

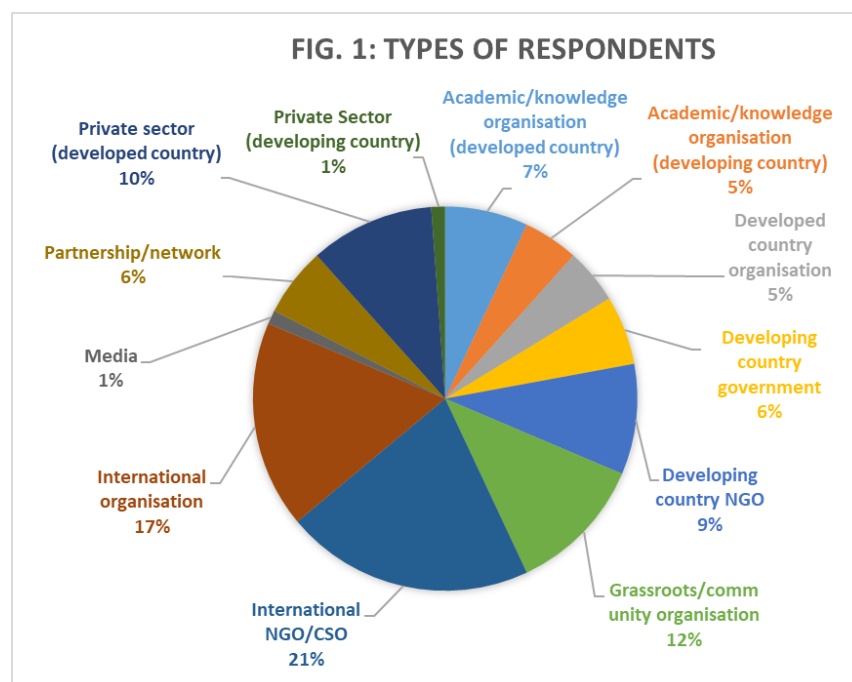
Recommendations for inclusive virtual meetings

The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the largest global disruptions of modern times. Amid lockdowns, shifting priorities and cancelled events, COVID-19 presents significant challenges in how we work together. However, it also presents an opportunity to design more inclusive dialogues, more engaging formats, and a way to do things differently.

To better understand the opportunities for virtual engagement and how to avoid “digital exclusion,” especially for grassroots and community-based organisation (CBOs), GRP circulated a SurveyMonkey. A total of 88 set of responses were collected from a wide range of stakeholders (see Fig 1).

The survey had three objectives:

1. Get an overview of existing software platforms that are being actively used and that can offer robust, user-friendly platforms with full range of features;
2. Understand the top challenges that partners, especially those in the south, have in accessing and engaging in virtual meetings/workshops/webinars; and
3. Collect feedback on best practices and suggestions for improvement in making virtual meetings and workshops meaningful, engaging and productive.



This document presents the survey’s findings:

Section I provides a set of recommendations that respond to the challenges indicated in the survey.

Section II provides an overview of best practices on designing virtual dialogues.

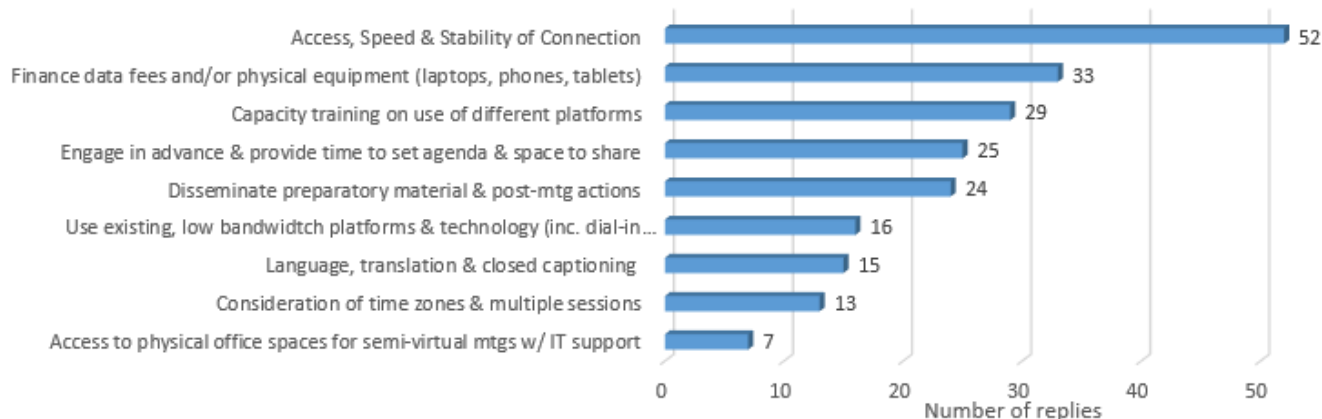
A full analysis of the survey can be found [here](#).

