VIRTUAL PLATFORM OF THE SUMMITS OF THE AMERICAS

EXPLORING NEW WAYS TO ENGAGE SOCIAL ACTORS IN OAS ACTIVITIES

(Document prepared by the Summits of the Americas Secretariat)

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This document presents the results of an online survey conducted by the Organization of American States (OAS) through the Summits of the Americas Secretariat (SAS) and the Department of International Affairs (DIA) from July 28 to August 10, 2009. The survey was targeted to civil society and other social actors and addressed the potential of e-participation tools in the activities of the OAS and the Summits of the Americas Process.

Background: In preparation for the Fifth Summit of the Americas the SAS launched the Summits Virtual Platform (SVP) in September 2008. The objective of the initiative was to promote transparency and active participation of civil society and other social actors within the Summits Process through the use information and communication technologies (ICTs) [1].

For the OAS, holding online consultations represents a cultural evolution of engagement with social actors. In this regard, the SAS collaborated with the OAS Department of International Affairs (DIA) to explore ways in which the OAS may expand these types of e-participation mechanisms in the region.

Purpose of the Survey: In an effort to guide the future direction of e-participation tools such as the SVP, the SAS and DIA developed a 14-question survey designed to gather specific information on the needs and expectations of actors involved in these types of consultations. Furthermore, feedback from the survey will inform the development of a strategy for institutional e-participation / Web 2.0 solution.

What is e-participation and Web 2.0?

- **e-participation:** the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for enabling and strengthening citizen participation in decision-making processes.
- **Web 2.0:** Whereas Web 1.0 highlighted one-way communication from a website to its users, Web 2.0 enables two-way communication that allows users to interact with other users and permits user-generated content.

Overview of main Findings:

A total of 269 civil society representatives and other social actors answered the online survey. Conclusions of the survey are included below. The report highlights the level of adaption of e-participation tools by respondents, the main tools currently being used as well as the purpose for using them. It also underscores the level of engagement with the OAS/SAS and the main difficulties faced by civil society and other social actors when participating in the organization's multi-lateral political processes.

*A complete list of responses to all open-ended questions is available in the following link: http://www.summit-americas.org/vp/ANNEX_Survey_results_081809.pdf, as an annex to this document.

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[1] *The SVP pilot phase was a joint effort of the Summits of the Americas Secretariat and the OAS Department of Human Development - through the Educational Portal of the Americas, with the financial support of the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas / International Development Research Centre(IDRC/ICA).*
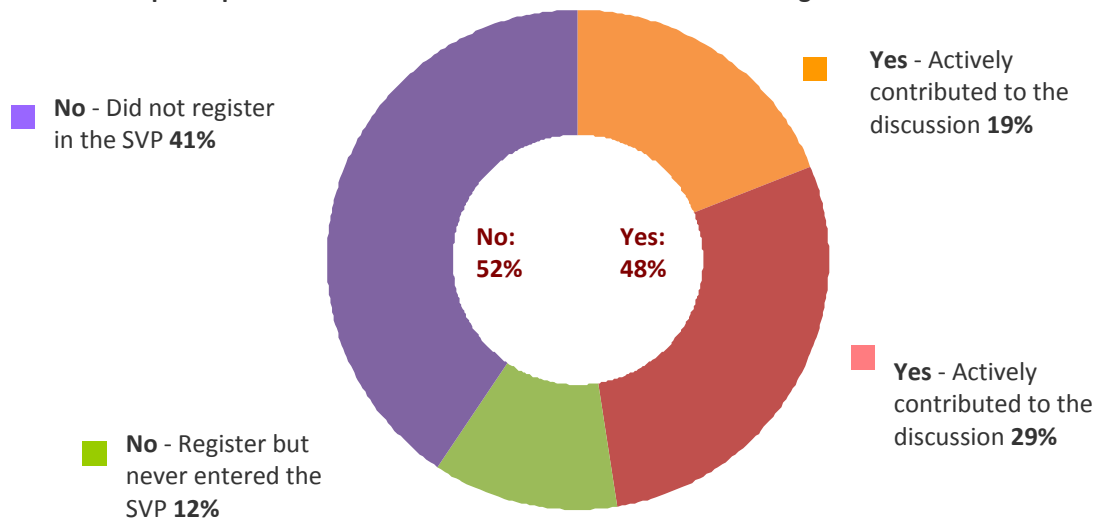
Question 1. Do you or your organization participate in virtual consultations or use other web-based participation tools offered by other institutions or organizations?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	**56.9%**	153
No	43.1%	116
	answered question	**269**

