



WORKING PAPER



Online engagement in the global South

Perspectives, challenges and options

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Women and girls from Barmer in Rajasthan, India using a laptop for the first time. © Digital Empowerment Foundation

About this working paper

This working paper has been produced to share some of the experiences and challenges climate practitioners in the global South have faced in transitioning to working online because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is based on a CDKN survey conducted in 2020, as well as a series of interviews with practitioners in Africa, Asia and South America. The paper shares different perspectives on the extent to which online engagement has been successful and what can be improved. It also highlights some lessons learned in the organisation of large international meetings, in-depth participatory processes, and training events at national and sub-national levels.

About the authors

Lucia Scodanibbio is a learning advisor at CDKN, promoting reflections among its partners on knowledge brokering and how to get climate adaptation knowledge to influence policy and affect change. During the Covid-19 pandemic these reflections were extended to gathering lessons learned related to the shift from face-to-face to online engagements, as this experience is highly relevant to the climate challenge the world faces.

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Summary

Online engagements increased dramatically in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Virtual platforms have enabled interactions and work to continue, despite an inability to meet in person. However, the digital divide has posed one of the biggest challenges for many of those from developing countries and rural areas to interact online. High internet connection costs, unreliable connectivity and limited access to computer hardware or smartphones have hindered participation in the global South.

A survey run by CDKN from April to June 2020 identified some of the greatest difficulties faced: issues related to technology, including participants' capacity to use it; maintaining a work-life balance during the Covid-19 lockdown; and the amount of time spent in online meetings instead of in person. The survey nonetheless showed that online platforms have enabled work to proceed; and that technology has enhanced access overall and enabled people in different locations to meet in an efficient and less costly manner. Zoom emerged as the preferred platform in most (but not all) locations for its user-friendly interface, multiple functionalities, and ability to perform in lower-bandwidth situations.

Interviews with meeting organisers in charge of arranging a number of different types of events – from large international workshops to participatory processes connecting participants from marginalised communities in remote areas – also shed light on some important lessons for running inclusive and effective online engagements.

Reduced costs for data and platform subscriptions, better connectivity, improvements in the platforms, skills development on how to run virtual meetings, and training on how to use the technology would all go a long way towards improving users' experiences of interacting online. Purchasing data bundles for participants, facilitating their travel to areas with better connectivity, and carefully considering when to hold meetings would also help to make them more inclusive. However, one must recognise that the digital divide, erratic electricity supply and restrictions on the use of certain platforms in some countries, all continue to pose a challenge to equal access to online meetings.



Internet café in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. © Ossewa via WikiCommons

Introduction

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, individuals from across civil society, government, academia and the private sector suddenly had to find alternative ways to collaborate with each other, as face-to-face meetings became restricted and travel was halted across most of the globe (Figure 1). Online platforms have provided a much-needed solution to enable work to continue. However, this has come with its own set of challenges.

Online platforms depend on a reliable electricity supply, access to fast and stable internet connections, computers equipped with the right hardware, or smartphones with affordable mobile data plans. Although there is much variation across continents and countries, in many of the locations where CDKN works even these basic preconditions are not always in place.

In this paper, we explore the experiences and challenges faced by a range of climate change practitioners from Africa, Asia and South America as they shifted to using online platforms to communicate and interact. We also share lessons learned from those who organised and convened virtual events, from large international meetings to participatory processes engaging vulnerable groups in Peru and county government officers in Kenya.

For the purposes of this brief, when we refer to developing country or global South contexts, we mean those places that are less connected or have more limited access to digital technology. We also wish to recognise upfront that different online meeting platforms have undergone big strides in enhancing their functionality and adding different features since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, it is possible that specific comments relating to the user-friendliness or functionality of a particular platform may be outdated by the time this document is published or read.

Digital challenges in the global South

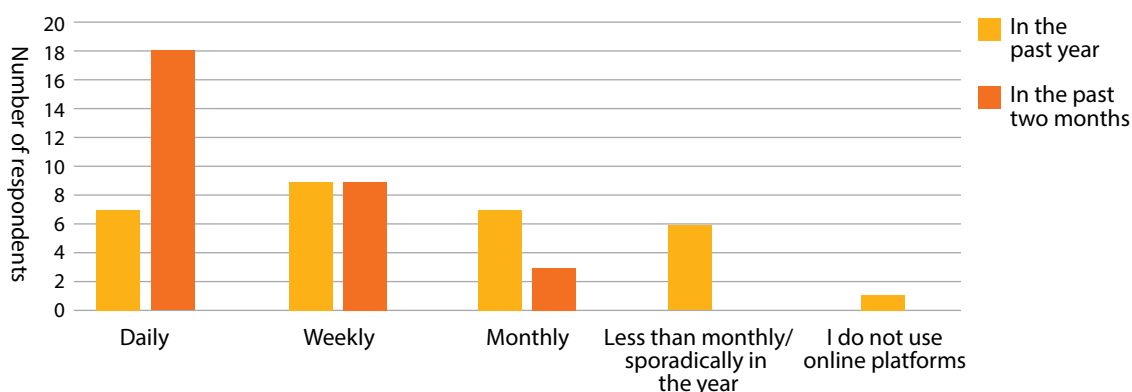
In a developing country context, numerous challenges can hamper the full functionality of online platforms and, therefore, preclude a fulfilling experience. This is not surprising given that, in most cases, the software has been designed in the global North under a different set of prevailing conditions.

