

NHRI·EU

**DIGITAL
IMPLEMENTATION
OF CAPACITY
DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAMMES**

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT
ONLINE IMPLEMENTATION OF
NHRI.EU.2 ACTIVITIES IN THE
WAKE OF COVID-19



THIS PROJECT IS FUNDED
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NHRI.EU.2 ACTIVITIES IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19**

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CONTENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	6
METHODOLOGY OF THE ANALYSIS	8
CONTEXT/LITERATURE	9
ANALYSIS	13
DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING	13
SUCSESSES OF DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING	14
CHALLENGES WITH DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING	16
MITIGATING CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING	17
NETWORKING AND TEAM-BUILDING	18
SUCSESSES OF DIGITAL NETWORKING AND TEAM-BUILDING	19
CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL NETWORKING AND TEAM-BUILDING	20
PREFERRED DIGITAL PLATFORMS	22
CHALLENGES AND FUTURE	24
GREATEST CHALLENGES OF MOVING FROM IN-PERSON TO DIGITAL	24
MITIGATION OF CHALLENGES	25
FUTURE NEEDS FOR ONLINE FACILITATION	26
SUGGESTIONS FROM DIHR	27
FULL ONLINE IMPLEMENTATION?	28
CONSIDERATIONS	30
SECURITY CONCERNS	30
CONCLUSION	33

ABBREVIATIONS

APF	Asia-Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions
DIHR	Danish Institute for Human Rights
ENNHRI	European Network of National Human Rights Institutions
EU	European Union
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
GANHRI	Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions
NANHRI	Network of African National Human Rights Institutions
NHRI	National Human Rights Institution
RINDHCA	Red de Instituciones Nacionales para la Promoción y Protección de los Derechos Humanos del Continente Americano
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
WHRDs	Women Human Rights Defenders
Q&A	Questions and Answers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project management principles call for collecting best practices during the implementation. The COVID-19 global pandemic has been a major disturbance not contemplated in existing risk strategies and has proved a challenge for project implementation during 2020. In this assessment, we are collecting best practices from the implementation of the NHRI.EU phase 2 project during the global pandemic in 2020, with an intention to adjust our implementation and risk strategies going forward. We do not cover an assessment on whether goals were achieved, because this is included in ongoing project evaluation reports, however we do want to record the measures we took in the attempt to achieve them, in spite of everything.

To assess the impact of digitalisation of project activities, we interviewed representatives from the project management teams of all partners of the project, which include GANHRI, ENNHRI, NANHRI, APF and RINDHCA. By gathering the insights of the facilitators of project activities, we are able to identify the challenges and positive outcomes of digital implementation of project activities, and accordingly draw out some best practices and lessons learned. As the NHRI.EU project is a global project, the insights from this assessment are relevant for future project management considerations at the international level, as they include global and regional perspectives on digitalisation. With regional inequalities with regards to internet accessibility, assessing the impact of the new hyper-digitalised global context from a regional and global level is particularly important.

An important reflection of the report is in which manner we can strengthen the digital security of partners and beneficiaries. This is a concern that we will integrate in the way forward of the implementation.

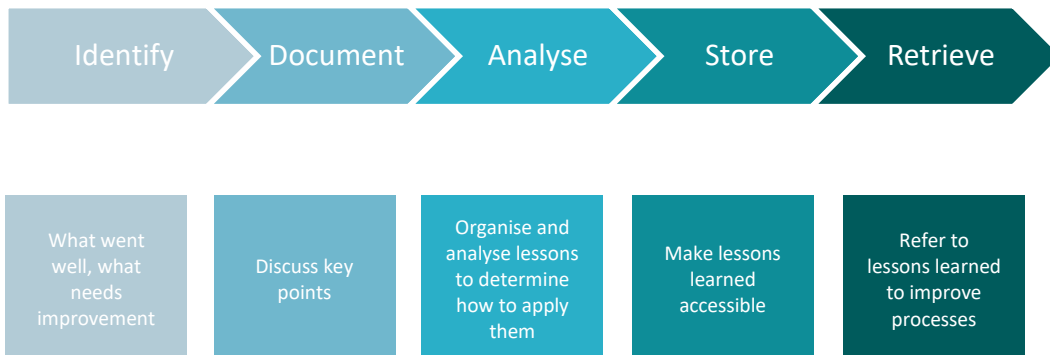
INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic that engulfed the world in 2020 and resulting travel bans, lockdowns and restrictions on physical gatherings, people and workplaces around the world have had to adapt accordingly. This has led to an increasing digitalisation of work life, in which activities, meetings and workshops have been implemented digitally. The NHRI.EU project is one of such projects faced with the challenge of adapting to digital implementation of its activities.

The NHRI.EU project is a global-level project, in which the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR), with funding from the European Union (EU) supports the Global Alliance for National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) and the regional networks, the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI), the Asia-Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (APF), the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions (NANHRI) and the Americas Network, the Red de Instituciones Nacionales para la Promoción y Protección de los Derechos Humanos del Continente Americano (RINDHCA), in their function as strengthening National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) in their regions, and globally. The ultimate goal of the project is to strengthen the capacity of the networks and NHRIs to promote and protect human rights. The project is extensive, and thus its activities involve high-level coordination across multiple actors. The digital implementation of the project is therefore important to analyse, as insights from the adjustment to digital tools, platforms and activities can be used to gather best practices for adapting to online project implementation.

To determine the best practices of project management requires that lessons learnt are gathered. The COVID-19 pandemic became a major disturbance, which was not considered in risk management strategies, and as a result adjusting risk management and implementation methodologies have become a priority. In this assessment, we are not assessing whether the project goals have been achieved, as this is the purpose of an evaluation. Rather, the assessment at hand focuses on the methods that we used in the NHRI.EU project to be able to continue the implementation in the context of the pandemic. The result of gathering these experiences will enable lessons learned for future similar situations.



Therefore, this analysis has the purpose of unearthing the elements of digital implementation of the project that have been successful, as well as the elements that can be improved upon and how the latter can be done in an alternative manner. The analysis is based on interviews with partners of the project, through which their positive and negative experiences of the digitalisation of the project has been collated and assessed.

Positive elements arising from the digitalisation of the NHRI.EU project include the increase in outreach, accessibility and inclusiveness of online workshops, as more people are able to participate online. Online workshops also provide participants with more options and can be less intimidating than in-person events. Moreover, people have increasingly adapted to communicating and meeting online, as online platforms were used as an option prior to COVID-19.