All partners are welcome to use these findings and share them widely. We plan to use these to help develop a comprehensive strategy to advance actions on resilience through virtual and physical events post COVID-19 in a new normal, where we travel less but engage more effectively. We would welcome any feedback and ideas on this to info@globalresiliencepartnership.org.

I. Key Findings and Recommendations

On average, over 200 individual replies were submitted for each of the open-ended questions that focused on challenges, suggestions for improvement and feedback on best practice. Figure 2 highlights the top nine categories of challenges identified by respondents in accessing virtual dialogues, especially for stakeholders in the Global South.

FIG.2: TOP 9 WAYS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO VIRTUAL DIALOGUES



1. ACCESS: Both access to stable internet connection and to physical equipment (e.g., laptops, smartphones) ranked as top two challenges impeding engagement from partners in the South.

- **Recommendation 1:** Explore ways to finance data fees, dongles, and long-term data subscription models to grassroots federations and CBOs to ensure long-term engagement and not just one-off meeting participation.
- **Recommendation 2:** Budget for physical equipment as part of overall engagement strategy and/or explore partnership with businesses who can donate used/refurbished smartphones and laptops.
- **Recommendation 3:** Develop semi-virtual options in partnership with organisations based in targeted countries that can provide office space and access to internet for that engagement. This option has the added benefit of creating a community feel and networking options¹.

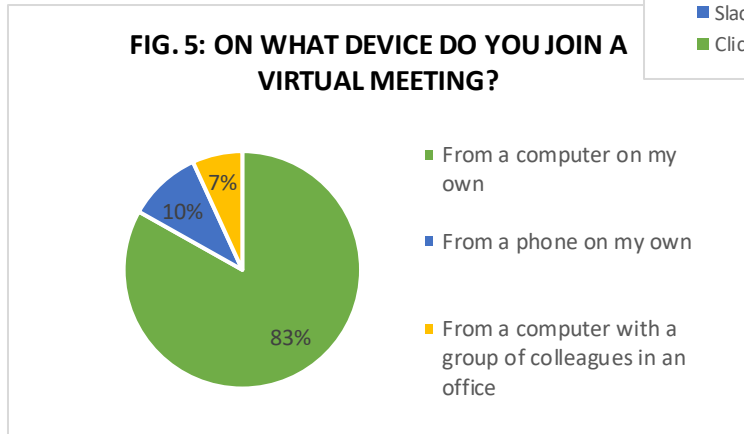
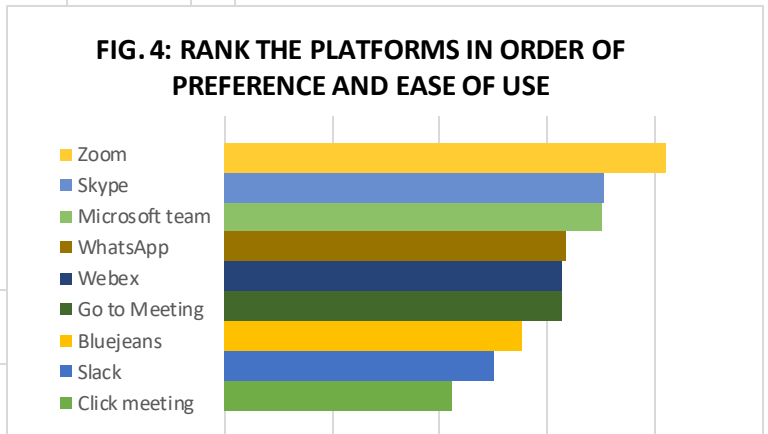
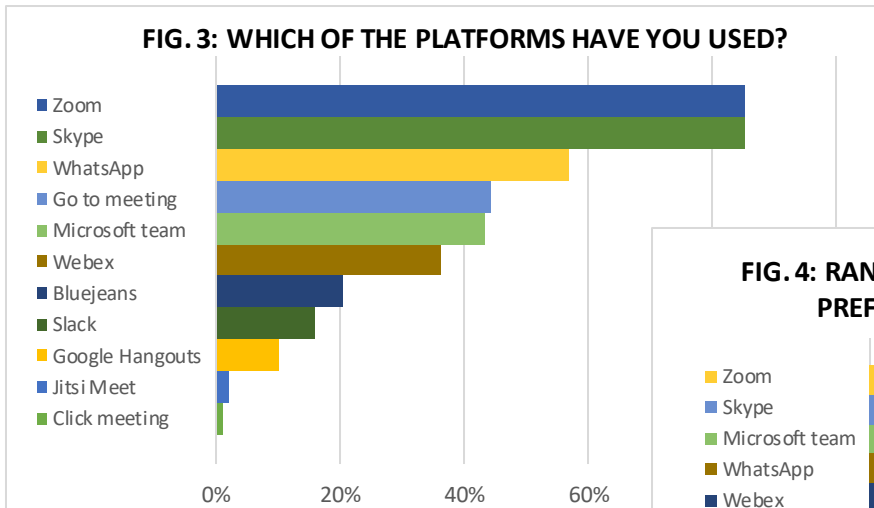
2. PLATFORM: No single platform is perfect – not yet! – but continuous use of the same platform was highlighted as key to build familiarity with its features and avoid frustration of installing new software and links each time.