Erratic electricity supply and access, internet blackouts which may be caused by political events, and computer equipment that does not allow downloading new application software, are some of the initial challenges faced in the global South. Expensive internet access in some countries, slow internet connections, poor bandwidth and limitations on wireless versus wired connectivity can make online meetings frustrating and unproductive. Though one can often connect through landline technologies, call-in numbers are more often based in the global North, or in a handful of countries elsewhere.

Furthermore, the use of online technology for communication may not be prevalent in some countries or sub-regions within the global South, in particular before the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfamiliarity with the user interfaces of these online platforms can make it difficult for participants in the global South to actively engage in online discussions.

While in some areas several of these challenges will be compounded to make online engagements virtually impossible, in others, only some of these difficulties may be at play.

Figure 1: Frequency of online engagement during the early phase of Covid-19 compared to the previous year



Source: CDKN survey on perspectives on online engagement in the global South, April to June 2020

Some core requirements for effective online engagement in the global South

Thirty individuals¹ from academia, civil society, government and intergovernmental organisations responded to the CDKN survey run from April to June 2020. Of these, 87% of respondents indicated that they require access to reliable internet to engage adequately online and, hence, this is the main issue restricting their online interactions. Cost of data was an issue for 37% of respondents.

Table 1: Core requirements of 30 CDKN survey respondents to engage adequately online

Requirement	No. of responses
Access to reliable WiFi/ Internet connectivity	26
Affordable cost (of data/ internet)	11
Access to hardware (phone or computer)	6
Mobile accessibility	4
Access to power supply	3
Ease of use	2
Adequate time management (for example, brief meetings, acceptable time of day when working across time zones)	2
Adequate space (quiet, comfortable)	2
Ability to record lectures or classes	1
Good sound quality	1
Level of organisation of meeting (for example, good agenda)	1

What do you require for successful online meetings?



Connectivity

I use broadband internet; and when it rains it gets disconnected most of the time. Since technicians do not come to their office regularly and allowing them to come to my home to fix the problem is not an option now, troubleshooting has become difficult.

My laptop is somewhat weakly configured, so sometimes it freezes or turns off in the middle of the calls. When multiple tabs are open, which usually happens, the problem is more likely to occur.



Computer hardware



Cost

The cost is more or less the same as I am using the old unmetered connection at the same price. Using cellphone data when broadband connectivity is unstable incurs additional cost, but that is not an issue as now I do not have to commute to and from the office which saves me a good amount of money.

Survey respondent from Bangladesh



Time and power

Adequate time (especially when working across time zones); good internet connectivity; and not having power cuts (which are common in the summer).

Survey respondent from Myanmar

A computer, good internet connectivity, and an alternative device in case the connection fails.

Survey respondent from Argentina



Alternative device

Box 1: The digital divide

Internet usage has grown steadily in the past 15 years, with the proportion of internet users increasing from approximately 17% in 2005 to close to 54% of the world's population in 2019.² Despite this growth, there are many disparities across continents and countries. In the Americas,³ 77% of people use the internet, whereas this percentage falls to 48% in the Asia-Pacific region, and to 28% in Africa, which is the continent with the highest percentage of the population not using the internet (for example, over 75% in certain countries in central and west Africa).

Africa is also the continent with the lowest percentage of households with a computer at home. While the internet can be accessed through other devices, Africa is again the continent with the lowest percentage of households having home internet access. Furthermore, it is also the continent where broadband prices are the highest (for example, for mobile bundle packages). Overall, the developing world, and least developed countries in particular, show that the affordability of broadband services is the lowest, in relation to gross national income.

One should note that many variations occur within and across continents and countries, however. The Americas category, for example, includes countries like Canada alongside others like Honduras or Bolivia. Similarly, Africa contains South Africa or Egypt, alongside Chad or Somalia. Within countries, rural contexts differ greatly from the more connected capitals or large cities.