On the other hand, the elements that are more difficult to replicate in digital spaces are more informal settings and discussions, networking opportunities and the strengthening of relationships among partners and participants. Online workshops may also face difficulties in participation and engagement. As a result, the organisation and implementation of digital workshops must include consideration of how to mitigate concerns relating to networking, infrastructure, participation, competences, and relationship-building.

The relationship with the donor was not negatively impacted by the new context, as the EU understood the gravity of the situation caused by COVID-19, as they were affected themselves. However, it is expected that the EU, as well as other donors, will in the near future assess the adaptability and flexibility with which the project moved to adapt and continue delivering the project in the new context. The adjustment involved a budget revision in June 2019 and constant reformulation of activities and budgets to continue implementing a project that deliver benefits for NHRIs and the networks. Additionally, these institutions have

faced increased pressure to protect human rights under emergency conditions and are also under political pressure themselves. The latter had a direct impact on the project.

Due to the uncertainty of the future, with potential climate crises, global pandemics, and/or situations of war and unrest, the insights provided by this analysis will be helpful to ascertain best practices of digitalisation and ensure that future activities and projects are readily adaptable to digital implementation in the event that such should be necessary.

METHODOLOGY OF THE ANALYSIS

The methodology of the analysis is interviews with partners of the NHRI.EU phase 2 project. Focal points from each of the four regional networks of NHRIs and GANHRI received a list of questions prior to the interview and were subsequently interviewed online on these questions.

The interviews covered questions regarding the facilitation of digital learning and training activities, networking and team-building online, the challenges to digital implementation of project activities, current and future mitigation measures, as well as preferred platforms and functionalities.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXT/LITERATURE

Assessing the digitalisation of activities is conducted in the wake of the heavy increase in digital adaptability demanded by the global COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. As a result, there has been a global spike during 2020 in working from home, online communications and digital activities. This has had the effect of forcing the NHRI.EU project implementation to adapt to predominant online implementation of activities. The project is heavily focused on operationalising and increasing the capacity of the networks to fulfil their role as supporting and strengthening NHRIs in their region, with a particular emphasis on the areas of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite the constraints imposed by COVID-19, the project has managed to adapt its implementation to the new demands of digital implementation, and the project has been able to deliver important outcomes towards the general objective of enhancing the role of NHRIs and the networks in promoting and protecting human rights.

Many of the activities of the project involve working with secretariats of the networks and staff of the NHRIs, who have been working online, and mostly working remotely. It is therefore necessary to include in our assessment the impact that lockdowns and working from home has had on the ability of staff and consultants to work remotely.

Working remotely and shifting to digital forms of communication and implementing work has had both positive and negative effects. Literature on the subject is divided on certain effects, however one of the key consequences that most literature agrees on is the increase in frequency and scope of work

communications. A Harvard study¹ on remote working during the pandemic has found an increase in the number of hours worked per day, meetings attended, meeting attendees, emails sent, as well as emails sent outside of working hours. The study also found meetings to be shorter but assumes this is to accommodate more meetings and more calendars.

Benefits

Some of the more positive outcomes reported by studies on remote working on a societal level is the reduction in commuting, climate footprint, traffic and congestion². On an individual level, a British guide to working from home has provided insights into positive benefits of remote and digital working, including more flexibility, productivity, convenience and work-life balance for staff, as well as improved employee retention for employers³. The relaxation of traditional professional rules and the consequent humanisation of colleagues, partners, and other stakeholders, has moreover been hailed an added benefit of the changing workplace culture due to increased online working⁴.

Disadvantages

With the potential and real benefits of the digitalisation of work activities as a result of COVID-19 in mind, there are however parallel negative consequences. Mainly, online working is not for everyone, as the challenges faced by individuals include isolation, distractions, higher costs, lower morale and strains on mental health⁵. As the adagio goes “some work from home, while others are at home trying to work”. Individuals have reported increases in work pressure, working longer hours, feeling the need to be more available, have more check-ins and have higher expectations placed on them⁶. Particularly the strain of increased screen

¹ Collaborating During Coronavirus: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nature of Work. Harvard Business School Organizational Behaviour Unit Working Paper No. 21-006, 20 July 2020. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3654470

² Working from home: Too much of a good thing. VOX EU CEPR, 13 February 2021. Available at: <https://voxeu.org/article/working-home-too-much-good-thing>

³ A Practical Guide to Working from Home: Covid-19 and Beyond. Labour Relations Agency, 08 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.lra.org.uk/resources/practical-guide-working-home-covid-19-and-beyond>

⁴ COVID-19 could have a lasting positive impact on workspace culture. The Conversation, 10 August 2020. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-could-have-a-lasting-positive-impact-on-workplace-culture-143297>

⁵ Practical Guide, Labour Relations Agency

⁶ Remote work since Covid-19 is exacerbating harassment. Project Include, March 2021. Available at: https://projectinclude.org/assets/pdf/Project_Include_Harassment_Report_0321_R8.pdf

time on mental health is a concern for both individuals and on a public health level⁷.

Disproportionate effects

The adverse effects are disproportionate across population demographics, as there are concerns about remote working exacerbating income inequality⁸ and increasing race and gender-based harassment⁹. A study from the Work Autonomy, Flexibility and Work-Life Balance Project¹⁰, based on surveys from early 2020, reveals that although most (2/3) of respondents felt blurred boundaries between work and home, the negative consequences of working from home was disproportionately higher among those with children, and in particular mothers. 80% of women with children reported more time spent on childcare and child education, and 60% reported more time spent on housework like cleaning, laundry and cooking when working from home during the pandemic. Moreover, over half of the mothers surveyed agreed that their job prevents time for family life and their family life prevents time for their job.

Not only do the negative effects manifest disproportionately across demographics, they also differ geographically. This is particular in relation to the concern about accessibility. UN human rights experts have warned¹¹ about closing digital spaces, including the issue of “access to universal, open, affordable, secure, and stable Internet”. In a talk about the human rights impacts of the pandemic, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic¹² raises concern over access to internet, which is an area still facing inequality. Access to internet and connectivity issues is concentrated geographically in low-income regions and areas. Compounded with the lack of research on health effects of screen time in low and middle-income countries¹³, the move to digital working could have severe consequences for inequality.