Open ended question - If so, please indicate the institution(s) and provide a link(s) to the website(s):
120 answers. Although answers varied considerably, a substantial number of responses mentioned subregional civil society networks, regional organizations and universities. As for multilateral organizations the use of UN agencies such as UNDP, ECLAC, UNESCO and UNICEF was also mentioned several times, as was the IADB and the SVP/OAS. Other websites included local and regional NGOs. It should be highlighted that many responses included websites that do not provide Web 2.0 functionalities. This may reflect some level of misunderstanding of web-based participation tools.

Question 2. Level of participation in the virtual consultations undertaken through the Summits Virtual Platform (SVP):

- **No** - Did not register in the SVP **41%**
- **No** - Register but never entered the SVP **12%**
- No: **52%** Yes: **48%**
- **Yes** - Actively contributed to the discussion **19%**
- **Yes** - Actively contributed to the discussion **29%**

Question 3. If your answer to question No.2 is NO, please indicate the reason why:

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I was not aware of the virtual consultations being held	**51.7%**	62
I was aware, but did not have the time to participate	**29.2%**	35
I was aware, but did not understand how to participate	26.7%	32
I was aware, but the themes of the consultations were not of interest to me	6.7%	8
I do not have access to the Internet to participate in virtual consultations	5.8%	7
I am not interested in these types of virtual consultations	0.0%	0
	answered question	**120**
	skipped question	**105**

Other: 14 answers. Responses related to technical difficulties with the portal that prevented participation as well as other reasons, including limited access to the Internet and not finding out about the forum on time. A respondent also mentioned the desirability of a Portuguese platform to facilitate Brazilian participation.

Question 4. If your answer to question No.2 is YES, please indicate how you learned of the Summits of the Americas virtual consultations. Please select all that apply.

Answer Options		Response Percent
e-mail announcement / invitation sent by the OAS Summits of the Americas Secretariat (SAS)	⭐⭐⭐	**73.7%**
email announcement / invitation sent by the OAS Department of International Affairs (DIA)		25.1%
Summits Information Network (Summits of the Americas Secretariat website - http://www.summit-americas.org)	⭐	**33.5%**
Department of International Affairs website (www.der.oas.org)		12.0%
Summits Virtual Platform website (http://www.summit-americas.org/vp/default.html)		23.4%
Fifth Summit of the Americas website (http://fifthsummitoftheamericas.org/)		25.1%
OAS Civil Society website (http://www.civil-society.oas.org)	⭐⭐	**43.1%**
Newsletter of the Summits of the Americas Secretariat		19.2%
Search engine (google, yahoo, etc.)		7.8%
Announcement posted on another website (CS Network, NGO, etc).		6.6%
It was recommended to me by someone (CS Network, Colleague, etc.)		10.2%
answered question		**167**
skipped question		**102**

Other: 9 answers. Responses indicated the Summit of the Americas virtual consultations were suggested by other participating organizations involved in the preparatory process of the Fifth Summit and through announcements from the OAS Department of Education.