Table 2: Regional differences in 2019 Information and Communications Technology indicators⁴

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) indicators from the International Telecommunication Union	Americas	Asia & Pacific	Africa
Percentage of individuals using the internet	77.2%	48.4%	28.2%
Percentage of households with internet access at home	71.8%	50.9%	17.8%
Percentage of households with a computer at home	65.7%	43.5%	10.7%
Price of high-usage mobile broadband bundle ⁱ	43.9 PPP\$ ⁱⁱ	31.3 PPP\$	53.0 PPP\$
Price of low-usage mobile broadband bundle ⁱⁱⁱ	32.1 PPP\$	20.6 PPP\$	27.1 PPP\$
Mobile coverage by type of network: LTE (Long-Term Evolution) or higher/ 3G/ 2G	90.5% / 6% / 0%	91.5% / 3.9% / 2.6%	38% / 41.5% / 10%

ⁱ Defined here as including 140 minutes of voice, 70 SMS and 1.5 GB of data

ⁱⁱ USD adjusted in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms

ⁱⁱⁱ Defined here as including 70 minutes of voice, 20 SMS and 500 MB of data



Read more: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>



Man from Madagascar works from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. © World Bank Photo Collection via Flickr

What are the main challenges for users?

When asked what has been frustrating and not working well, in addition to issues tied to **internet connectivity and costs**, CDKN survey respondents referred to:

- Issues with the **technology functionality**, such as:
 - The 40-minute time limit on Zoom when not using a paid account.
 - Calls cutting off and poor sound quality.
 - Difficulty in joining calls because of permission issues.
 - Problems with accessing platforms effectively on mobile phones.
- Participants' **familiarity with using the technology**, such as:
 - The need to learn how to maximise the utility of new platforms.
 - Understanding the complexity of the tools.

Those surveyed also talked about issues that are applicable globally, such as challenges related to **maintaining a work-life balance** during the Covid-19 lockdown (especially in family contexts with small children). They mentioned the frustrations tied to the **amount of time spent online in lengthy meetings**, which prevents one's ability to focus on substantive work and is mentally draining; and the absence of in-person contact.

It should also be noted that not everyone was prepared to work from one's home when the Covid-19 pandemic started. Adequate computer hardware and software, necessary for complex work to be done from home computers, was not always available. Home internet connections were not always strong enough to support multiple workers and children going through home-schooling, nor did everyone have adequate desks and chairs that supported healthy, comfortable postures and prevented injury.

I have not really received any form of training on how to use online platforms.

Survey respondent from Ghana

At times, the personal and family context affects the ability to make interventions during online sessions (interruptions, background noise, distractions).

Survey respondent from Argentina

In certain contexts, some participants, such as public officers, find it disrespectful to hear noisy children in the background.

Interviewee from Peru

Almost everything is online and sometimes online engagements become too much.

Survey respondent from Namibia

A personal interaction always allows a deeper dialogue and creates more solid connections.

Survey respondent from Peru

When there are more than two children taking classes, they often have all the equipment connected at home, so the signal is reduced or there is less equipment available (sometimes there is none at all).

Interviewee from Peru



Media communication project manager working from home in Georgia, May 2020. © Irinka Aliashvili, UN Women Europe and Central Asia.



Member of the Sudanese Red Crescent conducts a workshop on healthcare and Yellow Fever prevention in Al Riad camp for Internally Displaced Persons in Western Darfur. © UNAMID and Albert González Farran via Flickr

Box 2: The Sudan context

The currently volatile political and economic context in Sudan makes online engagement very challenging. Persistent power cuts of seven hours per day (often for weeks on end) are coupled with access restrictions to certain platforms, due to the economic sanctions placed on the country until recently by the United States. To access Zoom or the Google suite of applications one needs to purchase and activate a costly VPN, a private server which enables one to bypass the restrictions. But this is not always reliable. In addition, Sudan has a strong oral history tradition, which means that people like to connect via conversations, both formally and informally.



We may be living in a new era, one in which the Covid-19 pandemic has ushered in a variety of online engagement mechanisms and interesting webinars that connect the world. But here it's different from other countries. We know about all of these opportunities, but they are not really available to us.



Sarra Majdoub, project manager at the Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA)

What has worked well?

While online communication has been frustrating at times, individuals are also discovering some positive aspects of the transition. Firstly, survey respondents mentioned that working via online platforms has **enabled day-to-day work to proceed** and **people to stay connected**, albeit in a different way.

A range of survey respondents reported that the following aspects of online engagement were working well for them:

Not organising in-person events has led to large cost savings, which has freed up resources for priority actions on the ground.

Survey respondent from Ecuador

We were able to engage and network with colleagues, share information and data, and take forward discussions which were planned to happen physically.

Survey respondent from Botswana

Online platforms were also valued for enabling people to **connect across different locations**, which, with video, “allows for closer interaction”. In many instances, these technologies have **broadened access and increased the ability to reach more people**, all at a lower cost.

Many people have had more opportunities to attend events without the need to pay for flights, travel and conference fees. This has potentially **improved the inclusive nature of global events**, even if there have been some technological barriers to engaging effectively and time zone differences continue to act as a barrier to broad global participation. Participants who are more introverted, hold junior positions or have English as a second language may also feel freer to participate by typing into the chat box instead of having to talk.

Since the onset of the pandemic, centrally-located teams have also been able to **follow projects on the ground** much more closely, as instead of visiting them once or twice per year on a three-day field visit, they can regularly provide support and evaluate progress thanks to the more widespread use and acceptance of different platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, MS Teams or others.