⁷ Digital screen time during the COVID-19 pandemic: a public health concern. F1000 Research, 08 February 2021. Available at: <https://f1000research.com/articles/10-81/v1>

⁸ Report, VOX EU CEPR

⁹ Harassment report, Project Include

¹⁰ Working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown: Changing preferences and the future of work. WAF Project, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://wafproject.org/covidwfh/>

¹¹ UN experts warn of closing digital space amid COVID-19 pandemic. OHCHR News, 30 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26139>

¹² HUMAN RIGHTS TALK: Covid-19 and Human Rights – Lessons learned from the pandemic.

Keynote speech by Dunja Mijatović, 10 December 2020. Available at:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-human-rights-and-how-to-move-forward>

¹³ Literature review, F1000 Research

As a result, the insights gathered from this assessment can be used to identify the potential positive, negative, and disproportionate consequences that can arise from the digital implementation of project activities. It is particularly important to consider whether the implementation of digital activities is exaggerating existing inequalities, be they gendered, racial, economic, geographical. As the NHRI.EU project is global, and its implementation stretches across gender, racial, ethnic, economic and geographical boundaries, potential unequal consequences for certain subjectivities is of serious concern.

That being said, even with all of the challenges regarding working from home and the digital transformation of workplaces, 75% of all respondents in the WAF Project study in the United Kingdom expressed the desire to work flexibly from home¹⁴. Similarly, an American study from December 2020 reveals that over half of surveyed respondents would want to continue to work from home after the pandemic¹⁵. With the above literature in mind, it is important to take into consideration the differently experienced effects of the digitalisation of work that has been occurring for the past year. Both the positive elements and the challenges of working remotely and online feed in to the success of digital activities.

¹⁴ Report, WAF project

¹⁵ How the Coronavirus Outbreak Has – and Hasn't – Changed the Way Americans Work. Pew Research Center, 9 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/12/09/how-the-coronavirus-outbreak-has-and-hasnt-changed-the-way-americans-work/>

CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS

DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING

A key part of the activities under the NHRI.EU project is the learning and training aspect, which ultimately aims at capacity building of NHRIs and NHRI regional networks. The project also ensures that the secretariats serving those networks have the operational capacity to deliver in their function/mandates. Learning and training under the NHRI.EU phase 2 project has included topics such as human rights principles, NHRI functions, HRDs, including women human rights defenders (WHRDs), SDGs, the NHRI accreditation process, amongst others. As such learning and training activities have been implemented almost fully digitally during 2020, they have taken the form of webinars, online training sessions, online workshops, blended online and in-person meetings and workshops, as well as courses and knowledge exchanges on online learning platforms such as Podio and Fuse.

Prior to the forced digital implementation of activities due to COVID-19, some of the planned learning and training activities were planned and conducted online, which means that trainers and facilitators have experience in this area to an extent. Nevertheless, the requirement of full digital implementation of activities has increased demands for facilitators of learning and training to adapt and transform certain activities planned for in-person events and courses to an online format.

Examples of learning and training activities that were implemented digitally under the NHRI.EU phase 2 in 2020 include:

- All partners have finalised strategies and workplans to reflect measures to mitigate the challenges presented by the COVID-19 context
- GANHRI held thematic webinars on the work of NHRIs during COVID-19 on for example IDPs, older persons, and persons with disabilities, which attracted a lot of participants

- GANHRI used the Fuse platform on COVID-19 for knowledge sharing, such as documents prepared by the UN, NHRIs and other partners
- RINDHCA developed and held over 20 webinars in 2020 on COVID-19 in relation to topics including repatriation of citizens, right to family life, fake news, health systems, migration, women, prison inmates, business and human rights, corruption, and attacks against NHRIs and HRDs, amongst others
- RINDHCA set up a thematic group dedicated to SDGs, which carried out 4 workshops sessions on the implementation evaluation and monitoring of the SDGs in the regions
- NANHRI has been able to collect information and insights of how NHRIs work and developed tools: a quick reference handbook and a regional action plan
- NANHRI completed their Regional Action Plan on HRDs and conducted a capacity building activity on the topic of HRDs, which was a blended meeting with an online component
- APF held webinars, Q&As, online mentoring and coaching sessions, and converted existing programmes and services to the online format
- APF finalised their Regional Action Plan on HRDs, following which the network has begun the capacity development programme on HRDs and the action plan that is being delivered in a purely online format
- ENNHRI continued desk research on existing mechanisms for HRDs protection, as well as online advocacy efforts to improve regional mechanisms to support HRDs. All data collected contributed to their Regional Action Plan on HRDs
- A new ENNHRI Hub and relevant online tools have been developed on Podio and ENNHRI website, which has helped lay foundations for members' engagement in a virtual environment, which was of added value during COVID-19 restrictions

SUCSESSES OF DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING



Within the learning and training part of the analysis, the interviews uncovered some general positive elements that were similar across the board for partners' experiences as facilitators. One of these positive elements was the **wider reach** allowed for by the online format. Respondents noted that face-to-face training often only included a few representatives from the NHRIs and networks, often at management level, due to barriers such as travel costs and schedules. An online learning and training format, however, allows for more participants from each organisation to participate, as all they require is access to a smartphone and internet, for which accessibility is higher than traveling, thus expanding the reach of the training. NANHRI also noted a side-benefit of savings in cost and time of participants to travel to meetings, conferences and seminars.

The facilitators of NHRI.EU activities also expressed general satisfaction with the **functionalities** of the digital platforms that were used to host online activities. The platforms used for online learning and training activities differed both across the networks and the nature of the activity. Overall, the activities were successfully conducted using the various functionalities online meeting platforms have to offer, such as chat functions, break out rooms, and other interactive elements. That being said, some did note that the platforms were not perfect and not strong enough yet to encompass all the functionalities needed for full digital implementation of activities, mostly with regards to networking, which the team-building section of the analysis focuses on in more detail.

In terms of **engagement**, the facilitators were divided on whether the implementation of learning and training activities online fostered more or less engagement than in-person. ENNHRI found more interaction and engagement in their online format, with participants very engaged in Q&As, chat box, evaluation, etc. GANHRI also found that there was no observable digital divide in that all regions engaged, interacted and participated. On the other hand, NANHRI found that engagement online could be difficult, as unstable internet connections meant that some could not offer comments and questions in real-time.