Question 5. Please identify the degree of your involvement in OAS initiatives. Please select all that apply
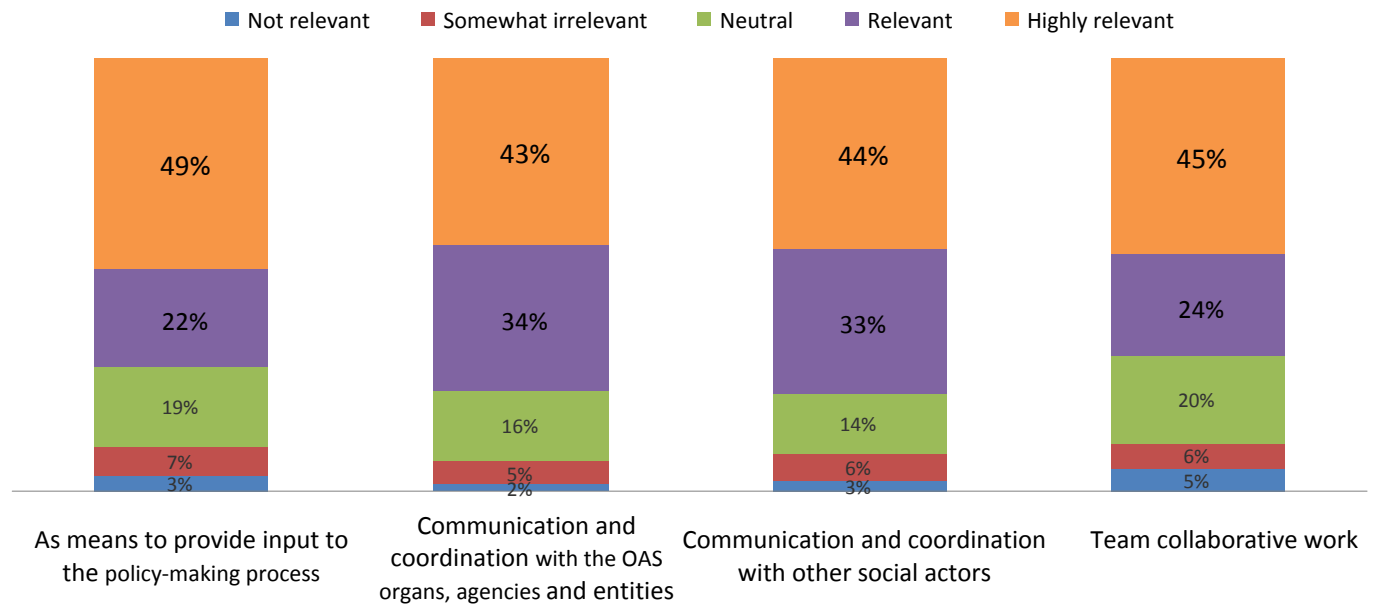
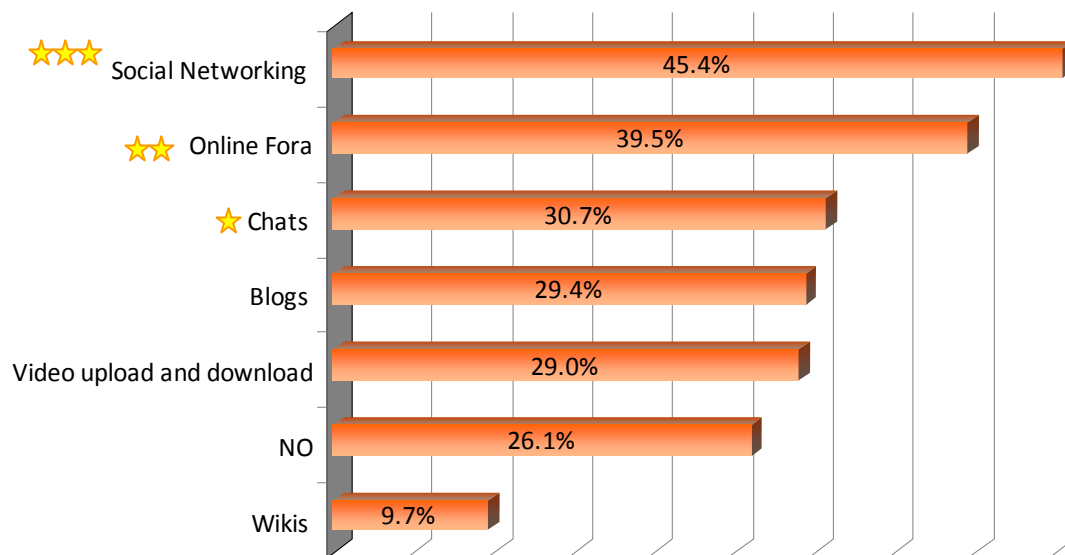| Answer Options		Response Percent
Attended a Summit of the Americas		33.7%
Attended OAS General Assembly and/or Inter-American Ministerial Meetings		22.5%
Attended conferences, technical meetings and/or workshops organized by the OAS	⭐⭐	**48.4%**
Registered as an OAS Civil Society Organization	⭐	**44.6%**
Established Cooperation Agreement with the OAS		5.4%
Participated in online consultations and fora		29.5%
Regularly download documents from the OAS website and sub-websites	⭐⭐⭐	**53.1%**
Regularly view and/or download videos available in the OAS 24/7 Webcasts		16.7%
Regularly view and/or download pictures available in the OAS Photo Gallery		11.2%
None of the above (Not involved)		11.2%
answered question		**258**
skipped question		**11**

Other: 38 answers. Participation in the Draft American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was repeatedly mentioned. Other responses included the involvement in the CSO Registration process and through OAS scholarships.

