particular importance and, again as necessary, to encourage participation and submissions if attention or enthusiasm lag. She or he also concludes the conference (or discrete phases of the conference, if there the conference is divided into different sections) and drafts conclusions and ultimately synthesises all the discussions into a final report.

The selection of a moderator is an important and strategic decision. The moderator bears a significant responsibility for making sure that the conference stays on the agenda and is relevant, lively and interesting for participants. This can be done through sending out communications that set the tone, as well as communications that encourage active and on-going participation. The selection of a moderator reflects the judgment of conference planners about what the conference will most need from its moderator.

Moderators can be selected on the basis of a variety of criteria, and while some candidates for the position may meet more than one, or even all of these criteria, it is likely that a choice will be made at some juncture for a moderator because she or he possesses a particular strength that planners believe will contribute to a successful conference. The moderator may, for example, possess strong moderating or chairing skills (i.e., an ability to stimulate and inspire discussion). The moderator may be a recognized expert in the field (i.e., someone who can contribute substantive expertise to the discussion), or she/he may be someone with a recognised name, stature and visibility in the field that can attract attention to the conference. These are different types of strengths, and conference planners will need to decide what they think the conference will most need or benefit from in choosing a moderator.

**Website designer/builder:** E-conferences can utilize a website for the posting of documents and messages that the conference generates. If a website is part of the conference design, someone needs to develop the website, a URL database in the languages of the conference, and web-based access to the website. The website designer needs to work closely with the project manager to give the website an appearance that is consistent with the needs and nature of the conference so that the website contains the features that will be necessary for a particular conference.

**Advisory committee:** As a group, they are available for consultation on content issues and should provide feedback on topic, objectives and agendas for the conference. Members of an advisory committee should possess topic expertise, and if possible, some experience with e-conferences. Members of the advisory committee can also participate in the conference, as necessary, to stimulate discussion. They can also review and contribute to the final report of the e-conference and can identify constructive follow-up activities.
Translators: Translators are necessary if the conference is to be held in more than one language. They are responsible for translating any project documents from their original language into all other conference languages. Further, in a multi-lingual conference, they are responsible for periodically translating summaries of the conference into other conference languages. For example, in the case of the IIAV’s gender and water conferences, periodic summaries of the content of each of the four language conferences were written (e.g., an English summary of the conference in English, a French summary of the conference in French, and so forth). These summaries were then translated into the other three languages, so that, all conference participants, regardless of their language, could follow the main themes and points of discussion from all of the four languages. A translation matrix (below) can be developed to track the translation of messages, attachments, etc., as they come in.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE In</th>
<th>MESSAGE LANGUAGE In</th>
<th>ATTACHMENT LANGUAGE In</th>
<th>Action Taken</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eng Frch Port Span</td>
<td>Eng Frch Port Span</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Sample translation matrix

Publicity and PR: Another important element of a successful e-conference is publicising it adequately to relevant potential participants. Initial publicity tasks include drafting a letter of invitation that describes the agenda, time frame, and guidelines for the conference in interesting and compelling terms.

Publicising the conference should be done as widely as possible. Lists of potential participants need to be collected so that the conference can be announced and potential participants can be invited to join the discussion. Define your list of possible participants as broadly as possible; recipients of the initial announcement/invitation to participate should also be asked to circulate the information to people on their contact lists for whom the conference would be relevant. Recruiting participants can be done through individual email invitations (if individual email addresses are available), and it can also be done by sending invitations to relevant listservs, or by posting announcements on websites that are relevant to the conference subject (e.g., websites, journals, discussion lists, etc.). It is important to publicise the conference widely and to use a variety of media (i.e., not just electronic).

Apart from publicising the conference itself, thought should also be given to how the results of the conference will be preserved and used. For example, would it be relevant and useful to create a written report summarizing the results of the conference? If so, how would such a report be publicised and distributed? Would it be relevant and useful to create a CD-ROM for the
collection and preservation of documents that are shared during the conference? How long will the website of the conference be maintained, and if it is to be maintained, how will its existence be promoted? These types of questions need to be considered so that plans can be made for preserving the achievements of the conference; such preservation helps to amplify the effects of a conference by ensuring that what has been discussed and shared is not lost and remains accessible to those for whom the information will be valuable.