Overall, **Zoom**, **Skype**, **GoToMeeting**, and **Microsoft Team** are leading conferencing platforms in terms of familiarity and ease of use among the surveyed participants, with being rated the lowest in terms of overall stability and quality of video in qualitative replies (See Figs. 3 & 4). **WhatsApp** also rated highly as a mode of communication especially among CSO, CBOs, and grassroots. Recognizing that WhatsApp may not be a suitable platform for virtual webinars/dialogues, it can still be considered as a ‘bridge’ offering opportunity for continued engagement between stakeholders and in-between larger virtual engagements.

- **Recommendation 1:** Choose a platform that offers features to run an engaging virtual dialogue (to include video option, chat function, screen share at a minimum) but is stable enough for lower bandwidth areas and offers local dial-in numbers for those who are unable to join via desktop option.

¹ This option will only be viable once COVID-19 pandemic is over.

- Recommendation 2:** Build in time to do capacity training on the use of the platform and all of its features. This can be done in multiple ways:
 - 1) Offer a trial run with key meeting participants/speakers in advance and walk them through its features;
 - 2) Send detailed instructions on how to join the platform both in the calendar invite and embedded in the agenda document, sent in advance;
 - 3) Make use of existing 'how-to' resources that are available on all major platform providers and send this as part of the info-pack (examples of Zoom guidance for new users [here](#), and GoToMeeting [here](#)); and/or
 - 4) Allocate a support person during the meeting to troubleshoot problems (via one-on-one chat function or email or WhatsApp) on how to use features they have trouble accessing.
- Recommendation 3:** Given substantial uptake of Zoom as the preferred platform for virtual meetings during COVID-19 lockdown, it is sensible to continue using this platform as people are becoming increasingly familiar with it. This, however, may not be an option for all targeted groups or types of meetings, and the key here, once again, is a continuous use of the same platform – whatever that platform may be.