Question 6. Relevance assigned to e-participation tools to facilitate and promote engagement with the OAS:

Legend: ■ Not relevant ■ Somewhat irrelevant ■ Neutral ■ Relevant ■ Highly relevant

As means to provide input to the policy-making process
- Highly relevant: 49%
- Relevant: 22%
- Neutral: 19%
- Somewhat irrelevant: 7%
- Not relevant: 3%

Communication and coordination with the OAS organs, agencies and entities
- Highly relevant: 43%
- Relevant: 34%
- Neutral: 16%
- Somewhat irrelevant: 5%
- Not relevant: 2%

Communication and coordination with other social actors
- Highly relevant: 44%
- Relevant: 33%
- Neutral: 14%
- Somewhat irrelevant: 6%
- Not relevant: 3%

Team collaborative work
- Highly relevant: 45%
- Relevant: 24%
- Neutral: 20%
- Somewhat irrelevant: 6%
- Not relevant: 5%

Others - 15 answers. Respondents highlighted the need to use these tools to complement face-to-face participation, and the importance of holding specific consultations with a defined and clear agenda and purpose in order to reduce the time-required to participate. The importance of enabling collaboration with other civil society organizations and sharing of experiences was also underscored.

Question 7. When asked to identify what common types of Web 2.0 technologies they are currently using to promote their organization's mission, respondents answered:

★★★ Social Networking — 45.4%
★★ Online Fora — 39.5%
★ Chats — 30.7%
Blogs — 29.4%
Video upload and download — 29.0%
NO — 26.1%
Wikis — 9.7%

Question 8. Based on your answer(s) to question No.7, To what end are you using e-participation tools in your organization? If you answered 'NO', please skip this question. Please select all that apply

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Communication and Outreach	**78.6%**	143
Coordination with other social actors and/or Civil Society Networks	**69.2%**	126
Team collaborative work	51.6%	94
Sharing of information	**83.5%**	152
Activism	44.5%	81
Others (optional)		10
	answered question	**182**
	skipped question	**87**

Question 9. When asked to indicate the level of relevance assigned to incorporating e-participation tools into the OAS website as a means to facilitate participation in OAS activities and multilateral political processes, respondents assigned the highest relevance to document upload/download, online fora and video upload/download. Less relevance was assigned to Blogs, Chats and Wikis:

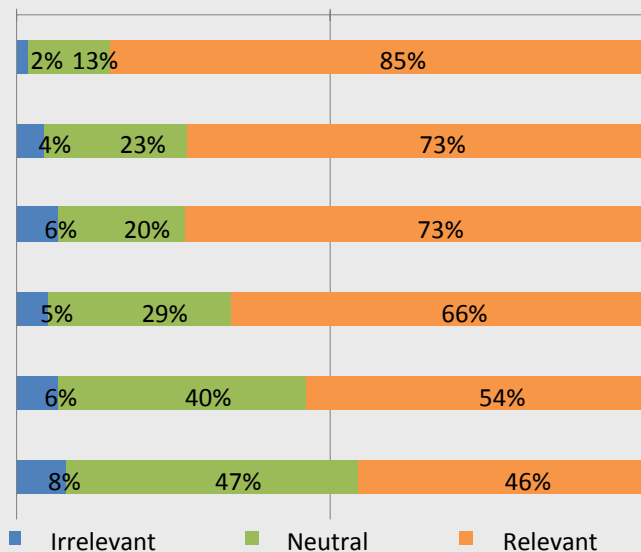Possibility to upload **documents** related to the main themes being discussed ⭐⭐⭐