It is important to note that there are regional variances in the NHRIs' comfort and proficiency in the digital universe. Some members, like APF, have always relied heavily on digital learning, as the bigger courses have prior to COVID-19 been in the blended learning format. As a result, their members have a high degree of comfort with online learning and training. A learning needs survey conducted in March 2020 also revealed that almost all members had access to the internet and a smartphone, which informed their approach to service delivery. On the other hand, for NANHRI, for example, their members were not as comfortable and accepting of the digital implementation of activities initially, and there were issues of internet connectivity and unfamiliarity with online functionalities.

CHALLENGES WITH DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING

Although the respondents espoused an overall enthusiasm with the online format for learning and training activities, certain challenges were prevalent for the facilitators across the board.



Almost all partners noted the key difficulty of adapting to online implementation being the **attention span** of participants. Communicating learning and training activities through an online format comes with the challenge of keeping participants' attention through a screen, which can be more difficult than face to face. Participants' attention spans are noticeably shorter, the facilitators identified, as it was hard to capture people's attention over a longer period of time. As a result, the learning and training activities implemented were shorter and more frequent, which caused the additional challenge of increasing the workload for facilitators, who have more meetings, more preparation, more staff involved and more time-consuming internal communications.

Secondly, **interactivity** was flagged as a challenge for the digital implementation of project activities. For the partners, successful learning and training modalities involve interactive elements, which has been challenging to implement digitally. Some partners have had positive outcomes regarding high participant interaction and participation, whereas others have experienced difficulties in achieving the desired level of interactivity. Despite the outcome, however, partners have overall identified the digital structure as harder to implement a participatory and interactive process in. Moreover, the partners noted that the people most comfortable with using digital technology tends to speak the most, with others not as engaged.

Accessibility was also raised by most partners as a challenge of implementing and facilitating online activities. Although online activities can have a wider reach, the

digital transformation of the learning and training aspects of the project has also created some barriers to accessibility. Technological knowledge, access and comfort is not uniform across NHRIs. Internet connectivity, for example, is one barrier to access, particularly in the Africa region, where internet is expensive and often unstable, and staff face difficulties working from home or participating fully in online meetings. Additionally, some NHRIs were not used to working full scale online and were less comfortable and more sceptical of digital implementation of activities, impeding the networks' work at least initially. Another barrier to accessibility is the language barrier, with the difficulty of achieving live translation online. The translation of webinars after the fact creates barriers to interaction for those speaking other languages. For GANHRI, they only managed to hold two events with simultaneous interpretation, and for a global network, their biggest challenge is language and time zone differences¹⁶. Even on the Fuse platform, the interaction in other languages than English is not ideal. Fuse was highlighted as difficult to navigate, a barrier for members to use, and caused disengaged members because of its layout.

MITIGATING CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL LEARNING AND TRAINING

Steps have already been taken by the partners to mitigate the challenges of digital learning and training. This section will discuss the findings from the assessment with regards to what has been done to mitigate these challenges, as well as suggestions that were offered to what more can and should be done to mitigate the challenges.



Most of the partners mentioned that they had implemented, or at least considered implementing, **shorter and more frequent meetings**, workshops,

¹⁶ Another important element to note regarding time zones is the imposition of curfews in certain countries during the pandemic, which, in addition to unstable internet at home, further limit meeting outside of office hours.

webinars, and other digital learning and training activities. Those partners who have already made the change from long and concentrated activities to shorter activities over a longer timespan have noted that this has helped mitigate the problem of participants having short attention spans. Partners identified different limits for online activities and meetings, ranging from maximum 1 hour to maximum 2 hours, depending on the activity. Shorter sessions on specific issues of urgent interest to NHRIs that pursue practical and concrete results should be prioritised to retain attention to the activity and topic. For example, activities that before were scheduled to be completed in a workshop or seminar over a couple of full days have now been implemented in shorter meetings over several months.

To mitigate the challenge of interactivity, partners noted the need for incorporating more **interaction and knowledge exchange** elements in the digital learning and training activities. GANHRI, for instance, noted that they used Q&A during their webinars, as well as online groups for exchange of information after the webinars. They have also used online platforms like Fuse for knowledge sharing across NHRIs. Some noted, however, that technology may limit the possibility of achieving the same level of interactivity as in person, particularly for events with many participants.

Identified as a challenge, partners raised the need to focus on **accessibility** of all participants. To mitigate the issues in this regard, more time and resources need to be invested in accessibility features, so most events can be accessed in multiple languages. This can either be done by creating events by language or finding tools that can facilitate simultaneous interpretation. Another challenge of accessibility is participation in terms of internet connection, which has been mitigated by partners both blending virtual and physical meetings, as well as paying for stable internet access for NHRIs to participate in meetings.

NETWORKING AND TEAM-BUILDING

Another element that has been affected by the digital implementation of NHRI.EU project activities is team-building and networking. To foster the sense of togetherness and networking that occurs because of in person activities, partners have taken steps to implement functionalities that mirrors such interaction online. While in-person meetings may include formal networking and team-working activities by design, the more informal and spontaneous networking opportunities offered by physical meetings do not occur on a digital platform. Such opportunities

include informal and spontaneous conversations and knowledge exchanges in breaks in between activities and at lunch or dinner. As a result, some partners have attempted to artificially imitate such informal networking by constructing spaces and time in the design of activities for this to happen. Particularly in a digital setting, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to take concrete steps to foster team-building and networking opportunities for the participants.

Some of the networking and team-building activities that partners have included in the digital implementation of the NHRI.EU project in 2020 include:

- Using the chat function in online platforms for participants to ask questions, exchange information and contact each other
- Knowledge management (communities) on Fuse or Podio, for example
- Plan gaps of no presentation (often at the beginning) for small talk
- Set time for exchange of views/comments/Q&As
- Use break-out room functions for groups to discuss and work together

SUCSESSES OF DIGITAL NETWORKING AND TEAM-BUILDING



A successful element of the digital implementation of networking and team-building activities of the NHRI.EU project has been the **continuity** of contact with participants and partners. The increased frequency of meetings has meant that there are more opportunities for the networks to be in touch with NHRIs than previously, where the contact was concentrated in fewer meetings or activities during the year. This is also evident in the knowledge management communities on platforms like Fuse or Podio, where the frequency of information sharing has led to regular contact between and across NHRIs and networks. Similarly, the partners identified the experience of more continuity, contact and team-building within the teams at their own networks, due to meeting more and being constantly linked and connected online. For activities there is additionally an identified continuity, as when an activity is spread out over a longer period of time,

the attention to a particular topic is sustained over a longer period of time. APF has for example found that participants network beyond the life of the course, because they have found professionals with similar interests they can talk to.