Finally, the **convenience** of working from home and not commuting or travelling, along with **risk reduction, cost savings** and **increased time for house work and childcare**, was also noted.



A young woman from Ranchi, India, learning about how a laptop functions © Digital Empowerment Foundation

It has given us flexibility in scheduling calls at short notice and the ability to address work issues quickly.

Survey respondent from Ghana

Open access webinars have been good. Pre-Covid, these would have required travel and entailed high costs.

Survey respondent from Myanmar

The possibility of sharing a video of the work that keeps on going in the field, despite the challenges of the lockdown, is very motivating for the teams and local settlers who continue to work in the field.

Interviewee from Peru

As an introvert who prefers to write rather than speak, unlike those who are more outgoing, online meetings give me the opportunity to just type my questions/comments in the chat box.

Survey respondent from Bangladesh

Now I am able to attend more meetings or interesting webinars than before, as there is no office commute involved. This saves me about four hours a day (for a 14km round-trip), plus it preserves the mental and physical energy I typically lost during an unpleasant trip to the office.

Survey respondent from Bangladesh

I enjoyed the flexibility to be at home while working since I have children who need a parental presence.

Survey respondent from South Africa

Box 3: Lessons learned from an online IPCC Working Group III meeting⁵

In mid-April 2020, 287 experts from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group (WG) III (responsible for assessing climate change mitigation) met virtually to advance their contributions to the Sixth Assessment Report. Originally meant to take place in Ecuador over the same dates, the meeting was shifted from a physical to a virtual setting in early March due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A feedback questionnaire run by the working group's technical support unit at the end of the meeting (and answered by 175 participants) indicated that while 86% of respondents ranked their overall experience of the meeting as "excellent" or "good", 29% felt that they were not able to fully participate in the meeting. Ability to participate varied depending on where the participant was located: 36% of respondents from developing countries felt they were not able to fully participate in the meeting, compared to 25% from developed countries.

Challenges tied to participants logging in from multiple time zones

While competing domestic and work commitments were the biggest barrier to participation (Table 3), participants' location played an important role too, especially with regards to the timing of live meetings. With attendees logging in from time zones ranging from +13 UTC (Tonga) to -10 UTC (Cook Islands), there were only two hours in the day where approximately 96% of participants could take part between 6:00am and midnight local time.

Unsurprisingly, the timing of live meetings was a problem for close to 60% of participants (Table 3). Of these, over 90% of the respondents from the Americas and Caribbean, close to 90% of those from the South-West Pacific and 77% of those from Asia indicated that the timing of meetings was a major or minor problem. In comparison, 48% and 26% of participants from Africa and Europe found the "time slots" to be a problem, given their central location. In future meetings, this issue could be addressed, in part, by switching the timetable of live events partway through the meeting to facilitate access by those in different geographic zones.

Table 3: Factors that hindered participation in the IPCC WGIII virtual meeting

	% Major problem	% Minor problem	% Not a problem
Competing domestic commitments	34	42	24
Competing work commitments	24	45	31
Timing of live meetings (for example, being held at anti-social hours)	29	30	41
Other people dominating discussions	14	31	55
Difficulties with remote access	4	24	72
• Developing country	9	33	59
• Developed country	0	17	83
Specifically:			
• Poor internet connectivity	15	46	39
• Developing country	25	39	37
• Developed country	0	55	45
• Poor audio quality	5	37	57
• Developing country	6	40	54
• Developed country	0	37	63
• Difficulty accessing MS Teams	15	24	61
• Developing country	15	25	60
• Developed country	14	21	66
• Difficulty connecting to live events (for example, plenaries)	6	17	78
• Developing country	4	29	67
• Developed country	3	3	95
• Difficulty accessing Zoom	1	11	89
• Developing country	0	9	91
• Developed country	0	10	90

	% Major problem	% Minor problem	% Not a problem
Limited access to computers in domestic environments	4	17	80
• Developing country	7	13	80
• Developed country	0	0	100
Other	21	21	58

Challenges tied to connectivity and technology issues

Difficulties with remote access and access to computers was a more significant problem for developing country attendees. 64% of respondents from developing countries suffered from poor internet connectivity, with a quarter of respondents stating it was a major problem, compared to 55% of developed country respondents only facing minor problems. The “other” category echoed some of these concerns, referring specifically to connection issues, the need to purchase fuel and data to participate, power supply issues, and an inability to access Zoom and Microsoft Teams from certain countries due to privacy or access restrictions (for example, Cuba, Sudan).

Use of a range of platforms for different purposes

The meeting used a combination of online platforms: Zoom for video conferencing (for all live discussions); Microsoft Teams as a way to enable interpersonal and social interactions between participants through the creation of a number of different channels for discussion, and to reduce high email traffic; Mailchimp to distribute a daily newsletter with updates; and the IPCC internal document management system to share meeting materials.