3. LANGUAGE & CONTEXT: *Currently most virtual meetings are hosted in English, in Europe-centric time zones, and follow a Northern seasonal and holiday schedule. This, compounded by poor connectivity can severely restrict engagement for non-English native speakers, those who are hearing-impaired and vulnerable communities whose schedule may not follow the tradition '9-to-5' daily rhythm.*

- **Recommendation 1:** Offer multiple virtual meeting options based on region, language and time zones. Make them staggered throughout multiple days to ensure viable options for various participants.
- **Recommendation 2:** Understand context specificity of the targeted audience that may impact their availability or access to internet. For instance, seasonal rains may cut electricity and internet access in the afternoons in some countries – accounting for such an element can enable the organizers choose a more audience-appropriate time slot.
- **Recommendation 3:** Send all preparatory meeting material and any relevant readings well in advance and, where appropriate, make PPTs available prior to the meeting as well, to enable all participants follow along regardless of language, connectivity and other issues.
- **Recommendation 4:** Enable Closed Captioning on the platform of choice for ease of comprehension. Some platforms already have built-in CC (e.g. Google Hangout) and others allow for third party plug-ins to be enabled. Get to know your admin settings and what is available on your platform of choice.

4. CO-OWNERSHIP OF PRIORITIES: *the power dynamic within current virtual engagement still lacks equity and inclusion, with the agenda being set by formal organisations often based in the Global North.*

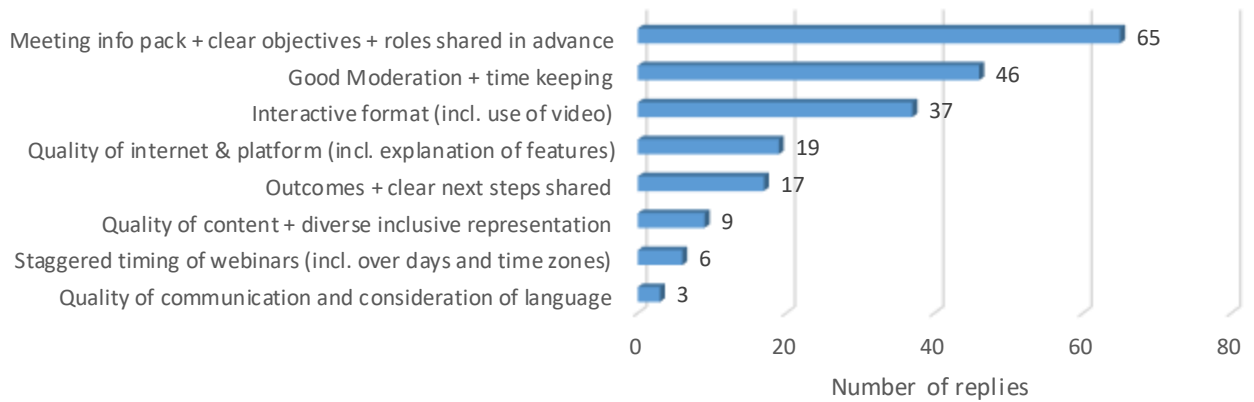
- **Recommendation 1:** Engaging and empowering grassroots, CSOs, and CBOs well in advance of the planned meeting to allow for co-creation of agenda and enable them to set priority discussion topics.
- **Recommendation 2:** Ensure that the format of the virtual engagement is conducive to open discussion and that the time set for it is sufficient to ensure all voices can be heard. A skilful moderator who is well versed in the various ways people engage has been repeatedly highlighted as key.
- **Recommendation 3:** Develop partnerships with local communities and grassroots to empower them to own the agenda and to initiate their own meetings at times most convenient to them. Capacity training and access to internet and software subscriptions is essential here.

II. Best Practices

Figure 6 provides an overview of what respondents saw as top elements for a successful, productive and meaningful virtual engagements. While none were revolutionary in nature, they underscore a couple of essential elements that may be under-used given the current overflow of virtual calls and meetings. Incorporating these into an “Essential Check-List” can ensure that organisations, especially community based organisations and grassroots networks are able to lead, join and actively participate in virtual meetings.

- 1. PREPARATION & FOLLOW-UP:** Quality of and timely dissemination of preparatory material and post-meeting follow up, as self-explanatory as this is, came out time and time again as key to ensure clarity, purpose, structure and next steps for all participants. Allocating enough lead-up time and staff for preparatory work and follow-up is and will continue to be key to ensuring success.
- 2. INCLUSIVE AGENDA:** Engaging key stakeholders in advance and making space to co-create agenda elements is both a challenge (See Section I) and a crucial element for a successful virtual engagement. Not enough lead up time is given to engagement with diverse stakeholders, especially from grassroots and communities, leading to a superficial, almost token-like, representation at the meeting with focus of the discussion often failing to incorporate the priorities of the most vulnerable.