⭐⭐ **Online Fora**

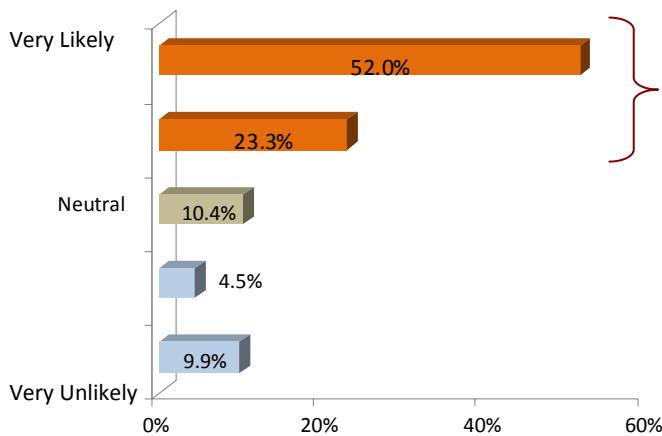Possibility to upload and download **videos** related to the main themes being discussed ⭐

Blogs by guest experts or OAS personnel that allow readers to post related comments

Chats that allow written real time communications through the Internet

Wikis that allow a space within a website to be edited by multiple volunteers/participants through the Internet
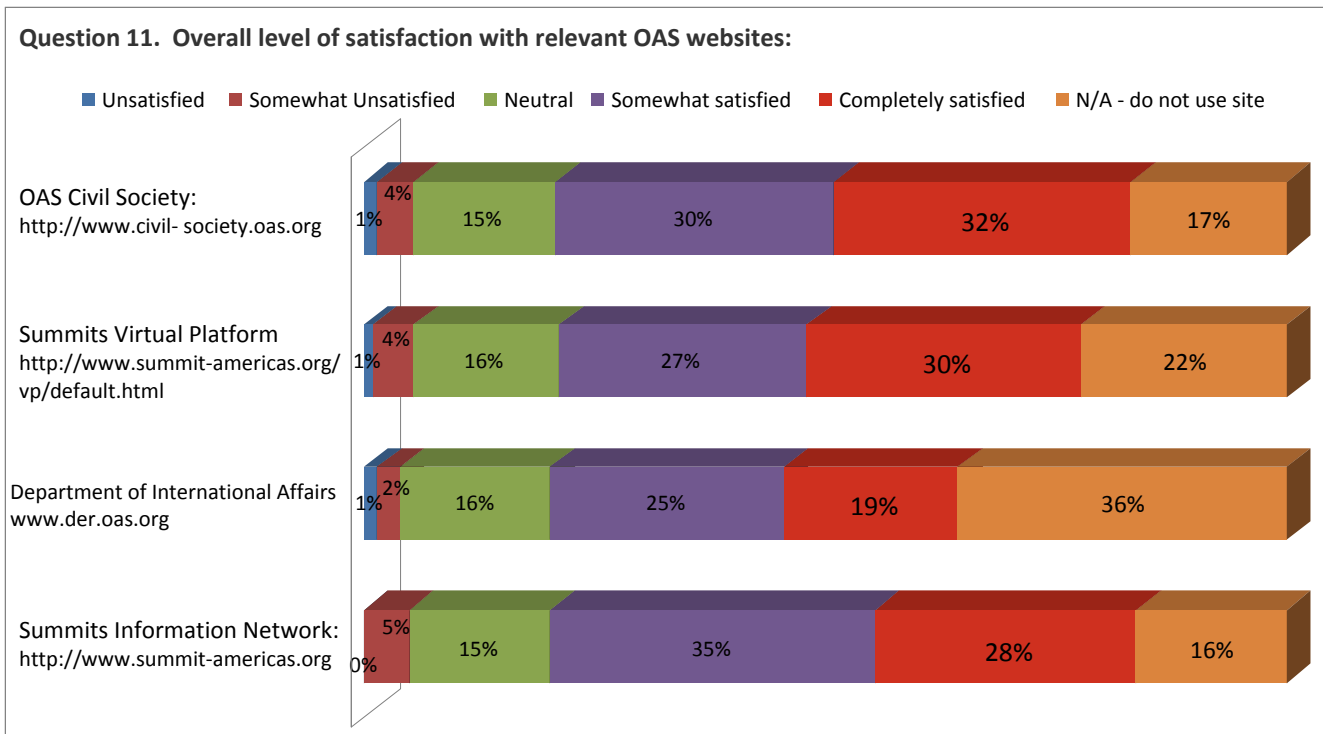