**Evaluation:** E-conferences should always incorporate a formal plan for evaluation. Evaluation is a discipline that helps us learn from our successes and failures and ultimately improves our work. During the initial planning, conference initiators should decide when the conference will be evaluated. Frequently, evaluations are conducted once, at the end of the conference to review strengths, weaknesses and what has been achieved. However, it is also possible to evaluate a conference at its mid-point (especially if the conference has a longer time-frame) in order to make sure that the conference is proceeding smoothly and meeting its objectives. Further, conference planners should determine during the definition phase who will be responsible for designing and coordinating an evaluation. The project manager, administrator and/or moderators can share this task.

Evaluation requires that an evaluative instrument be designed, usually a questionnaire that consists principally of close-ended questions (this makes the tasks of analysis easier). In the case of an e-conference, the easiest and most efficient way to distribute the questionnaire is via email. Be sure to establish a clear deadline for returning the evaluation. Also, while close-ended questions are the easiest to tabulate, one or two open-ended questions should always be included to give respondents the opportunity to “say what’s on their minds,” if they so choose. Provide an incentive to take the time to fill out the questionnaire by promising participants access to a final evaluation of the conference.

**The logical framework:** A logical framework is a useful planning and management tool. This framework distills into a single overview chart long and short-term objectives, as well as the expected results and the required investments in order to meet all objectives and generate the desired results. For all objectives, results and required investments, the chart identifies the concrete ways of verifying that success has been achieved. Creating a logical framework imposes a discipline on your planning; it is a way of checking that you have anticipated all of the human and material resources that you need in order to achieve success for your conference. For example, the following logical framework describes the assumptions, required inputs, and indicators of success for the process of preparing this paper. A logical framework can be created to assist in the planning of virtually any kind of endeavour, but it is particularly useful when planning a major project that requires access to and coordination of different resources and skill bases.
Table 3. Sample logical framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long-term objective</th>
<th>Creating the paper: “Organising an e-conference”</th>
<th>Indicators and Values</th>
<th>Means of Verification</th>
<th>Assumptions and critical factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A document on file at the IIAV for internal use to assist in future e-conferences; a document suitable for distribution to partners and friends describing this process</td>
<td>Document is available to others through the PR department; document is on file and available to all IIAV personnel and consultants; the manual is available online via the IIAV website</td>
<td>PR department and International department promote the existence of the doc via the IIAV website (gender and water) and relevant other websites (including gwa) and on gwa email list</td>
<td>The IIAV will continue to facilitate e-conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term objective</td>
<td>A document for presentation at a conference, summer 2003 (for example Delft)</td>
<td>100 copies, bound and with a simple cover; available at the conference; there is someone to present it at the conference</td>
<td>An IIAV worker will attend the (Delft) conference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned results</td>
<td>The paper itself</td>
<td>Agreed text, agreed form</td>
<td>Available on website</td>
<td>Secretariat of the IIAV available for mailing and International Dept plans promo activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned investments</td>
<td>Seven days research and writing time by volunteer in Department of International Cooperation; other members of the department and past e-conference moderators read and comment; PR</td>
<td>Drafts discussed by international staff and by past moderators</td>
<td>Photocopying and compilation costs are part of IIAV running costs, not extra.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 3: Preparatory phase

Assuming that funding is secured and that all the preliminary design steps have been accomplished, conference planners are now prepared to proceed with assembling the team and creating the infrastructure that will allow the conference to happen. If someone from the initial planning group has been functioning informally as the project manager, she or he may now become the formal project manager, or a project manager may be hired. In any case, one of the initial steps once funding has been confirmed is writing contracts and hiring the various individuals who will staff the conference (i.e., project manager, administrator, website designer, moderators, etc.).