While over a third of respondents had problems accessing MS Teams, Zoom did not pose a problem for the majority of respondents, irrespective of their developed or developing country origin. The difficulty with MS Teams may have been due to limited familiarity with the platform, which if introduced in advance of the meeting, may have had more uptake. Compared to Zoom, MS Teams was also less essential to the success of the meeting, as it was mainly meant to enable interaction among participants. Nevertheless, the lack of interaction compared to a physical meeting was considered a drawback of this virtual event.

Ability to contribute to the discussions

54% of women, compared to 41% of men, mentioned other people dominating the discussions as a barrier to participation.



Read more: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2020/07/IPCC-WG-III-TSU-Report-Evaluating_the_IPCCs_first_Virtual_Lead_Author_Meeting.pdf



Two laptops continue running without power in Bhagmalpur, India. © One Laptop Per Child via Flickr

A closer look at different platforms

As the number of online meetings increased drastically in 2020, people became exposed to a range of different platforms and had to make decisions about which ones to use on a more regular basis. A clear preference for Zoom emerged in the CDKN survey, which has been reflected many times, including in the IPCC WGIII meeting referred to in Box 3.

Zoom was generally preferred because of the user-friendly interface, the apparent better quality of the call and video quality even in lower bandwidth environments, and the variety of functions to facilitate interaction (such as the “raise hand” and screen sharing function, the whiteboard and breakout rooms).

Which platforms do you prefer, and why?

In order of preference: Zoom, Skype, Google Meet. Mainly for the features they offer, ease of signup, familiarity, quality of calls.

Survey respondent from India

Zoom, most collaborative and allows for breakout rooms, translation, whiteboard, recording, captions, etc.

Survey respondent from the UK

We usually use Webex. But using Zoom for breakout discussions seems interesting. We also use Slack for internal communications and have stopped using Skype. The increasing use of WhatsApp in the work space should also be noted, something we try to avoid due to the limited ability to filter (especially outside working hours) and the difficulty to follow up on conversations (we promote email to have a better record of the conversations). We have managed to limit internal use, but it's difficult when it's for external use with our members or partners.

Survey respondent from Argentina

Zoom for the ability to share screens and Google Meet for unlimited time.

Survey respondent from Namibia

Microsoft Teams. This is safer in terms of security.

Survey respondent from Ghana

Platform	Number of mentions
Zoom	25
Skype	9
Microsoft Teams	8
Google Meet	4
Skype Business	2
GoToMeeting	2
Hangout	1
WhatsApp	1
Webex	1
Slack	1
Mailchimp	1
Blackboard	1
GoToWebinar	1

I like Google Meet and Zoom because I am used to them.

Survey respondent from Gambia

Depends on the purpose: Blackboard (most stable for lectures); Zoom (user-friendly for large groups that use video).

Survey respondent from Ecuador

I prefer Zoom, because,

- it is easy to use and has many options compared to others. For example, Google Meet does not have an option to record a call but Zoom does. Google Meet requires the meeting participants to have a Google account, but anyone can join a Zoom meeting.
- It is also my personal observation (not sure if there exists any comparative study on it), Skype calls consume more internet bandwidth than Zoom, resulting in lower audio and video quality.
- My experience over the last three months says that people are more familiar with Zoom.

Survey respondent from Bangladesh

Google Meet (excellent closed-captioning abilities) and Skype (excellent video quality).

Survey respondent from India

Zoom for meetings; GoToWebinar for webinars; and Mailchimp for sending emails to large groups.

Survey respondent from Argentina

Why the IPCC Working Group III chose Zoom

The IPCC WGIII technical support unit needed to meet a number of requirements in their selection of a platform for their meeting sessions (See Box 3). For example, the team required a sufficient number of licences to accommodate a group of 300 participants (in the plenaries) and up to 20 simultaneous meetings (breakout groups) for the different report chapters and annexes. A webinar licence was also needed for the outreach event, which would also be streamed to YouTube and Facebook.

Zoom was found to be the best solution for a number of reasons:⁶

- It caters for extensive licencing requirements, including for the webinar outreach event which was attended by more than 600 participants.
- There was functionality to enable the technical support unit to run and monitor the (parallel) meetings. By creating a number of generic Gmail accounts tied to the Zoom licences, the technical support unit organising the meeting could start and manage meetings interchangeably, and there was contingency in case of hosts' internet connectivity or other problems. By assigning additional co-hosts to sessions (for example, from the scientist team), the technical support staff could enter and leave meetings as needed.
- It has a simple user interface (in terms of audio, video and screen sharing settings), which could also be controlled centrally. The "raise hand" function was also deemed important given the large group, especially as attendees with raised hands are placed at the top of the participant list.
- It provides the ability to download the chat transcript (during or after the meeting), generate a participant list, and record meetings (on the cloud or a local computer), which assists with note-taking and reporting.
- It offers the choice to establish meeting passwords; enable or disable a waiting room, file sharing and annotation; and identify or rename participants, and remove them if needed.



