



REMOTE HUMANITARIAN FACILITATION

Guidance Note

JUNE 2020

Work in the Age of COVID-19 Guidance Note Series



HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP



 **Caritas**
AUSTRALIA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Graphic design: Jean Watson

Copy editor: Campbell Aitken

Cover photo: Skydiving / Germanskydiver / Shutterstock

About this Guidance Note Series

The *Work in the Age of COVID-19 Guidance Note* series falls under the Partnerships and Practice Stream of the [Humanitarian Horizons research program](#). Intended as short and practical documents for operational actors, the series includes humanitarian guidance notes on remote management, remote monitoring, remote facilitation and remote working.

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and Caritas Australia collaborated on this guidance note as part of HAG's Humanitarian Horizons research program.

About Humanitarian Advisory Group

[Humanitarian Advisory Group](#) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice.

Humanitarian Horizons is a three-year research initiative. The program adds unique value to humanitarian action in Asian and Pacific contexts by generating evidence and creating conversations for change. This publication was funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

About Caritas Australia

[Caritas Australia](#) is a Catholic Agency for International Aid and Development and part of an international confederation of 165 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations worldwide. Caritas Australia applies the principles and practice of community development, supporting people to help themselves out of poverty, hunger and injustice, regardless of ethnicity, religion or political beliefs.

Caritas Australia has over 65 long-term development projects in 17 countries. The organisation supports a network of local partners to respond to emergencies, implement disaster risk reduction and resilience strategies, secure sustainable livelihoods, alleviate poverty for vulnerable communities, provide access to basic services in remote areas, advocate for fair policies (including on climate change), and obtain justice for First Australians.

Certified



Humanitarian Advisory Group is BCorp certified. This little logo means we work hard to ensure that our business is a force for good. We have chosen to hold ourselves accountable to the highest social, environmental and ethical standards, setting ourselves apart from business as usual.

REMOTE FACILITATION IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

COVID-19 has triggered a surge in online communication, with remote working and remote management becoming the new norm for most industries and businesses. Platforms like Zoom have exploded in popularity: the number of daily active Zoom users jumped from 10 million to over 200 million between the end of December 2019 to March 2020.¹

Critical social sectors, like the aid and development sector, have joined the new trend. Movements of climate change and localisation of aid have been calling for less international travel and greater emphasis on local organisations' leadership in emergency and development contexts in recent years, but the ban on international travel has forced a radical shift, pushing international staff to return home and reducing international access to emergency settings, as in the Pacific after Tropical Cyclone Harold in April 2020.

Humanitarian practitioners have adapted to this new reality, using technology more than ever to communicate, collect and use information in order to design, manage and evaluate aid projects. Workshops, consultations, group discussions, team meetings, brainstorming sessions and other formal and less formal facilitated discussions are now happening online, raising questions of security, access to new technologies, and the practicalities and effectiveness of remote facilitation compared to face-to-face facilitation in various contexts.

Why this guidance note?

This note is intended to guide international and national operational actors on how to adapt and think about remote facilitation in the context of, and after, COVID-19. It provides a snapshot of key takeaways from existing research, and draws together emerging learning and guidance.² Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and Caritas Australia collaborated on this note, drawing on our experience in jointly facilitating and participating in a four-day online event as part of Caritas' international program strategic development in April 2020. The note contributes to a guidance series on remote working produced as part of the Humanitarian Horizons research program.

Summary of key actions



Run an impactful and efficient event: Know your technology and ensure your participants do too!



Promote inclusiveness: Create an online supportive space, connecting with participants and encouraging participants to support each other.



Maximise participation: Prepare for dynamic sessions using simple and/or more advanced tools.



Protection and accountability: Ensure protection of and accountability to participants regardless of the remote aspect of the relationship.