More an added benefit than a success, the **humanisation** of people during (net)working online was a second element that the assessment revealed as a positive bonus of digitalisation of activities. Working remotely, with all the disturbances of home life, has removed a lot of assumed graces and formal barriers to socialisation, and as a result the networking element has been easier in some ways by working online due to the humanising factor of people's private lives making appearances in online work settings. Whether the humanising factor of online meetings can substitute or mitigate the absence of spontaneous, informal in-person social interaction is hitherto unknown.

The networking and team-building activities have been particularly successful in **smaller groups**. The implementation of digital networking functionalities has been the most fruitful in smaller groups, where welcome moderation, small talk, exchange of views, Q&A and group work or breakout rooms have been relatively easy to implement. Smaller groups can foster a sense of team-work and allow for informal networking prior to, in the breaks of, or even during, an activity or meeting, in a way that larger groups of participants simply cannot. For ENNHRI, for example, in the first 15 minutes of each meeting for smaller groups (less than 40 people), there is nothing planned but welcoming, small talk and networking. Many of the partners identified trust as important for networking, which smaller groups achieve by more personal and repeated interaction with the same people.

CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL NETWORKING AND TEAM-BUILDING



Probably the most important challenge to networking and team-building on a digital platform was unanimously identified as the absence of **the human factor**.

There is an intangible value in meeting and communicating in-person, and the human connection formed during a face to face interaction is impossible to replicate in an online setting. Both the networking opportunities derived from informal gatherings over coffee, dinner, and other casual settings, as well as the formal one-on-one meetings and smaller group work, has enormous professional and social networking value.

Another challenge that is posed for digital implementation of networking and team-building is the need for **trust**. Trusting relations is what fosters successful networking and team-building, and trust is hard to achieve through a screen. An example of the difficulty of fostering trust in an online setting between people who do not know each other is that partners found that in breakout rooms, it often ends up being people who already know each other who do the talking and the rest are merely 'audience'. The absence of trust is also magnified by cultural differences, as in some cultures it is necessary to physically meet to foster and sustain a trusting relation, and as such it is more difficult for participants of such cultures to adapt to having to trust someone they have never met.

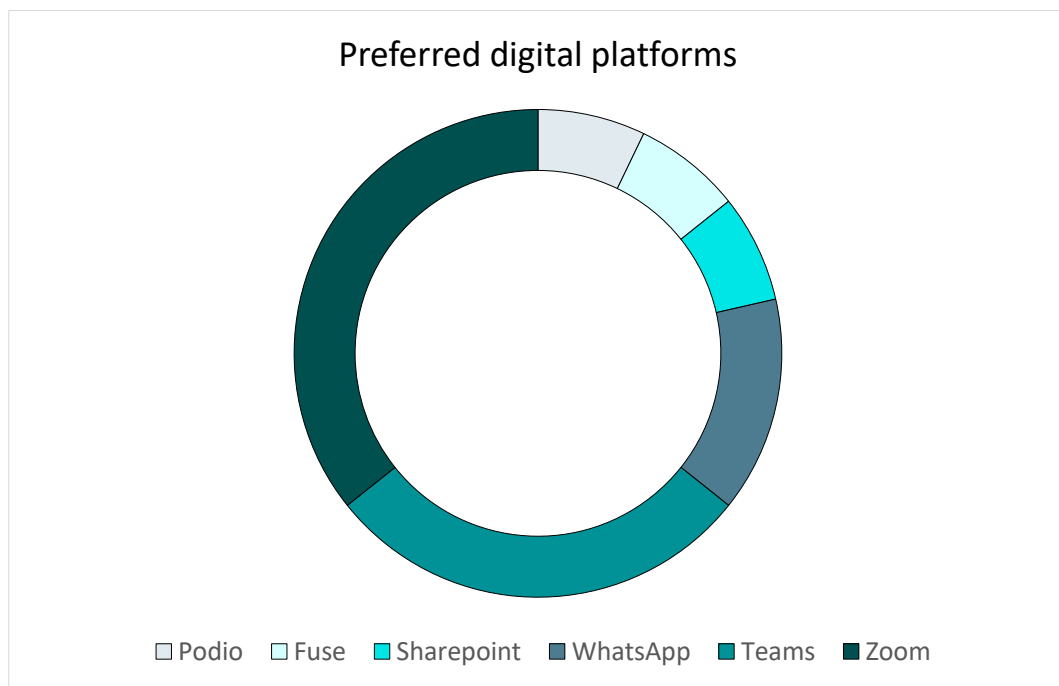
Further hindering online networking is the issue of **interruptions and lack of concentration** of participants that are prevalent during an online activity. Looking at a screen makes people disinterested, and thus it is hard to keep traction and momentum. Participants concentration spans are lower online than in-person, which means they often do not afford as much undivided attention to one thing. The dispersed focus of participants is a challenge to networking and team-building in a digital context, as participants are not fully engaged in the conversations, as they would be in a physical meeting. NANHRI has noted the example that people often join meetings without a camera and then work on multiple things while the meeting is occurring. Moreover, working from home comes with added interruptions, which is a further barrier to participants' concentration and thus hindrance to fostering relationships with other participants.

The partners found the mitigation of the above challenges to be extremely difficult, as networking and team-building online was the most challenging part of having to implement the NHRI.EU project digitally. The human factor, for instance, is not a something that can be replaced or easily mitigated by a digital solution. The functionalities and solutions that attempt to resolve this problem, such as breakout rooms, hosting social events online, among others, are missing the fundamental intangible difference that being in the physical presence of someone makes to a social and professional relation. Similarly, the absence of trust is not readily mitigated, as some people will always find it difficult or impossible to initiate and have a trusting relationship with their colleagues, partners or other professionals through a digital platform. The final challenge is likely to be easier to

mitigate, and the partners have also focused on mitigating solutions for this challenge, as it is not only prevalent for networking and team-building but has been an issue across all online activities. These solutions have been discussed in the previous section and will be discussed further in the following section.

PREFERRED DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Which digital platform to use for a given activity is important, as factors like functionalities, comfort, availability and security¹⁷ of platforms can also play an important role in ensuring the success, or pose challenges to, the digital implementation of an activity. The partners were asked to name their preferred digital platform for implementing online activities under the NHRI.EU project and explain why.



Zoom was clearly the overall favourite platform to use for digital implementation of project activities, with all four regional networks and GANHRI listing this platform as one of their preferred. As a videoconferencing tool, the partners used

¹⁷ There are certain security concerns involved with video conferencing platforms, which will be addressed in the section on security considerations later in this paper.