■ Irrelevant   ■ Neutral   ■ Relevant

Question 10. How likely are you to use e-participation tools in the future in the framework of OAS activities and multilateral political processes, such as sectoral Ministerial meetings, the OAS General Assembly, and the Summits of the Americas?
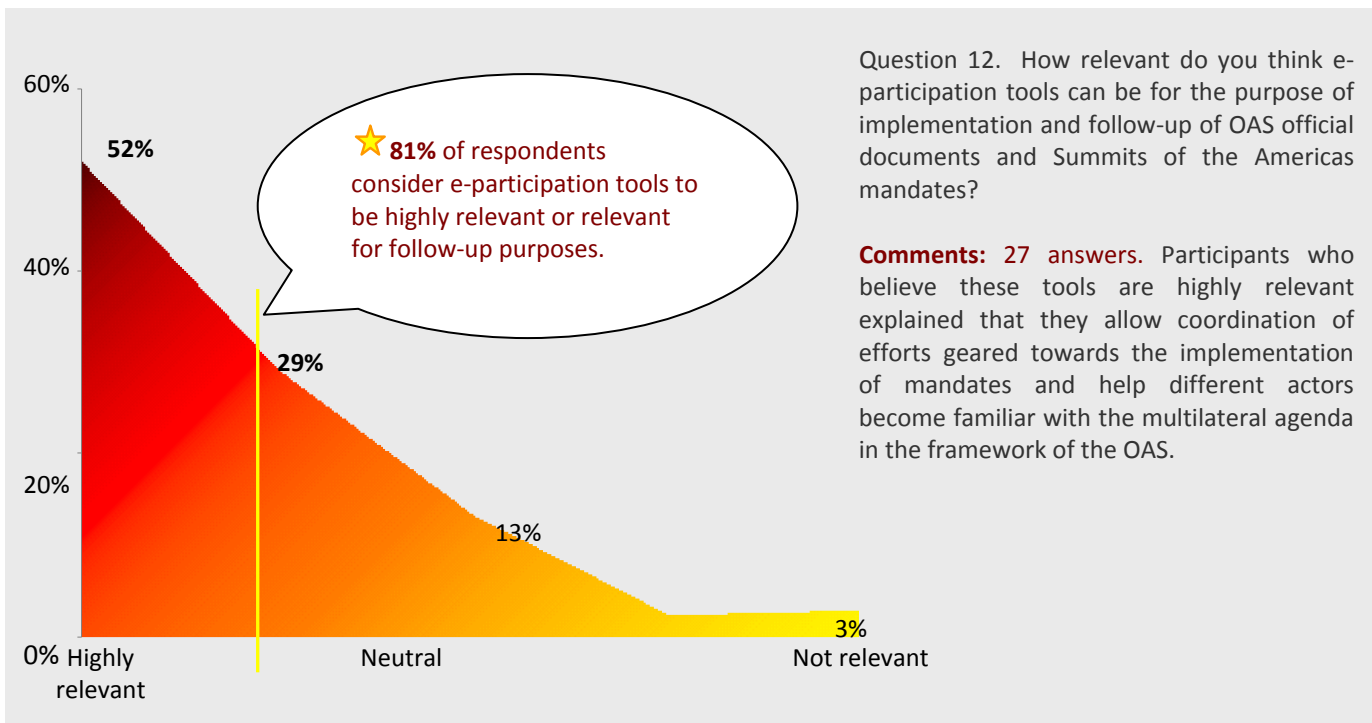

*75.3% of respondents are very likely or likely to use e-participation tools in the framework of the OAS and the Summits.