A number of steps that have been discussed in the foregoing section need now to be executed; the following list of tasks must be completed before the conference can begin:

- **Staff**: need to be hired
- **Agenda and schedule**: must be finalized [see figure 2]
- **Invitation list**: relevant email and/or website addresses must be collected in order to publicise the conference
• **Listserv**: the listserv must be set up (participants can add themselves, or the administrator can add them to the list of participants)

• **Administrator’s mailbox**: for the conference administrator must be set up

• **Website**: if the e-conference will incorporate a website, it must be finalised and built

• **Invitation**: an invitation/announcement must be written and either mailed to potential participants or posted to relevant websites inviting potential participants to take part in the conference and providing instructions about how to sign onto the listserv; this should happen at least one month in advance of the anticipated start date for the conference [see figure 1]

• **Background information**: the portfolio of background documents that will serve as a common frame of reference for the conference and as a jumping off point for the conversation should be requisitioned/collected and circulated to participants; if a glossary of terms has been developed, it can be included in this mailing. This should happen at least two weeks in advance of the anticipated start date for the conference

• **Agreements between project manager and moderators**: initial discussions with moderators should include agreements about how often to meet (either in-person, by telephone, or electronically) to discuss the progress of the conference

*Sample introduction/invitation and agenda documents*

The following page contains a sample invitation and introduction document that was created for the NOVIB Combating Violence Against Women e-conference.
Welcome to the NOVIB-VAW Online Discussion

The main goal and objectives of this Novib-VAW electronic discussion list are to effectively contribute to the eradication of all forms of violence against women, by using the power of cooperation to share knowledge to develop good practices in combating violence against women. It is our hope that this discussion list will complement NOVIB’s project of “Combating Violence Against Women” which is intended to provide direction and ideas in addressing the issues in more strategic and defined manner. The discussion list will be conducted in five languages: English, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Chinese. Each language will have its own channel but the same messages will be shared across all the languages. Kathy Clarin, the list manager, will select messages for posting based on the following criteria:

1) RELEVANCE OF THE MESSAGE TO THE TOPIC BEING DISCUSSED,
2) THAT THE MESSAGE HAS APPLICABILITY TO THE OTHER REGIONS; AND
3) THAT THE MESSAGE IS NON-REPETITIVE, MEANING THAT A SIMILAR MESSAGE HAS NOT ALREADY BEEN POSTED.

MESSAGES WILL BE POSTED TWICE A WEEK. WEDNESDAY AND SATURDAY (GMT). THE DISCUSSION LIST WILL RUN A TOTAL OF 10 MONTHS. THERE ARE TWO COMPONENTS, 1) DATA COLLECTING AND RESOURCE SHARING AND 2) THREE DISCUSSION TOPICS. EACH TOPIC WILL BE GIVEN 6 WEEKS OF DISCUSSION TIME AND 2 WEEKS FOR A SUMMARY DOCUMENT.

THE FOLLOWING IS THE PROPOSED TIMELINE AND TOPICS FOR EACH DISCUSSION:

1. GENERAL DISCUSSION: ALL 150 PARTICIPANTS WILL SHARE INFORMATION ON THE OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES ON COMBATING VAW AND TO LOOK AT LONG TERM STRATEGIES.
2. COLLECTING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES FROM PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS. A FORM WILL BE PROVIDED TO SUBMIT THIS INFORMATION. (FEBRUARY 3 TO MARCH 3, 2001)
3. WOMEN IN SITUATIONS OF ARMED CONFLICT. FIRST TOPICAL DISCUSSION. (7 MARCH –12 MAY 2001)
4. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (16 MAY- 12 JULY 2001)
5. THE TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN (1 AUGUST-13 OCTOBER 2001)
6. OTHER OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND/OR CONCLUSIONS (MID OCTOBER-NOVEMBER, 2001)

AFTER EACH THEME A SUMMARY DOCUMENT WILL BE CIRCULATED AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS FOR FINAL APPROVAL. AT THE END OF ALL THE DISCUSSIONS, A FINAL REPORT DOCUMENTING THE ENTIRE PROCESS WILL BE PROVIDED TO ALL THE PARTICIPANTS. (DECEMBER 2001) [FOR A MORE DETAILED DISCUSSION ON THE PROJECT, “SHARING KNOWLEDGE TO COMBAT VIOLENCE”, VISIT HTTP://WWW.NOVIB-VAW.ORG]

PLEASE SAVE THIS MESSAGE FOR FUTURE REFERENCE. THANK YOU.