¹ <https://venturebeat.com/2020/04/02/zooms-daily-active-users-jumped-from-10-million-to-over-200-million-in-3-months/>

² See 'Useful Resources' on p. 12

REMOTE FACILITATION IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

The standard fundamentals of good facilitation also apply to online events, but some differences and potential pitfalls exist. The points presented in this guidance note focus on the adaptation required for online facilitation rather than facilitation skills in general.

Remote monitoring approaches are underpinned by:

- 1. Size of the event.** The number of participants will influence your choice of online tools and platform that are most appropriate to your event. Most platforms can host large numbers of participants, but you might want to break into smaller groups of discussions for larger events, or consider using participation tools to maximise participants' engagement and interactions (see examples below)
- 2. Diversity of participants.** Consider barriers of participation for different groups of participants. Language, familiarity with and access to the technology, gender, disability, culture and context (time zones and holidays) and other barriers can affect the confidence and ability of participants to engage in online conversations or use certain tools
- 3. Participants' access and familiarity with the technology.** Whilst you'll most likely invest time to become familiar with the online tools and platform you intend to use for the facilitation of your event, it is important that you also consider participants' access to and familiarity with them. The simplest actions, like turning on and off a microphone, can be distractions, and it's best to avoid having to manage technology related issues during the event
- 4. Purpose of the event.** Keep in mind the desired outcomes of your event when deciding which platform and tools to use. How controlled should your facilitation be, and what is the desired level of participation during your event? You might opt for a more controlled platform, limiting interruptions to a panel discussion in which most participants are observers, or a team meeting involving brainstorming ideas and collecting opinions from all participants
- 5. Sensitivity of the event.** Ensuring the security of your event is vital. If you intend to discuss sensitive topics, make sure participants feel safe contributing to the discussions and engaging on the platform you intend to use. Also, ensure participants are in safe and private locations, just as you would for a face-to-face consultation. Communicate whether you intend to record the consultation and for what purpose.

Remote facilitation example approaches and methods



Phone calls through specific operators or internet platforms with limited functionality (e.g. WhatsApp, Messenger). Note that in some contexts, WhatsApp is considered a safer method of communication than a standard phone call. Most suitable for individual consultations or interviews.



Advanced interactive platforms such as Zoom or Webex, offering various presentation and interactive tools (e.g. share screen and videos, break into group discussions, run live polls, parallel use of a chat box, participant access to pre-set reactions, etc.)



Webinar platforms. These are most suited to large events with limited interaction from participants, such as a panel discussion or recorded presentation.

Challenges and opportunities for remote facilitation during COVID-19

Face-to-face events are generally considered as more effective than remote facilitation. This is based on the perception that it is easier for facilitators to foster trust and personal connections, as well as read their audience and therefore adapt their facilitation style and plan to the needs of participants when face-to-face. Remote facilitation may not be appropriate in certain contexts, and we believe the role of local partners is more important than ever in providing local insight. Despite these and other challenges, remote facilitation presents a range of opportunities.

Challenges of remote facilitation

- ▶ Time management and participants' focus, understanding that research shows online participation is more tiring than face-to-face
- ▶ Closing gaps in access to and knowledge of technology by participants in different settings
- ▶ Poor understanding of participants' realities and local context, and reduced ability to build personal connections and trust
- ▶ Cybersecurity is a fast-changing environment; protecting data and people while engaging online is difficult

Opportunities

- ▶ Some online tools allow a more 'controlled' or 'inclusive' facilitation style, in which facilitators can (for example) control participants' microphones, give more equal opportunity to speak to a variety of participants, and collect instant reactions or polling results
- ▶ Lower cost than face-to-face. More complex events might require extra preparation time, but the elimination of travel costs and increasing phone/computer access makes online events comparatively cheap
- ▶ Participants in our online events reported more meaningful contributions than in some recent face-to-face events. People were more conscious of the time available for their contributions, and had more time to reflect on the points they wanted to make (while waiting for the facilitator to ask them to speak)
- ▶ Increasing numbers of online events makes these events accessible to a larger range of humanitarian practitioners

KEY ACTIONS AND PRACTICAL STEPS FOR REMOTE MONITORING DURING COVID-19

1. Run an impactful and efficient event



Key action: Know your technology and ensure your participants do too!