Comments: Many participants noted that this is their only means of participation as they are in remote areas and have limited funding to assist meetings. However, the lack of skills and access by some groups to make effective use of these tools was identified as an obstacle. It was suggested for the OAS to provide training to overcome this challenge. It was also stressed that the organization must keep in mind accessibility for people with disabilities.
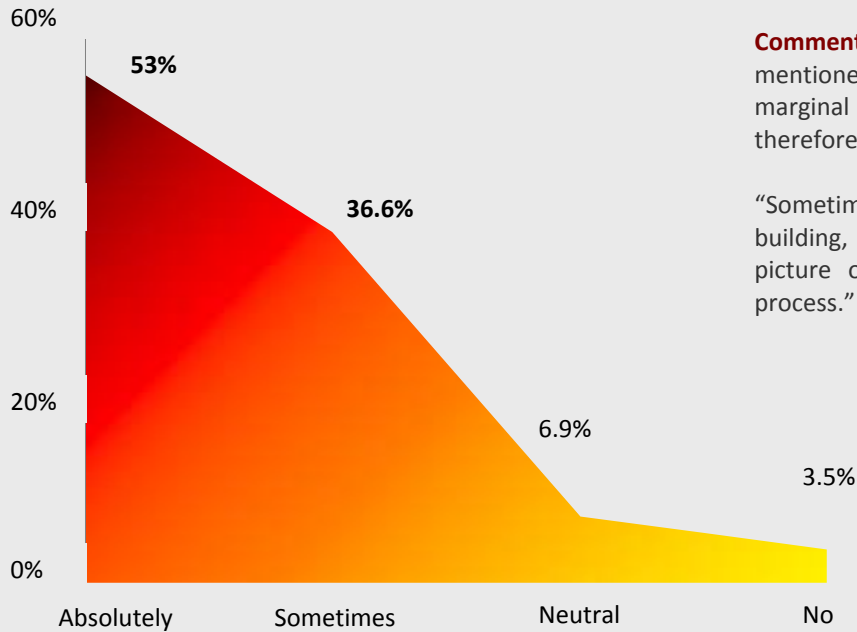
Other participants mentioned that their participation or lack of is contingent upon the themes being discussed

Question 11. Overall level of satisfaction with relevant OAS websites:

Legend: ■ Unsatisfied ■ Somewhat Unsatisfied ■ Neutral ■ Somewhat satisfied ■ Completely satisfied ■ N/A - do not use site

OAS Civil Society:
http://www.civil- society.oas.org
1% | 4% | 15% | 30% | 32% | 17%

Summits Virtual Platform
http://www.summit-americas.org/vp/default.html
1% | 4% | 16% | 27% | 30% | 22%

Department of International Affairs
www.der.oas.org
1% | 2% | 16% | 25% | 19% | 36%

Summits Information Network:
http://www.summit-americas.org
0% | 5% | 15% | 35% | 28% | 16%

Open ended question - 44 answers. We encourage you to provide comments to facilitate our understanding of your response in an endeavor to strive for improvements in future. According to survey results, the satisfaction level with current websites is relatively high (note proportion of 'completely satisfied' and 'somewhat satisfied' answers). Respondents explained that the websites are very informative and that users are able to access relevant documents. Nonetheless, many comments were made regarding language discrepancies, few links to other OAS websites, confusing navigation, and documents that could be included within the website to facilitate browsing, among other comments. Lack of promotion of the websites was also mentioned by several respondents, which may explain the 'N/A – do not use site' answers.

⭐ **81%** of respondents consider e-participation tools to be highly relevant or relevant for follow-up purposes.

52%
29%
13%
3%

0% Highly relevant | Neutral | Not relevant

Question 12. How relevant do you think e-participation tools can be for the purpose of implementation and follow-up of OAS official documents and Summits of the Americas mandates?

Comments: 27 answers. Participants who believe these tools are highly relevant explained that they allow coordination of efforts geared towards the implementation of mandates and help different actors become familiar with the multilateral agenda in the framework of the OAS.

Question 13. When asked if they believe that e-participation tools promote transparency and citizen participation in political processes, **53%** chose '**absolutely**', vs. 3.5% 'No'.

Comments: 29 answers. Many participants mentioned that the technological aspect was marginal and subject to political will, and therefore responded 'sometimes' or 'neutral'.

"Sometimes because it does allow for awareness building, but it still does not give a complete picture of the politics about the negotiation process."

Question 14. Please send us any additional comments that you may have about this survey or about the e-participation initiative. A total of 82 comments were made in response to this question. The following comments highlight recurring themes and represent some of the main suggestions, remarks and concerns expressed by social actors.