To Post Messages:
Posting means sending information on NOVIB-VAW related matters to the list-manager for “possible” sending to all the members of the list. So, to post a message to the list, address it to novib-vaw@nic.surfnet.nl. If you are responding to someone else's posting, please make sure the Subject heading is the same as the one you're replying to. To keep this a productive workspace, we ask you the following:

1. Messages must be relevant to the topic being discussed.
2. Please treat each other with respect.
3. When you would like to have a personal discussion, or if you feel offended by a particular message, please send a message to the individual involved only. Others in the list need not be involved. Besides, because it’s a personal exchange, such posting has no value to the others in the list.
4. Copyrighted material shouldn't be posted without permission from the author.

General Usage Guidelines:
1. Try to keep postings concise and short. Maximum should be no more than two screens long.
2. Subject headers will be used to identify message content, so people can more easily decide which messages they want to read. Some of the subject headers we might use are “FYI” (for your information), “Action”, “Decision”, “Draft”, “Discussion”, and others.

Text-Only Access
It is being assumed that many of the members of our list do not have full Internet access. To ensure equitable access to the discussion and information, we ask you to do the following: If you are referencing resources that are available via WWW, please let us know how we can receive them via email, so that those without WWW access can access them. Please note that all NOVIB-VAW postings are archived on the web site www.novib-vaw.org. So to catch up on what's been going on, visit the archive. But if you do not have WWW access, and would really like to have a copy of a particular posting, please email the list-owner, mihyo@iiav.nl, and ask for that particular message.

IF YOU EVER WANT TO REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THIS E-MAILING LIST, YOU CAN SEND A MESSAGE TO LISTSERV@NIC.SURFNET.NL WITH THE FOLLOWING COMMAND IN THE BODY OF YOUR MESSAGE: UNSUBSCRIBE NOVIB-VAW. IF YOU HAVE PROBLEMS WITH THIS PROCEDURE, YOU MAY JUST SEND A MESSAGE TO <LUZ@ISISWOMEN.ORG>, AND WE WILL DO THE REST.

If you have questions, concerns or suggestions about the operation of this list please direct them to the list facilitator, Luz Maria Martinez at luz@isiswomen.org and/or Kathy Clarin at kathy@isiswomen.org.

Thank you very much. Here’s to a stronger and more real connection between women, putting technology in our hands, and combating violence,

Luz Maria Martinez, Chair, NOVIB-VAW On-line Discussion
Kathy Clarin, List Manager

Figure 1. Sample Invitation/Introduction Document
We have also commented in this paper on the importance of a clear agenda. To clarify what that means, we include the following example of the agenda for the first e-conference that the IIAV planned on gender mainstreaming and water management.

**AGENDA E-CONFERENCE 1**

*STATE OF THE ART: THE STATE OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN INTEGRATED WATER MANAGEMENT*

**Phase One — January 28 - February 1**

**INTRODUCTIONS**

Participants introduce themselves and describe their work and experience, particularly in the fields of water and/or gender. They are invited to say what they hope to achieve by participating in this conference.

**Phase Two — February 1 - February 8**

**BASIC CONCEPTS**

Gender, gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, gender approach, gender sensitivity, the sexual division of labour, equality, equity, Integrated Water Resources Management, Water for Domestic Use, Water for Food, for Nature, and for People, gender-differentiated research data, intra-household analysis, gendered access to resources...

Participants may raise questions or make comments on the definitions supplied in the two background papers posted. Other participants should respond so we achieve consensus on the concepts.

**Phase Three — February 8 - February 17**

**GENDER AND WATER IN RELATION TO:***

Poverty, class, power relations, urban/rural issues, food security, health, access to resources, employment, race and class

**Phase Four — February 17 - February 22**

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN IWRM:**

What steps need to be taken?

Participants are asked to contribute ideas.

Contributions close - February 22

Moderator's Summary Posted - March 8

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**Figure 2. Sample Conference Agenda**

Participants may comment on the analysis provided in the background papers, citing examples from their own regions and work.

**Stage 4: Realization/maintenance phase**

At the date set forth in the announcement for the conference, the moderator issues a formal welcome to participants and the conference begins. Participants send documents and messages and react to what they are seeing and hearing from other participants. Messages and documents are reviewed by the conference administrator and posted, as relevant. In multi-lingual conferences, summaries of the conference are translated and made available to participants at agreed-upon intervals.

