

IFPRI Blogpost

Guidelines for IFPRI Virtual Training Activities¹

Travel restrictions and safety regulations due to COVID-19 compelled IFPRI researchers to conduct virtual Capacity Strengthening (CS) activities to maintain engagement with partners. As part of the shift from in-person training to virtual, IFPRI researchers are developing effective pedagogical approaches to build skills and connect with large groups of policy makers and analysts.

Some experiences of IFPRI researchers on conducting virtual training were captured in the blog series "[Conducting Virtual Training during COVID-19: Experience of IFPRI Researchers](#)". In addition, many of the researchers who contributed to these blogs presented their experiences to the wider IFPRI audience during the IFPRI's RISE 2021 session on "Can virtual approaches achieve capacity strengthening (CS) goals?". The key takeaways from the blogs and RISE 2021 discussion have been used as a basis for developing a set of virtual training guidelines. These guidelines provide best practices which can be utilized when organizing and delivering capacity strengthening activities depending on the nature and scale of the programs implemented. The guidelines are divided into four broad areas of focus: Content and design, Delivery, Logistics, and Post-training follow-up.

Content and Design

Modifying training content for virtual training can be challenging as effective engagement with partners may benefit from face-to-face interaction to help contextualize lessons and ensure comprehension. Still, various approaches captured in the following guidelines may benefit virtual audiences.

- Give adequate notice of the training ahead of time to participating organizations to allow for nominations. Reminder emails and telephone calls to officers responsible for coordination of the training may be needed.
- Contact nominated participants ahead of the training to ensure awareness of their nominations and to support their online participation in the training.
- Identify target audience, their skill levels, and needs to develop learning objectives, training structure, and the appropriate training resources. Training content should consider the technical capacity of the target audience.
- Share instructions to prepare for the online training in advance along with reading materials, exercises, and other resources to save time during the training and allow participants to cover content on their own.
- Organize training content in reusable lessons that cover specific topics with guided examples. Participants can visit these lessons again to reinforce learning and, if self-contained, can more easily be shared online.
- Explain mathematical derivations using animation sequentially as if they are derived in the classroom on a whiteboard.
- Data-based problem-solving techniques should use small datasets in MS Excel as practical examples. These should be available prior to the training session so that participants can use them during the lessons.

¹ This note was prepared by Suresh Babu, Nandita Srivastava, and Adam Kennedy in consultation with IFPRI researchers who have been conducting virtual training activities during COVID-19 Pandemic for which they are thankful. This note will be further revised as we collectively gain more insights and experience in delivering online training activities. Any comments should be sent to S.Babu@cgiar.org or N.Srivastava@cgiar.org.

- Pre-recorded training videos of similar online sessions can help prepare participants and save time during virtual sessions.

Training Delivery

Given limited time during online session, organizing the content and the method of delivery becomes key for the success of online training activity.

- While preparing the content for presentation, write all important statements in the slides so that participants are better able to understand key messages both during the session and during their review later.
- Rehearse the presentation to help improve delivery of content within the time allotted.
- Focus on only one topic with significant time available for practical examples.
- Ask questions periodically to measure understanding and help participants remain attentive during the session.
- Provide time for informal discussion to allow new ideas to emerge and to better understand any gaps in the training content.
- Speak slowly and clearly and record your session for future use.
- Short review, practice, and question breaks are useful. They provide participants with time to apply the skills they learned and to interact with the trainers to get technical clarification on the content delivered.
- Online chat sessions can be used effectively to clarify technical concepts and address questions. An additional trainer should be utilized to address participant questions in chat in real time without any disruptions to the event. Chat questions can also be documented and shared with the participants for review after the online session.

Logistics

Logistics for an online event is as important as the content and delivery of the training.

- Send participants the training agenda, slide decks, and other resources at least three days before the commencement of the training. Any updated training slides and resources should be shared with participants immediately after the online training session.
- Conduct a mock practice session with the moderators and speakers before the event on the platform which will be used for the training. This ensures that the platform is working smoothly, and all speakers and participants can access it.
- Support staff, moderators, and speakers should check in thirty minutes before the training to ensure the platform is running smoothly. Also invite participants to join 15 minutes early to fix any technical issues before the session begins. The presence of support staff during the training can also avoid unexpected disruptions due to technical problems.
- Send frequent reminder emails prior to each training module with the link to join the training. This ensures that participants are aware of the training and have blocked their schedule accordingly.
- Non-verbal communication is still as important as verbal communication, even when connecting virtually. Thus, instructors and participants should switch on the video to improve engagement levels.
- Adjust audio and video settings to limit the amount of disruption during the training. Participants should be encouraged to use the 'raise hand' feature to be unmuted.

- For trainings with multiple sessions, recordings from each session should be shared immediately after the session so they can be reviewed and any questions can be addressed in subsequent session as needed.

Post event follow up

Following up with participants after the training delivery is important to support participants' learning and usage of the content in their work.

- Record all sessions and share them with the participants within twenty-four hours after the conclusion of the event. The email can also contain notes from the event, chat discussions, additional training materials, and the PowerPoint presentations. Provide contact information so that additional questions can be addressed.
- Consider developing research outputs with participants (papers, briefs, etc) as a practical way to strengthen relationships and to ensure that new skills are being practiced.
- Respond to questions raised during participants' follow-up research activities quickly and provide guidance during their research process.
- Training materials should be posted on an appropriate online platform (IFPRI capacity strengthening webpage, training partner's website) for quick reference and to reach a larger audience who may use the contents of the training in their work.

These guidelines are an initial set of suggestions synthesized from IFPRI researchers' experiences delivering online training activities during the last two years. They will be further improved as researchers gain more experience, new approaches are developed, and more staff contribute their success stories.