

Insights of 1st SPIDER–DIF event

Thursday 5th of December of 2024 from 13:30 to 15:30 (BRT)

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Introduction to the DIF Report

The Digital Dialogues Implementation Forum (DIF) is a collaborative platform of the SPIDER Project designed to facilitate dialogue, knowledge exchange, and strategic discussions on digital transformation, emerging technologies, and inclusive innovation. The first edition of the DIF took place in December 2024, within the framework of TICAL Conference¹, in close collaboration with RedCLARA, the Latin American advanced networks organization.

The forum brought together experts, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners from Europe and Latin America to discuss key challenges and opportunities in digital transformation. Two main panels were organized during the event:

- **Panel 1: Transforming Policies into Action – AI and Data in Bi-regional Collaboration**, which focused on policy implementation, cross-sector collaboration, and overcoming structural challenges for EU-LAC cooperation.
 - Moderator: Carlos Gamboa (National Research and Education Network – RedCONARE, Costa Rica)
 - Panelists:
 - Juan Pablo Carvallo (National Research and Education Network – CEDIA, Ecuador)
 - Eduardo Grizendi (National Education and Research Network – RNP, Brazil)
 - Tom Fryer (GÉANT, Europe)
- **Panel 2: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Digital Transformation**, which examined the role of education, international cooperation, and the BELLA project in promoting human-centered and inclusive digital ecosystems.
 - Moderator: María Fernanda Cabrera (UPM – Spain)
 - Panelists:
 - Martha Ávila (University Corporation for the Development of Internet – CUDI, Mexico)
 - Alice Abreu (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ, Brazil)
 - Luis Cadenas (Latin American Cooperation of Advanced Networks – RedCLARA, LAC)

This report summarizes the discussions, insights, and examples shared during both panels, providing a detailed account of the topics addressed and the key perspectives offered by the panelists. It aims to serve as a reference for understanding the outcomes of the first DIF event and informing subsequent initiatives in digital collaboration and inclusive transformation.

¹ <https://tical2024.redclara.net/en>

Panel 1: Transforming Policies into Action: AI and Data in Bi-regional Collaboration EU-LAC

TOPIC 1.1: Transforming Policies into Action in Bi-regional AI and Data Collaboration

The discussion emphasized that transforming AI and data-related policies into concrete action requires moving beyond high-level agreements toward operational collaboration mechanisms between Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. Key points emerging from the discussion included:

- From policy alignment to implementation:
 - Panelists noted that both regions already have strategies, policy frameworks, and regulatory instruments related to AI and data, although these vary in their level of maturity for practical implementation.
 - The main challenge lies in operationalizing these policies through shared infrastructures, governance mechanisms, and sustained collaboration models.
- Addressing infrastructure and data asymmetries:
 - Differences in data infrastructure and digital maturity were identified as a major barrier to effective collaboration.
 - Rather than viewing these asymmetries only as limitations, the discussion framed them as an opportunity for complementarity, capacity-building, and shared learning.
 - Regional and bi-regional digital ecosystems were highlighted as instruments to bridge gaps and enable participation from institutions with different levels of development.
- AI and data as enablers of societal impact.
 - AI collaboration was discussed in relation to concrete societal challenges, such as public services, health, education, and sustainability.
 - The importance of focusing on applied, impact-oriented AI use cases rather than purely technological development was repeatedly emphasized.
- Learning from existing collaborative initiatives:
 - Examples of ongoing EU-LAC cooperation were referenced as proof that bi-regional collaboration can work when supported by appropriate infrastructures, trust, and shared objectives.
 - These initiatives were seen as potential models for scaling future AI and data collaborations.

TOPIC 1.2: Strategies to Promote Public-Private-Academic Collaboration

The panel highlighted cross-sector collaboration as a structural requirement for successful digital transformation in a bi-regional context. Main discussion points included:

- The role of incentives in fostering collaboration:
 - Financial incentives (e.g. access to funding, shared infrastructure) and non-financial incentives (e.g. visibility, participation in innovation ecosystems) were identified as key drivers for collaboration.

- Long-term incentives were considered particularly important to sustain engagement beyond individual projects.
- Inclusive governance and participation in policy-making:
 - Ensuring that academic and private-sector perspectives are included in public policy discussions was identified as a persistent challenge.
 - Panelists stressed the importance of dialogue platforms and participatory governance models that allow different sectors to contribute meaningfully to digital policy design.
- Lessons learned from previous collaborative experiences:
 - Successful collaborations were described as those with:
 - Clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
 - Trust-based relationships among partners.
 - Flexibility to adapt to different institutional and regional contexts.
 - Fragmentation and short-term engagement were identified as common risks that reduce long-term impact.

