



TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING REMOTE LEARNING

Lessons Drawn from SCALE's Online
Capacity Strengthening Efforts
June 2021





About SCALE

SCALE (Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture, Livelihoods, and Environment) is an initiative funded by USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP) and implemented by Mercy Corps in collaboration with Save the Children. SCALE aims to enhance the impact, sustainability and scalability of FFP-funded agriculture, natural resource management, and off-farm livelihood activities in emergency and development contexts.

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Contact information

c/o Save the Children
899 North Capitol St NE, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20002
www.fsnnetwork.org/SCALE

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Background

As COVID-related restrictions on travel and gatherings have limited opportunities for in-person capacity strengthening, SCALE has pivoted to remote learning models. Over the past year, SCALE has gained useful experience from developing and facilitating online training courses and events, including a [Make Me a Change Agent \(MMCA\)](#) training conducted in late 2020 and a remote permagarden e-learning course developed in early 2021. This document summarizes some of the key insights SCALE has drawn from these experiences, which may be useful to others planning their own online capacity strengthening events.

Training Pace and Timing

Since online training requires long stretches of screen time and more self-guided learning, participants can become easily lost in the material or fatigued. A few changes facilitators can make to enhance participants' ability to absorb the content and successfully complete training include:

- ❖ Consider a lighter agenda and shorter training. Joining a remote course is typically more tiring for participants and facilitators than in-person ones. Strategies for overcoming this challenge include sending short training videos ahead of time for participants to review or planning follow-up online lessons to cover additional topics.
- ❖ Budget time for regular breaks. Even short, two-minute breaks for people to stand up, stretch, and step outside can increase energy levels and attention spans.
- ❖ Build flexibility into training modules and extend the amount of time between sessions. Some participants in SCALE trainings noted they were unable to keep up with the pace of the training due to limited internet access and competing priorities. Allowing for more flexible deadlines and/or spreading training series over a longer period may help increase participation.

Tips for Boosting Participation

- Offer incentives, like add-on certificates or a private lesson with the trainers, for completing key lessons
- Extend deadlines when necessary to accommodate participants' schedules and heavy content
- Set up challenges and competitions with participants

Encouraging and Maintaining Participant Engagement

Remote facilitators have less opportunity to talk one-on-one with participants to answer content questions. They also have a harder time "reading the room" to sense when topics may need more clarity. A few ways to address these challenges include:

- ❖ Use breakout rooms or offer "office hours" for one-on-one or small group coaching outside of the training.
- ❖ For hybrid training approaches (participants together in a training room with remote facilitators), have several dedicated co-facilitators in the training room to help manage the activities, organize ice breakers to keep energy levels high, and provide daily feedback to the remote facilitators on the pulse of the training and informal feedback from participants.



Dedicating a full day of preparation (such as the day before the training) with the in-person and remote co-facilitators may also help improve flow and logistics.

- ❖ Start with a round of introductions, ice breakers, and/or check-ins to build familiarity and connection within the group.
- ❖ Emphasize group work, field experiences, and hands-on activities wherever possible. Practical activities were the most useful, according to participant feedback from SCALE's training.
- ❖ Intentional engagement by the trainers is important for encouraging participation. For example, responding to participants' questions and concerns, providing positive reinforcement (e.g., thanking participants for sharing something or calling them out for contributions or engagement), and validating and encouraging participants as they go through the lessons are all important strategies for keeping participants engaged.
- ❖ While on camera, facilitators should stand and use body language to keep participants engaged.
- ❖ Don't wait until the end of a training to gather feedback. More frequent evaluations allow the training team to read the room in real-time and adjust their approach to meet participant needs. Quick ways to gather participant feedback throughout a session include: using polling functions (like in Zoom), platforms such as Mentimeter, reaction buttons (thumbs up/down, clapping, etc.), and the chat box.
- ❖ When engaging non-English speaking participants, reduce the amount of text on the slides and slow the presenter's pace, particularly if the audio is presented in a different language than the text on the slides and subtitles. This allows participants time to read and absorb both the subtitles and the slide text, which is critical to retaining their engagement.

Logistical Considerations

The choice of learning platform will vary based on cost, needs, and size of the group. However, there are a few important logistical matters to consider regardless of what platform you choose:

- ❖ Ensure adequate interpretation and sound to improve two-way communication between participants and facilitators.
- ❖ Use collaborative tools such as Google Docs, Miro, and Jamboard for online group exercises so that facilitators can view group work and provide real-time feedback to the participants via comments during these lessons.
- ❖ Develop PowerPoint slides to provide visual references for learners who prefer reading content over hearing it and share these ahead of the session.
- ❖ Self-guided learning using pre-recorded lessons can be a great hedge against power outages and allows participants to revisit content post-training as refreshers.



Photo: Save the Children

- ❖ Pre-record role-play scenarios and participatory activity videos to demonstrate key skills being taught during virtual sessions.

Mix up activities for different learner types and to keep sessions fresh

- *Reflection questions ("respond to this question in the discussion box below")*
- *Photo/video activities ("take a photo of a productive garden and upload")*
- *Knowledge checks ("complete this short quiz")*

Remote Learning Lessons for In-Person Training

Although many of the steps highlighted here were adopted out of necessity, they also point to ways in which virtual/online learning can improve traditional in-person training. These should be considered as good practice going forward.

- ❖ Online training means that each session is recorded and available to participants afterwards, allowing for easier refresher learning, remote support, and cascading of training to others.
- ❖ Providing training content online opens up access to more participants, which can be an opportunity to foster cross-sectoral learning. For example, SCALE was able to expand training normally restricted to agriculture staff (due to size and resource constraints) to include participants working in health, nutrition, and SBC because it was online.
- ❖ Having a plan for learning both before and after online training is critical, since it can be harder for participants to follow along in a virtual setting. However, preparing participants for the sessions (such as with pre-reading and introductory activities) and making sure there is a plan for following up with them afterwards significantly strengthens in-person training as well.



Facilitator's Checklist

Training platform and approach (e.g., all-online, hybrid, etc.) allows easy access for participation, and was chosen in consideration of COVID restrictions on group gatherings, limited bandwidth, participants' time burden, and availability.

Participants with limited bandwidth have alternative ways to participate in the course, including via chat function or self-guided asynchronous learning materials.

All training materials are available to participants prior to the session.

The sound on both ends (facilitator and participant) is tested in advance of the first session and adjustments made (e.g., adding microphones, additional computer terminals, etc.).

Training is accessible to participants of varying levels of English and non-English speakers. Slides are translated, captioning support is available, jargon is removed, and all items have been reviewed for accuracy and clarity.

There is a clear work plan with internal deadlines for completing pre-recorded materials to allow time for review and editing or re-recording.

Training dry run is completed at least one week in advance, with facilitators practicing things like screen sharing, poll taking, and breakout rooms.

Dry run participants (including at least one non-native English speaker) have observed and given feedback on the training pace, content, timing, and techniques to engage participants.

Facilitators and/or training aides are trained on using and troubleshooting the chosen platform and add-ons (e.g., Zoom, Google Docs, Miro, Jamboard, etc.) before the dry run.

There is a plan for following up with participants after the event, such as through remote support, refresher learning using the recorded training sessions, check-ins, and ongoing learning plans.