Zoom to hold workshops, webinars, meetings, and other regional and global online activities. ENNHRI noted that their use of Zoom was conditional on the requirement of names of participants visible and a staff member to continuously monitor the participant list. APF mentioned that they used Zoom with a password required to control the participant list, and that it was the platform that integrates best and has remote translation options. NANHRI noted initial reluctance from their members to Zoom, but that after many months of use during 2020, their members found Zoom the easiest platform to use.

GANHRI was the only partner that mentioned **SharePoint** and **Fuse** as some of their preferred digital platforms, emphasising that SharePoint's functionalities worked well. GANHRI has also particularly used Fuse during the pandemic to create global communities for NHRIs to share information, best practices, and keep communication channels open. Although not videoconferencing tools, these platforms can and have supported the digital implementation of the NHRI.EU project, for example through knowledge management, information sharing and creating and maintaining online communities.

ENNHRI mentioned **Podio** as the only partner, noting their avid use of the platform for internal organisation, schematic ordering of information and knowledge management and promoting cooperation between members.

Microsoft **Teams** was another favourite platform among the partners, with 4 out of the 5 partners interviewed expressing their preference for this platform. APF did not like to use Teams, as they found the bandwidth did not adjust as fast as other video conferencing platforms. On the other hand, among those who were enthusiastic about Teams, ENNHRI noted that they used the platform for informal and internal meetings, as they found it was suited well for this type of communication. Although NANHRI identified Teams as difficult to use for their members, the network also noted that they were interested in scaling up their use of Teams and its functionalities, particularly because it has more opportunities for interaction. As a result, the network is planning to invest time and finances in Teams training courses and licenses for their members to get familiar and comfortable with using Teams.

WhatsApp was mentioned by APF and RINDHCA as a preferred platform, with the explanation that their members like to use it for one-on-one calls and messages, as there is a level of comfortability with WhatsApp for NHRIs in those regions.

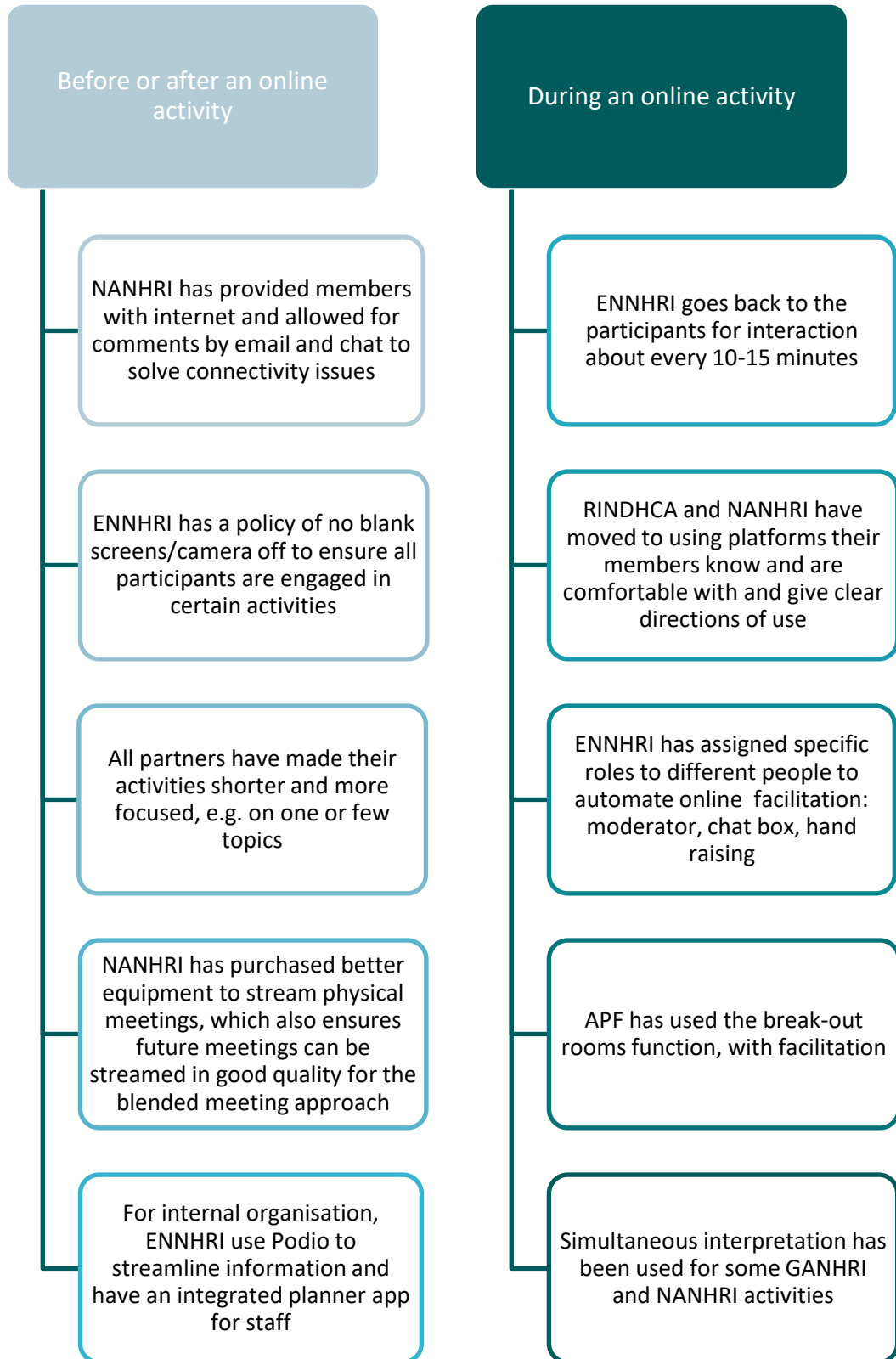
CHALLENGES AND FUTURE

GREATEST CHALLENGES OF MOVING FROM IN-PERSON TO DIGITAL

The partners interviewed were asked to identify the greatest challenges of moving from conducting activities in-person to implementing them digitally.



MITIGATION OF CHALLENGES



FUTURE NEEDS FOR ONLINE FACILITATION

All partners recognised the need and desire for more activities that are digitally implemented in the future. As a result, the assessment asked the partners what they have already implemented, plan to implement, or need to be able to implement activities successfully online.