CDKN and FCFA global online event to edit Wikipedia articles in November 2020. © CDKN and FCFA

Maximising user experiences with online interactions

When asked what might improve their experience of using online platforms, CDKN survey respondents reiterated their points about improved connectivity, enhanced access to online platforms (for example, through paid subscriptions), and training to be able to better use the technology. However, they also provided feedback on the specific aspects of the platforms they value the most, ways to reduce costs for users, and tips for online meeting etiquette (Table 4).

Table 4: Suggestions for improving online user experiences

What respondents would like to see in online platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mechanisms to register participants. • Functionality to record comments and questions. • Ability to arrange participants' video thumbnails when in large calls. • Breakout rooms, collaborative writing and drawing space like Zoom whiteboard, Google Docs or Miro boards. • Video compression (and hence reducing data and bandwidth use). • Improved closed captions (i.e. subtitles and transcription and / or translation of dialogue as it occurs, which can be opened when audio is problematic; these need to be typed by a meeting attendee or through third-party software). • Platforms with simple and intuitive user interfaces (particularly when accessed on mobile devices). • The option of a 'lite' version when internet connectivity is weak. • An easy to use and find chat function when video and audio streaming is not possible. • Local landline dial-in numbers in situations when electricity and internet access is not possible.
Reducing costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Platforms lowering the costs of subscriptions to better enable personal, as opposed to business, accounts. • Organisations providing users with data bundles. • Payment schemes that include low-cost payment options such as 'pay-as-you-go' (to avoid the high cost of annual subscriptions) to narrow the digital divide.
Online meeting etiquette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring adequate preparation for online meetings (especially for large ones). • Sharing the meeting agenda in advance and respecting the time allocated. • More discussion upfront about how the platform is being used, giving a chance for people to discuss how they are expecting it to work. • Providing guidelines and bounded time for questions, including only by chat. • More use of video by host and participants to improve interaction (but which requires higher bandwidth). • Clearly communicating what one expects of participants and creating an environment that enables this interaction and the expected results, which varies according to the type of meeting (for example, internal versus external meeting, webinar, virtual training course, one- or multi-day workshop). • Shorter online engagements and sessions.

Online communication technology does not adequately cater to the requirements and limitations of those who live and work in the developing world. Developers of online communication platforms could adapt and develop their technology to allow for more contribution of the global South into regional and international fora through a number of mechanisms.

Interviewee from South Africa

Reaching participants in remote areas – experiences from Kenya and Peru

As the number of online meetings and engagements has risen, valuable lessons have emerged regarding some steps that can be taken to improve the experience of users located in remote areas. Boxes 4 and 5 share two experiences from Kenya and Peru that shed light on some of the challenges faced as efforts were made to connect more marginalised participants in online events; and the possible approaches that can be used to overcome these challenges.

Box 4: Five lessons from online training of Kenya County Government officers⁷

In August 2020 a four-day workshop was held with approximately 30 government officers working in the ministries in charge of water, livestock, environment and fisheries from five Kenyan counties: Wajir, Garissa, Marsabit, Isiolo and Turkana Counties. The event shed light on a number of different lessons pertaining to online training:

1. The **provision of data bundles** by the organisers was critical to ensure uninterrupted internet connectivity. Even so, some participants still could not engage fully (for example, when reconvening in plenary after a breakout session), possibly due to intermittent power supply.
2. A **technical team**, in charge of supporting the facilitators and trainees with the transitions between videos and presentations, and plenaries and breakout sessions, also set up a WhatsApp group that kept facilitators, organisers and trainees in constant contact. The technical team would also check on trainees and facilitators (by phoning them) when they disappeared offline or when the facilitators' requests for specific input were met with a silent black screen (despite the encouragement to keep one's camera on). They also helped with audio issues and muting and unmuting participants to minimise background noise, and sent emails with the links to important documents as the course progressed.
3. **Maintaining long enough health breaks** in the course of the day and finishing on time is crucial to the success of a meeting. Breaks were not sufficient, given that the facilitators waited to start the morning sessions until a good proportion of participants had joined, which tended to be later than planned.
4. Thinking about **what incentivises people to participate** is important. In this workshop, the usual excitement associated with training outside of the participants' home county was missing. Perhaps this was due to the inability to secure daily subsistence allowances that generally come with in-person events, or simply that participants did not get a chance to physically meet old friends.
5. It is critical to provide some **training to increase familiarity with new technologies**. In this workshop, technology was likely a problem for some senior county staff used to spending time in the field, rather than in front of a computer. While the organisers tried to connect different participants so they could attend the course as a group from their staff quarters or offices – where this was safe enough – this was not always effective.

While ordinarily the training would have been in the format of three in-person workshops for the three different counties in Kenya, this training grouped all participants into one online group. Thanks to this online nature of the event, exchange, engagement and learning between different county participants was maximised as they realised they all face similar issues.