Practical steps

- ✓ Plan for IT and facilitation support from colleagues. Who can help you facilitate different group activities, assist participants with any IT questions and issues, and manage participants?
- ✓ Organise a pre-event tutorial for participants on the platform and tools you intend to use (alternatively, share tutorial videos with participants prior to the event).
- ✓ Plan sessions of a maximum of 1.5 hours without a break, and a maximum of three sessions a day. Focus is harder to maintain from behind a computer than when sitting in a room. Allow for as many breaks as possible.
- ✓ Allow extra time for the first session and intervals between sessions if possible. Time in between sessions also helps you adjust and adapt your plan based on previous sessions.
- ✓ Communicate clearly with any event speakers about their interventions: when and for how long will their presentation be? Which tools do they intend to use?



Inspiration and ideas

Because participants and facilitator(s) are reliant on various internet connections, technologies and levels of technical capacity, you must anticipate and prepare for questions and problems to occur during the event. Whilst we recommend you familiarise yourself with multiple online tools that can support your facilitation and management of participants, we recognise that navigating the technology, supporting people who are having problems and facilitating at the same time can quickly become overwhelming. Our best tip here is to get some help from colleagues and divide tasks for the event.

In our online workshop event, several colleagues gave support with tasks such as muting/unmuting participants' microphones, responding to participants' IT issues privately, supporting and flagging questions to facilitators from the chat box, and supporting group discussions, ensuring participants understood the tasks and kept track of time.

We were also conscious that some participants had never heard of Zoom, and found the organisation of a live pre-event tutorial helped take the pressure off the event itself. It allowed for a relaxed and informal space for participants and facilitators to play with the technology, connect with one another, and build confidence in joining and facilitating the event. One colleague was made our IT support person; she provided her contact details so participants could express any concerns or issues with using the technology throughout the event. This was particularly needed in the COVID-19 context where people had just made the transition to working from home and were still getting comfortable with their new setting.

2. Promote inclusiveness



Key action: Create an online supportive space, connecting with participants and encouraging participants to support each other.

Practical steps

- ✓ Reach out to your local partners before the event to ensure your plans are logistically and culturally inclusive. Check time zones, holidays or cultural events in each country, as well as any recent events that are worth mentioning or any particular expectations for the opening of your event.
- ✓ Consider pre-consultations with specific groups of people to enable you to reflect their views accurately and encourage their participation during the event. (This mostly applies to events with unbalanced representation, and you anticipate low participation from certain groups).
- ✓ Plan to start and end online sessions with positive, inspiring and/or participatory activities, allowing everyone or a selection of people from different groups to say a word, share a reflection or story. These can be very short activities, such as an acknowledgment of country to start a meeting, people waving at their camera, or writing a word in the chat box to end a meeting.
- ✓ Encourage participation from a diversity of people using online tools to apply standard facilitation best practices.
- ✓ Encourage camera use to connect to participants, but do not impose it, because some people may be uncomfortable about being seen in their home environment. Try to look directly into your camera when speaking as much as you can to give participants the feeling of eye contact.
- ✓ Acknowledge any concerns participants might have about their ability to use the technology by highlighting that we're all learning in the COVID-19 era, and that working from home also means that life occasionally interferes!
- ✓ If relevant, arrange for additional contributions to be made after the event or each session. This will increase chances of participation from people who might need more time to formulate their inputs and might be more at ease when writing. Google Docs, Dropbox or similar open platforms allow people to add their inputs. You can also share your email and have people write directly to you with their thoughts after the event.



Inspiration and ideas

As in face-to-face facilitation, it is the role of the online facilitator to create a safe space for participants to engage, ensuring inclusiveness and respectful exchanges. You can still connect with participants and encourage participants to support each other. You are also responsible for ensuring participation from a diversity of participants, depending on the make-up of your event.