Platforms

The partners noted that to continue with more successful digital implementation of activities, they need to heavily invest in online platforms to do more meaningful engagement and learning opportunities online. This of course includes the licenses, and for some regions also internet connectivity for members, but more importantly, also training in the functionalities of the platforms for members to optimally utilise the functions. The NHRIs need to develop the capacity to use the platforms.

General online work culture

Most of the partners identified a need for, and the beginning of, a cultural and organisational change in the way NHRIs and networks work. APF started already in early 2020 to reconceptualise how to do activities online and manage expectations of members. Similarly, NANHRI led their members through the digital change and attendant challenges of not trusting online platforms, lacking training, etc. As a result, investments should be made into maintaining the momentum of organisational change that COVID-19 has initiated regarding how we see our work being done.

Internal organisation

To ensure future digital implementation of activities runs smoothly, investments need to be made in internal organisation. The current overload of work and constant streams of information mean that staff require more streamlined internal organisational processes. Scheduled work on knowledge management, for example, has been looked at by ENNHRI, where they are already in the process of using Podio to streamline information and collect it in a more schematic way. In doing so, the information dissemination and engagement of members can be audited, resulting in both easier implementation of tasks for staff, as well as strengthened member engagement. ENNHRI also have begun to use an integrated planner app that helps with organisation of workflows, where tasks are attributed to staff and staff can see their upcoming tasks.

More sustained follow-up

Another solution that was flagged to combat the loss of traction and attention to online activities is a focus on more sustained follow-up. This could be in the form of questionnaires and feedback after workshops and other online learning and training events or spreading out meetings of a working group over a longer period of time, constantly coming back to the subject or topic at hand. This can also ensure that the participants can use what they have learned as they go along, as the attention to it is fresh in their minds. The sustained momentum of a digital learning and training activity is helpful to keep the interest in the topic and ensure participants are taking relevant knowledge and tools away to use in their work.

SUGGESTIONS FROM DIHR

As a result of the assessment and contextual literature, DIHR has collated some suggestions of what can be done before, during, and after an online event or activity to ensure successful digital implementation.

Before the activity

- To strengthen the capacity for digital security in projects that focus on human rights, we will develop and share guidelines on digital security with partners and participants, with a specific component on HRDs
- Project management team must ensure adequate competences of speakers, trainers, facilitators and moderators, including their ability reach participants through the screen
- Preparation is key, including running checks and practices internally to ensure accessibility and smooth running of the practicalities
- For public and open events, social media can be used for networking and promoting before and after the event, including reaching out to participants on LinkedIn, sharing screenshots of the event on social media, keeping participant groups alive following the event for continued dialogue

During the activity

- Beyond a 'visible' speaker and moderator, employ an 'invisible' facilitator, who can assist with practicalities such as un/muting participants, noting questions or solving sound/image issues
- Break-out rooms for smaller groups of brainstorming, networking, and working together, perhaps with prompts or questions to stimulate conversation
- For smaller activities, could incorporate a brief team-building or get-to-know each other exercise at the beginning of the workshop to increase networking and a feel of togetherness
- Encourage or improvise activities conducive to team building and connection
- Ensure that recording the event is safe for all participants

After the activity

- Issue concise feedback forms to participants *and* facilitators to gain valuable insights into the successes and challenges of the activity for future activities
- Create online spaces, where participants can continue the discussion, knowledge share and network, perhaps in a chat on Teams, in communities on Fuse, or groups, among others
- Promote safe platforms and inform of the risks of using unsecure platforms such as WhatsApp

FULL ONLINE IMPLEMENTATION?

With all the information collected in mind, we asked the partners whether they would consider full online implementation of activities in the future, even long after the exit of the global pandemic.

For all, the answer was not fully, but partially. All agreed that more activities should, could and will be implemented digitally in the future, and should be considered at the planning stage of projects and activities. Online implementation

was prioritised in as much as possible in the hybrid model, but it was also acknowledged that digital activities could not replace all face-to-face activities. The partners noted that the accumulation of online experiences should not be seen as an alternative but a complementary tool to foster cooperation and work, and that a hybrid mode of online and physical activities would be preferable. NANHRI did note that almost full online implementation of activities was possible in the future, with physical meetings a last resort option only for when it is critically needed. But to do this successfully, a large and sustained financial and technical support in developing members' capacity in the online platforms was needed.

The main reason noted for not willing to fully transition to online work is that most participants and facilitators have expressed that they would prefer to meet in person, of the two options, so some activities should be kept in person to maintain connections and relations. In addition, the positive climate impact and financial savings from less travel, was another reason highlighted for reducing travel and considering what is necessary to fly to meet for.

The certain activities that should be kept as physical meetings, and the reasons for keeping these certain activities as physical meetings, include:

- Activities with a high level of exchange and engagement like workshops, break-out groups and networking opportunities, e.g. GANHRI's international conference, are much more difficult to conduct online, and an in-person conference will most likely yield a higher level of engagement and success
- Global activity and leadership meetings should be in-person, as for ENNHRI, their General Assembly was difficult to make interactive and engaging online on governance matters. In the case of RINDHCA, the general elections have opted for elections by acclamation without issuing voting, which is a deficient electoral procedure
- For global workshops and conferences, it is difficult to replicate the journey you have when you meet over 2-3 days in 1-2-hour meetings through a screen
- Major events should be in person and more focused clustered meetings online
- The NHRIs that need more support than others require in person meetings, and the travel resources should be targeted to those
- Networking in person is important for the creation and maintenance of relationships, with the coffee and tea breaks, informal chats, dinners, and working together physically

CHAPTER 3

CONSIDERATIONS

SECURITY CONCERNS

An important element of shifting to digital implementation of activities is the consideration of security. With more staff working from home and relying on their own internet connections, as well as the increase in hosting online events, networks and NHRI face a heightened security threat. A cybersecurity company has reported¹⁸ a 70% increase in cyberattacks in the first month of lockdown alone.

The NHRI.EU project has an objective to ultimately support the work of human rights defenders. As the issue of digital security has been pressing for long time, with the increase of digital communication and digital interaction, a better understanding of digital risks becomes crucial. Although many of the actors that work under the NHRI.EU project live and work in countries and circumstances that appear to be safe and secure, these actors are obligated to observe alertness and due diligence in their digital communications in order to protect human rights defenders, activists and others they communicate with, who may find themselves in more exposed and insecure digital situations to the action of state actors, or even cyber criminals.