Read more: https://cdkn.org/2020/11/feature-virtual-training-faces-challenges-and-also-important-rewards/?loclang=en_gb



Garissa Cattle Market, Kenya. © USAID and Mariantonietta Peru via Flickr



Participatory process for developing Peru's gender and climate change action plan, 2015. © Peru's Ministry of Environment (MINAM)

Box 5: Enhancing inclusivity in Peru's climate change policy processes⁸

As stipulated under the Climate Change Framework Law, the Ministry of Environment of Peru has adopted a cross-cutting approach for climate change management, which takes into account different cultures, genders and generations. It has also identified 10 interest groups, with a high priority given to the representation and participation of vulnerable groups – particularly indigenous groups, women and youth – in the National Climate Change Commission, as well as at the sub-national level.

As the Covid-19 pandemic prevented face-to-face meetings in early 2020, the Ministry of Environment realised that to continue with its broad participatory approach it had to go beyond sending people a link to join a call, particularly to maintain genuine engagement and consultation processes. Its approach has been multifaceted:

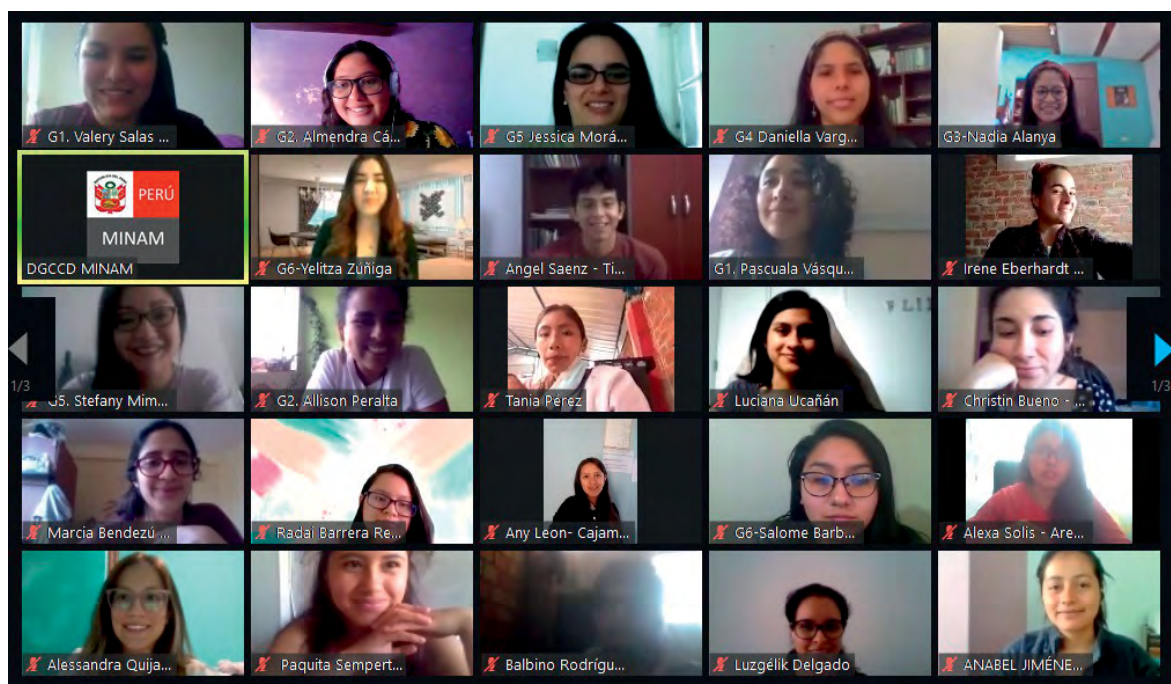
- Online consultations were held at the sub-national level, to see **which platforms would work best** for the numerous remote locations the ministry aimed to target. In some cases, it appeared that Zoom calls were hindered by poor audio and slow connections, compared to Microsoft Teams and Google Meet, which seemed to hold up better in certain rural situations. Where Zoom did work, it was preferred for the ability to run more dynamic meetings, such as by creating breakout rooms (which work less effectively in MS Teams). While the need for a Google account to be able to use Google Meet was a hindering factor for some users, those familiar with the Google interface valued it for its user-friendliness.

The platforms were also compared for how user-friendly they were on mobile phones. The availability of either a Spanish interface, or one which was self-explanatory enough (such as through the use of icons, instead of words) was also an important factor for villagers not used to spending much time on online platforms. These early tests for connection, accessibility and user-friendliness, were critical for choosing a platform that would work well for users. This varied from case to case, though it appeared that Zoom, combined with the provision of data bundles, provided the best option in areas with poor internet access.

- A couple of weeks before each event, a small **training** was organised to get everyone on the same page regarding the functionality of the videoconferencing platform, such as to learn how to raise one's hand to intervene. The training also increased familiarity with other tools aimed at enhancing the interactivity of the meetings, such as Mentimeter, which was particularly successful with youth groups.
- The organising team also assessed what **time of day and week** would be more convenient for people to take part in the meetings. For example, it became clear that afternoons were prioritised by women, who were busy helping children with their home schooling, house work and family duties earlier in the day. While youth preferred late afternoons, or preferably Saturdays, the ideal time to meet with Afro-Peruvian indigenous groups was early mornings during the week.