Because you won't have a 'visual feel' of the room, we suggest making note of who is contributing to discussions and using this information to equalise participation; for example, you might alternate opportunities for female and male participants to speak. You can also request feedback from participants from a specific group (e.g. *can we hear from someone in the operational team on this topic?*) Identifying who is contributing disproportionately will allow you to select people who haven't spoken to encourage a diversity of input.

One example of concrete action taken towards creating an inclusive online space, is the commitment of the Secretariat of Indonesia CSO-NGO Network-of-Network (SEJAJAR) to provide sign-language interpretation during all their periodic webinars.

SEJAJAR frames the provision of sign language interpretation as a strategic choice that enables them to:

1. Promote a 'spirit of inclusiveness' for their periodic events;
2. Respond to the needs of some of their CSO members in order for them to contribute to the events;
3. Set an example of concrete investment in inclusiveness;
4. Encourage the deaf community to step into the network.

3. Maximise participation



Key action: Prepare for dynamic sessions using simple and/or more advanced tools.

Practical steps:

- ✓ Consider using multiple tools and activities, maximising interactions and taking into consideration participants' number and capacity to use the tools. Also consider the time needed to switch tools.
- ✓ Pre-assign roles to participants and develop preparatory activities to increase engagement, motivation and manage expectations for the event.
- ✓ Plan to keep in-depth group discussions to a maximum of 10 participants, with 5–7 active participants being ideal.
- ✓ Present the rules and format of the event, especially how to participate and the need to keep your microphone on mute whilst another participant is talking. Insist on full participation and engagement during relatively short sessions, and plan for breaks.
- ✓ Provide clear instructions and other key information both verbally and in writing (using a chat box or shared screen). Remember that your voice can be momentarily cut off, and some people respond better to written or spoken information, so it is important to provide both.
- ✓ Utilise the platform's 'quiet feedback' mechanisms (e.g. virtual hand raising and reactions) so people can engage while others are speaking.
- ✓ Finally, be yourself, not the 'expert'; acknowledge contributions from participants and return questions to the group if appropriate. You can also encourage participants to add to your summary of the discussion and check that you got it right (e.g. by using a Yes/No reaction tool).



Inspiration and ideas

Because you can't always see and hear participants in online events, securing their participation and motivation might feel a bit daunting. Luckily there are tools and activities you can use to check in with participants, enliven the session and keep participants engaged. Simple examples include short videos, shared screen presentations, adaptations of traditional ice-breakers, use of the chat box and virtual reactions. For more advanced tools (e.g. Annotating & Whiteboarding in Zoom), ask yourself whether the expected outcomes are worth the risk of creating a distraction or excluding participants from engaging.

In our online workshop event, we found it helpful to reach out to participants beforehand with the aim to start reflection and maximise participation during short thematic discussions. We shared a list of pre-reading resources for each session, and developed a short questionnaire which helped us to know our participants better and get a sense of their thinking prior to the event. We also asked participants if they could give a short presentation on a related topic or facilitate an ice-breaker to increase engagement throughout the event.

EXAMPLES OF REMOTE FACILITATION TOOLS

Indicative level of complexity of tools *(from a participant viewpoint):*

- **Very easy** – no or little action required from participants
- **Easy** – requires participants to independently find a function that can be completed in one click
- **Medium** – requires participants to use largely intuitive platforms
- **Advanced** – requires participants to use multiple functions