TOPIC 1.3: Challenges for EU–LAC Digital Transformation Collaboration

The discussion openly addressed the structural and contextual challenges affecting EU–LAC collaboration in digital transformation. Key challenges and reflections included:

- Structural and capacity-related barriers:
 - Differences in technological infrastructure, institutional capacity, and access to skills were identified as core challenges.
 - Addressing these differences requires tailored approaches rather than uniform solutions.
- Turning diversity into innovation potential:
 - Cultural, economic, and technological diversity between regions was framed as a potential source of innovation.
 - Collaboration models that recognize and integrate these differences were seen as more resilient and impactful.
- The role of funding policies:
 - Funding mechanisms were highlighted as powerful tools to:
 - Set priorities.
 - Encourage inclusion.
 - Enable long-term collaboration.
 - Alignment between funding instruments and bi-regional strategic goals was considered essential for sustainable impact.

Panel 2 : Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in Digital Transformation

TOPIC 2.1: Education as a Driver of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The discussion underscored education and the infrastructures that support it as a central lever for advancing DEI in digital transformation. Key insights included:

- The enabling role of National Research and Education Networks (NRENs):
 - NRENs and advanced networks were described as facilitators rather than direct implementers of DEI actions.
 - Their primary role lies in:
 - Providing digital infrastructure.
 - Connecting institutions and communities.
 - Amplifying and scaling existing initiatives led by universities and research centers.
- Concrete examples of inclusive digital practices:
 - A specific case was presented involving support for people with hearing disabilities through videoconferencing and shared digital infrastructure.
 - Digital tools enabled:
 - Participation of international experts.
 - Engagement of families and communities.
 - Knowledge exchange through sign-language interpretation across countries.
 - This experience illustrated how technology can transform localized inclusion efforts into broader, transnational initiatives.
- Respecting cultural and linguistic diversity:
 - The need for educational platforms and tools to reflect cultural and linguistic diversity was emphasized.
 - Networks were seen as key actors in supporting multilingual environments and inclusive design, while recognizing that implementation remains primarily institutional.

TOPIC 2.2: Integrating DEI into International Cooperation

At the level of international cooperation, DEI was discussed as a systemic and long-term challenge rather than a set of isolated actions. Main discussion elements included:

- A systemic approach to DEI integration:
 - Drawing on two decades of gender and science policy experience, the discussion highlighted three interconnected dimensions:
 - Representation (“fix the numbers”).
 - Institutional structures (“fix the institutions”).
 - Knowledge production (“fix the knowledge”).
 - While progress has been made in representation and institutional change, transforming knowledge production was identified as the most complex and urgent challenge.
- DEI in emerging and deep-tech fields:

- Particular concern was expressed regarding fields such as advanced computing, AI, and other deep technologies, where gender and diversity imbalances remain pronounced.
- Panelists stressed that DEI considerations must be integrated from the earliest stages of research design, not added retrospectively.
- Measuring impact through indicators:
 - Existing international frameworks and indicators (e.g. from the European Commission and UNESCO) were referenced as valuable tools for measuring DEI impact.
 - Despite available indicators, it was noted that information and communication technologies remain among the sectors with the greatest gender gaps, highlighting the need for sustained educational and training efforts.

TOPIC 2.3: BELLA – Toward a More Human-Centered Interconnected Digital World

The BELLA project was discussed as a concrete example of how digital interconnection can be designed around human and social needs. Key points included:

- Inclusion as a core design principle:
 - BELLA was presented not merely as a connectivity project, but as an initiative aimed at building a regional digital ecosystem.
 - DEI values (such as inclusion, equity, and gender neutrality) are explicitly embedded in its strategic documents, including the project proposal and the BELLA White Paper.
- Mechanisms to support inclusive participation:
 - Two main instruments were highlighted:
 - The digital ecosystem, conceived as an open space for interaction among academia, government, industry, and society.
 - Innovation and investment consortia, designed to articulate social needs, knowledge production, and technological development.
 - These mechanisms aim to lower participation barriers for underrepresented groups through concrete incentives and support measures.
- Beyond connectivity, addressing the knowledge divide:
 - Digital inclusion was framed as more than access to connectivity. Access to knowledge and meaningful participation was emphasized as equally critical.
 - BELLA was positioned as an opportunity to address these broader dimensions of the digital divide.
- From principles to measurable impact:
 - While concrete DEI indicators within BELLA are still under development, the discussion stressed the importance of moving toward measurable outcomes.
 - Proposed actions included:
 - Collective ideation processes across regions.
 - Mapping existing gender and DEI initiatives.
 - Strengthening collaboration among institutions and networks working on these issues.

The panel concluded by highlighting dialogue as a fundamental mechanism for social change, stressing that continuous exchange and reflection are essential to ensure that digital transformation remains inclusive, equitable, and human-centered.