- **Data bundles** were bought for participants to ensure that they could connect from their mobile phones. In many cases this required prior inquiries about who owned the phone line (for example, in some cases it was the husband of women participants) to ensure the correct transfer of data. The participants were also monitored during the meetings to ensure they engaged actively (such as by commenting in the chat), as a precondition to receiving data bundles for future meetings. Negotiations between the government and external funders were also necessary to justify these new types of costs (for example, data and internet connections, Zoom licencing fees) which had not been included in the past.
- **Network connectivity issues** were also a limiting factor in some cases, such as in villages in the Andes or during the rainy season in the rainforest areas. To overcome this barrier, participants had to gather at the school or municipal offices, for an improved connection. Once again, this affected what time of day meetings could take place, to ensure safety and convenience.

These different steps and activities to enhance and increase participation by multiple, dispersed groups across the country took time and logistical effort; and leadership by the Ministry of Environment was crucial. While the process suffered from initial hiccups, with people not engaging in some of the first meetings due to the new unfamiliar format, participation gradually increased.



Online consultations to engage youth in Peru's climate change policy process, 2021. © Peru's Ministry of Environment (MINAM)

Conclusion

Irrespective of what happens with the Covid-19 pandemic, climate impacts and our growing carbon footprint increasingly require that we work remotely. The 2020 lockdowns provided an invaluable opportunity to test the limits of online engagements and working from home, often under difficult conditions. Numerous lessons have emerged that can guide us in future choices we may need to make.

Clear disparities have emerged with regard to the inclusivity of working through online platforms, with the digital divide separating those who have access to affordable internet, stable electricity and appropriate devices, from those who do not. While the different platforms have undergone significant changes to increase their user-friendliness, we question how many steps have been taken towards becoming more accessible for those located in the global South, and in remote areas. We hope that these considerations may help influence both those developing online platforms, to consider how inclusivity may be increased, and those designing online engagements to work with the tools available to make their events as equitable as possible.

Going forward, nonetheless, it will be important to determine how far online engagements can take us. Despite successes, online meetings do suffer from a set of inherent limitations. For some complex topics or abstract concepts, the benefits of an in-person meeting cannot be replicated on a computer screen, no matter how helpful online whiteboards and digital sticky notes can be. Having people move and interact around large flipchart papers covering a number of walls, for example, can never be the same online. In many cases, however, all that is needed may be an initial in-person meeting that unlocks the complexity of the topic and gets everyone on the same page, setting the stage for online interactions to continue thereafter. Where people already know each other, online meetings are largely successful.

The way forward, therefore, seems to be one in which a blend of online and in-person meetings enables a range of groups to participate, while acknowledging the importance of informal spaces which are not easily replicable online.



Kenyan and Ghanian participants share ideas at a CDKN project design workshop in Cape Town, 2019. © CDKN



Indonesian woman working from home. © ILO/F. Latief

Annex 1: Interviewees

Carrion, A. (2020). Project Coordinator, Leadership, Climate Change and Cities, Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO). Interview with CDKN, 24 November 2020.

Isola, S. (2020). CDKN Country Engagement Leader in Peru. Interview with CDKN, 25 November 2020.

Kibet, S. (2020). Dryland Resource Management and Livelihood Specialist, University of Nairobi. Interview with CDKN, 20 August 2020.

Majdoub, S. (2020). Project Manager, Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA). Interview with CDKN, 29 August 2020.

Endnotes

- 1 Respondents came from South Africa (4); Ghana (4); India (3); Ecuador, Peru, Uganda, Botswana, Namibia and Argentina (all 2); Bangladesh, Bhutan, The Gambia, Myanmar, Chile, UK and Ethiopia (all 1).
- 2 International Telecommunication Union. (2019). *Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2019*. Retrieved from: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>
- 3 This includes North, Central and South America.
- 4 Op cit. (2019).
- 5 IPCC. (2020). *The IPCC's first virtual Lead Author Meeting: An evaluation by the Technical Support Unit of Working Group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Retrieved from: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2020/07/IPCC-WG-III-TSU-Report-Evaluating_the_IPCCs_first_Virtual_Lead_Author_Meeting.pdf
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Scodanibbio, L. (2020). 'Virtual training faces challenges and also important rewards.' Blog: https://cdkn.org/2020/11/feature-virtual-training-faces-challenges-and-also-important-rewards/?loclang=en_gb

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The Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) supports decision-makers in developing countries in designing and delivering climate compatible development. We do this by combining knowledge sharing, research and advisory services in support of locally owned and managed policy processes. CDKN works in partnership with decision-makers in the public, private and non-governmental sectors nationally, regionally and globally.



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