Type of tools	Example of tools we've found useful
 <p>Facilitation tools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Chat box – used to communicate information to individual or all participant(s), and by participants to comment on ongoing discussions ● Breakout rooms – these facilitate group discussions for larger events, and are also useful as an ice-breaker ● Screen sharing – to show a PowerPoint presentation or video ● Online quizzes – as possible ice-breakers
 <p>Participant engagement techniques</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Virtual hand raising – participants can alert facilitators when they have questions/comments ● Mute/unmute individual or all microphone(s) – this can be controlled by both participants and/or the event's host
 <p>'Quiet feedback' mechanisms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Yes/No reactions – to get quick and quantified feedback from all participants in response to yes/no questions ● Polling – to get live and quantified feedback from all participants answering pre-set questions ● Thumbs up and applause icons – for all participants to visually support a point being made in the discussions ● Online Surveys – to collect post-event feedback, e.g. using the SurveyMonkey platform to ensure anonymity
 <p>Parallel interactive platforms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Google Docs or ● Whiteboard – for live collection of written answers and contributions from participants (can be used simultaneously by multiple people) ● Dropbox – or other cloud platforms for sharing resources

4. Protection and accountability



Key actions: Ensure protection of and accountability to participants regardless of the remote aspect of the relationship.

Practical steps

- ✓ Review security settings for your meeting. Depending on the platform you're using, this may not be a problem. Most platforms are reviewing their security settings to avoid disruptions and hacking of private and public events, but you might want to avoid sharing access details for your event publicly and rather share these with vetted/registered participants only.
- ✓ If you intend to discuss sensitive topics, ensure participants are comfortable with the security provided by the platform you intend to use. They may suggest a different platform, or indicate that they are not comfortable discussing sensitive information remotely at all.
- ✓ As when organising face-to-face meetings, ensure participants are located in a safe place prior to engaging in sensitive conversations. Re-assure them about security at your end too.
- ✓ Consider the advantages and risks of recording conversations. Ensure you ask for consent prior to recording, specifying how recordings will be used and/or shared (internally or publicly).
- ✓ Develop feedback and accountability mechanisms for participants to voice how they felt about the event, what went well, what could be improved, as well as any concerns
- ✓ Ensure data security systems are in place for remote access to information. This is not just about storage of data at your end; transfer of data requires attention when working remotely. Consider de-identifying data and using the most secure platforms for sensitive data sharing.



Inspiration and ideas

Some suggestions provided in this guidance note were drawn from a feedback mechanism established after an online workshop. We used SurveyMonkey, which ensured the anonymity of participants' feedback on both the content and format of the event. The survey asked about whether the objectives of the event were met, whether participants felt they were provided with enough opportunities to participate and share their views, and collected ideas about ways to improve similar events in the future.

We've found a good practice is to provide a written plain language statement before conducting consultations with partners. It is recommended such statements include information such as the purpose of the consultation, intended use of and access to the information shared during the consultation, that consent is required for recording and storing information, that joining the consultation is voluntary, and how to safely voice any concerns about the consultation (including about facilitators themselves).

USING THIS GUIDANCE NOTE

An increase in remote facilitation during COVID-19 is likely to significantly shift the way humanitarian sector works now and in the future. Collaborating with national and local actors and communities on effective remote facilitation approaches is vital, as is sharing successes and common challenges.

This guidance note can be used to:

- ✓ plan remote facilitation approaches
- ✓ raise awareness of remote facilitation best practices
- ✓ advocate with donors for supporting remote facilitation requirements

USEFUL RESOURCES

<https://www.disasterready.org/working-remotely>

<https://www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au/communication/online-discussions/facilitation>

<https://www.devex.com/news/5-tips-for-running-a-development-organization-remotely-96845>

<https://aps-community.org/tips-for-facilitating-online-groups/>

<https://learningsolutionsmag.com/articles/2283/five-essential-skills-for-virtual-classroom-facilitators>

On online fatigue:

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/zoom-fatigue-video-conferencing-coronavirus>

<https://www.upwork.com/resources/remote/maintaining-well-being-during-times-of-uncertainty/>

<https://www.theladders.com/career-advice/10-tips-to-handle-zoom-fatigue-in-the-age-of-endless-online-meetings>

Remote humanitarian facilitation:
Guidance note





HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP



 **Caritas**
AUSTRALIA