The conference may have just one phase, or it may proceed in multiple phases (each with its own specific agenda and timing). In multiple phase conferences, summaries of each phase should be prepared and made available to participants at the culmination of each phase.
**Stage 5: Closure and evaluation**

As noted earlier, an evaluation can be conducted at a mid-point during an e-conference, if the conference is long enough to warrant it. If an evaluation is conducted while the conference is taking place, it can be used to make solve problems that may be occurring. Feedback helps improve the process, and the more all participants take responsibility for a conference’s success, the stronger and better the e-conference will be. This sort of active participant investment and involvement in the process can be encouraged by conducting evaluations which require participants to reflect on their experience in the conference (e.g., how is the conference turnout out? am I benefiting in the way I’d hoped? what would I change if I could? etc.).

A mid-point evaluation can be useful, but we should be mindful that it also asks participants in the conference for even more of their time. A mid-point evaluation should be done only if there is a compelling need for it; otherwise, it makes sense to conduct one evaluation at the end of the conference. A final evaluation at the end of the conference should be conducted among all participants to assess the conference’s usefulness, to identify successes and failures, and to create a final evaluative document, on both content and process, that can contribute to our growing body of experience with organising e-conferences and can guide and strengthen future e-conference endeavors. A methodology for the evaluation should be determined and then an evaluative instrument (e.g., questionnaire) should be designed and distributed to participants; the easiest way to do this is usually by email. Ultimately, results of the final evaluation can be posted on the conference website (or mailed directly to participants) in order to share with everyone the type of experience that the conference has produced. Note: it is always possible to share with participants an abbreviated version of an evaluation and preserve the more comprehensive version for internal use. At the close of the conference, thank-you notes to all the people who made the conference happen should be posted to the website (if there is one) as a gesture of closure.

**Stage 6: Post-conference PR and promotion**

It is important that an e-conference produce “outcomes.” Participating in these types of events requires time, money and effort, and the promise of clear outcomes (included as part of the initial invitation) will help to create incentives for participation. An e-conference should produce a final synthesis document that represents what went on during the conference. This is not the evaluation, but rather a document that summarises the main points of discussion during the conference; it is usually written by the moderator, or by the moderator in collaboration with the project manager. This report should also be made available to all participants electronically and in hard copy format.

Beyond this report, part of the conference planning may have specified the creation of products as a result of the e-conference. A CD-ROM that contains the contents of the messages and documents shared during a conference is one common way of preserving the conference. If the production of such documentation was part of the conference design, it should take place now after the conference has been completed and a final report has been written.

Post-conference tasks, then, include the following:
Preparing and disseminating a final synthesis document which discusses and summarises the major themes and findings of the conference discussion;

Preparing and disseminating a written formal evaluation based on feedback from as many participants as possible (all should be solicited for a response); and,

(if part of the initial conference planning/funding agreements): Preparing a CD-ROM (or conceivably also a printed document) that contains the major papers and contributions that were shared by members of the conference.

OTHER RESOURCES TO CONSULT IN PLANNING E-CONFERENCES

This paper provides an introduction to the topic of planning an e-conference. There are certainly other resources to consult, and this list will only grow in the coming years. The following are suggestions of a few resources (online and print) that you can consult for more information.

- “The 10 commandments…of electronic conferencing”: a list of key tips to keep in mind. [http://www.oneworld.org/thinktank/water/econference/sld001.htm](http://www.oneworld.org/thinktank/water/econference/sld001.htm)


- Darren Saywell of the The Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) has published papers on using electronic conferencing for development work. You can visit the WEDC site: [http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/cv/wedc/about-wedc/index.htm](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/cv/wedc/about-wedc/index.htm). A couple of relevant papers are:

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The IIAV

The IIAV is a national center and in a world where information knows no boundaries. Through far reaching cooperation with women's information centers throughout the world we are able to provide access to information on the position of women to researchers, women's organizations, policy makers and the media, to meet the national and international information needs of our customers.

The International Cooperation department of the IIAV is responsible for developing and implementing tools and services with our partners world wide.

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