Coupling the use of e-participation tools with political will and a comprehensive participation strategy	*Participation should not be limited to requesting opinions; if there is no effective impact it is a waste of time and credibility.*
	E-participation tools are fundamental to remain informed about the different themes relevant to each NGO. It also enables us to provide inputs believed to contribute to follow-up and compliance with policies and recommend changes that should be made to reach them. However, this holds as long as our inputs are effectively reflected and we are allowed to be active participants of the process and not mere spectators. This is a great initiative that opens doors for a broader and better involvement with the OAS.
	It is important, but one must always remember that it should be part of a multi-response strategy. It is an essential tool for communication, but recognize that it is a process that can be clouded by disingenuousness.
	The OAS needs to improve Civil Society participation mechanisms. If the consultation process is just to inform or to make organizations/participants believe that they are engaged but at the end the representatives from the governments never care or take into account the recommendations at the end it will be better not to have any form of communication because it doesn't work. So far some tools to obtain information and to send comments are there but to call that "participation" is too much because it is just a way to inform. Real participation means to have the opportunity to engage in the policy-making process or to have your opinion count in the final decision. So far civil society continues to be a decorative feature in the OAS.

Ensuring accessibility	*These activities should certainly be recommended. The other thing is that they can marginalise many of the people in the Americas who do not have access to high speed bandwidth to post and access videos, etc. The use of e-participation then limits.* *On the other hand, many young people are also users of the technology, so e-participation should be shown as an example. Other tools such as integrated translation software should be used to help cross cultural interaction.*
	I believe it is important to strengthen and broaden the use of information through ICTs. However in our small towns, mainly in the rural areas, there is no access to quality technology. Although there are many 'cybercafés' (telecentres) they are not being used adequately. There is need for ICT infrastructure to provide grassroots training to the people.
	This may be a useful tool, unfortunately, many civil society members who are organized - particularly those in remote and impoverished communities - have little access to these tools and this is an obstacle that must be kept in mind. This may even be evidence of social inequality.
Promoting civil society e-participation in the framework of the OAS	*I wish to thank the OAS for its commitment to the furtherance of democracy throughout the region and for its innovative programmes. You are doing an excellent job.* *While our governments have striven to do much for the economy, we are not impressed with their commitment to empowering civil society (even with information dissemination) and are more and more concerned with the social dwindling spiral that we are presently in, all of which are impacted by so many factors. Our participation in OAS meetings have empowered us with knowledge of the kinds of agreements that our government have signed on to; this in itself is encouraging. And so again we thank the OAS for the great work that it is doing and we encourage you to keep up the good works.*
	We believe this is an important and heartening survey as it is the beginning of a way towards bringing the OAS closer to civil society. E-participation represents a relevant qualitative change in favor of channeling the voice of the 'third sector' to the Permanent Missions of the different countries and to the Organizations' bodies.
	I think it's great that the OAS is taking civil society participation seriously in all of the organization's processes. The world is growing at exponential rates and if we don't share the responsibility of citizen governance (decision making, public policy design, comptrollership, citizen co-responsibility, future planning, etc.) democratic in-governability will reach anarchic levels that will be difficult to overcome.
	It is a very important initiative for our remote region as the media and mass communication assign little relevance to OAS related matters and its objectives. Lack of information and little exposure to OAS reference personnel generates disinterest in the countries - this needs your urgent intervention.
Providing training and enhancing social actors' capacity to participate	*I believe that more training should be provided for civil society organizations on the use of these tools of participation, in such a way that they may be used more frequently for communication and participation in General Assembly consultations and follow-up to the Summits process. Currently most NGOs do not know or have access to these types of tools.*
	This is a good way to have feedback from people who are not yet involved. However, access to technology and management of tools is a limitation for me because I do not have IT skills. Nonetheless I am somehow informed and believe that the tools are useful for information sharing.
	We are still developing our capability to use these types of tools. The crunch of daily problems and our own underfunding limits our time to do this. We are dealing with our daily problems and crisis. We are also spending a lot of time fundraising to keep the doors open.
Using these tools to enhance face-to-face consultations, not to replace them	*E-participation may be very useful in promoting self-directed learning that would increase knowledge and understanding of the themes and areas of the OAS. However, the reality is that in relation to policy implementation this is completely contingent upon Member States' political will to consider the results of such participation. In my opinion, most States have yet to reach this point. Hence, communications of this nature through the Internet cannot replace direct communication.*
	E-participation should not substitute well organized face-to-face meetings that scale-up from the national to the sub-regional and finally to the regional level.