From this point of view, a requirement for future project implementation will be to invest in basic awareness rules and initiate a change of digital habits and behaviours. Basic principles of increased digital safety include securing the content of computers and phones, awareness of phishing and protection of personal data, protecting communications while on Wi-Fi, and awareness of safe communications and safe platforms. Evidence of the need for such protections is

¹⁸ Adapting online security to the ways we work, remotely and post-coronavirus. Security, 20 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.securitymagazine.com/articles/92868-adapting-online-security-to-the-ways-we-work-remotely-and-post-coronavirus>

reflected in the fact that attempts to profile, spy and boycott the work of human rights defenders are well reported¹⁹. Citizen Lab²⁰ reported more than 100 cases of targeting HRDs by NSO, an Israel-based security firm, using the vulnerability of WhatsApp.

The cost of continuing to implement human rights projects mainly digitally involves a larger investment in capacity development, awareness-raising and safer software. It also involves that there is an awareness that internet access might be expensive in certain countries, where connecting to internet for organising, communicating and obtaining information may have Facebook²¹ and similar platforms as the most accessible option, which in turn requires a higher security awareness.

In the assessment, the partners were asked whether they and their members were aware of security concerns related to online working. The assessment reveals that all of the partners were themselves aware of security issues but had not had discussions on online security with their members.

ENNHRI noted that stakeholders raised security concerns initially with the use of Zoom, so ENNHRI used WebEx instead, depending on the requirements of stakeholders. The network itself was comfortable with using Zoom after they updated their platform but has placed security measures of passwords and full names on the participant list. ENNHRI also ensures to communicate the meeting rules in the beginning of the meeting, especially for bigger meetings e.g. annual conference.

NANHRI noted that their members did have concerns of security, but those concerns have disappeared, and they trust the platforms and facilitators now. More countries in Africa also allow Zoom now, which they did not before. NANHRI's own security precautions include making it clear if a meeting is livestreamed on Facebook or YouTube, so participants are informed. NANHRI also ask participants to register names and institutions they work for, and remove participants who have no name, particularly in meetings that contain sensitive information. NANHRI always tries to monitor and manage activity on online meetings, check the participant list, the chat box, etc.

APF noted that the Asia-Pacific region has had security issues, with attacks on NHRIs' social media pages, hacks of NHRIs' emails, etc. APF is working with encryption, trying to educate and equip their members to focus on digital security.

¹⁹ [Amnesty International Among Targets of NSO-powered Campaign | Amnesty International](#)

²⁰ <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/citizen-lab-identified-over-100-cases-of-abusive-targeting-of-human-rights-defenders-journalists-using-nso-group-software/>

²¹ See the experiences of Myanmar and Philippines in this regard.

APF noted that the majority of their members, however, are unprepared if they encountered a security breach. A lot of them are using Gmail, for example, because it is easier to access remotely than their institution email. APF noted that they wanted to see Phase 3 address security concerns.

While implementing human rights projects, DIHR and similar organizations should deliver due diligence to ensure that we do not put vulnerable actors at a higher risk than they are already facing. Ensuring that we take steps towards ensuring safe online communications is one of the obligations that we should accept.

The project will accept this obligation and contribute to compile best practices on digital security and attempt to disseminate and influence other actors, partners to discharge our due diligence. Other examples of existing digital security resources for human rights actors, including HRDs, include a webpage by Frontline Defenders²² on digital security resources, which references their 2007 handbook²³ on digital security and privacy for Human Rights Defenders.

²² <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/digital-security-resources>

²³ <https://securityinabox.org/en/>

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly posed a new set of challenges for project management. The ensuing lockdowns, curfews and travel bans have caused a large proportion of the global workforce to alter their routines, most notably to work remotely, increase the amount of work they do online and force new digital habits to adapt to the 'new normal'. This new context has had consequences for the implementation of activities, which have been forced to be implemented online. The pressure on project management to display adaptability and agility in response to the pandemic exposes the need for project management to take emergency responses and readiness into account in the planning phase of a project. This assessment has gathered insights into the how the NHRI.EU project implementation has adapted to the new digital demands in order to uncover the lessons learned and best practices of the digitalisation of project activities. The assessment interviewed members of the NHRI.EU project management team from the partner organisations, the global and regional NHRI networks, to derive insights into digital project implementation from a facilitator's point of view.

As the NHRI.EU project is a capacity development project, it involves learning or training activities, where participants (often members of NHRIs) are strengthening their capacity in different areas of the project. For this assessment, it was important to distinguish between the learning and training aspect of activities and the networking or team-building aspect of activities to uncover both aspects of digital activities.

For digital implementation of learning and training, what worked well was having a wider reach to participants, the functionality of working online and in certain examples increased engagement. On the other hand, the challenges included decreased attention span of participants online, less opportunities for interaction and inaccessibility of the digital space. To mitigate this, the partners interviewed identified the solution of shorter and more frequent meetings, focus on facilitating interaction and knowledge exchange, as well as being concerned with accessibility, and even attempting to increase accessibility. An important caveat to bear in mind is the impact on staff, as it takes more time to prepare more, smaller meetings instead of one big meeting.

For team-building and networking, the best practices identified were improved continuity in communications and knowledge exchanges, humanisation of colleagues and partners, as well as communicating in smaller groups online. Conversely, the networking elements that are often lost in the online space is the intangible 'human factor', trust between individuals, as well as the issue arising of more interruptions and lack of concentration.

Overall, the biggest challenges identified included replicating human interaction online, engaging participants, facilitating networking and a sense of togetherness, the lack of knowledge and experience in new platforms, time and language differences, as well as the increased workload internally in project management. The partners have already taken steps to mitigate the challenges with different steps taken to combat those issues, which was explored with concrete examples from each network. The partners also raised future needs for successful digital implementation of activities, to which we identified and outlined some concrete steps and measures that could be taken.

Considerations of security concerns was also explored, as this was an area that the assessment identified key capacity gaps in. As we work with human rights globally, some actors are more vulnerable to security threats and surveillance than others, depending on their location, nature of their work, people they work with, etc. A key finding from this report is namely the future need to invest in digital security in the NHRI.EU project.

With the uncertain future with regard to climate, health and environmental crises, unstable political situations, and other contexts that may change the working context dramatically, it is important for project management implementation to be able to adapt to these changes. This report is useful in outlining an assessment of lessons learned and best practices in the digital implementation of project activities.

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THIS PROJECT IS FUNDED
BY THE EUROPEAN UNION