FIG. 6: BEST PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

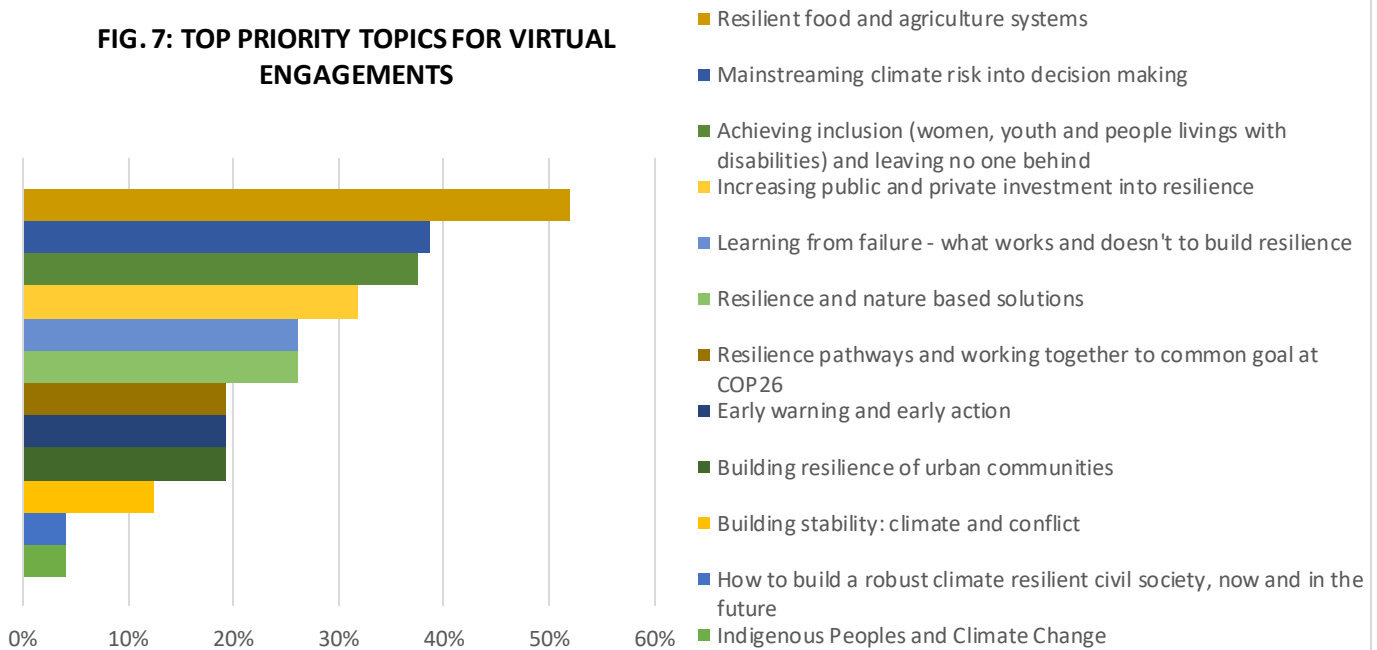


3. INTERACTIVE FORMAT: Investing time and resources into learning how to design interactive formats suitable for virtual engagements will pay huge dividends, especially in the long run, as we shift to the “new, post COVID-19 normal” where we make more frequent use of virtual platforms as opposed to physical meetings. There are numerous resources that already exist to help organisation design more creative ways of engaging with their audience and creating a sense of proximity despite the distance. An example is from the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre with the launch of the [Virtually Amazing](#) Manifesto and its web site that contains resources and information on how to engage directly with the Centre on design and facilitation of interactive meetings.

III. Priority Topics

The survey also asked on topics that people and their organisations wish to engage in virtually. The results of this are given in **Figure 7**.

FIG. 7: TOP PRIORITY TOPICS FOR VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENTS



If you have any further feedback on how to ensure virtually inclusive engagements, get in touch with GRP at info@globalresiliencepartnership.org.