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BRIEFING NOTE

**Re-inventing agricultural
trainings in times of COVID-19**
Early lessons learned from
Africa, Asia and Latin America



OXFAM

Re-inventing agricultural trainings in times of COVID-19. Early lessons learned from Africa, Asia and Latin America

This briefing note was prepared by Gisella Cruz-Garcia, Bert Visser and Hilton Mbozi. This work is part of the Sowing Diversity = Harvesting Security program Phase II (2019-2022). Funding for the program is provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

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COVER PICTURE: Vaida Nyandimu from Rushinga, Zimbabwe, holding pearl millet panicles. Photo: Sacha de Boer/Oxfam Novib.

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Acronyms

FFS	Farmer Field School
SD=HS	Sowing Diversity = Harvesting Security
ToT	Training of Trainers



Foreword

This document shares our experiences and lessons learned from the Online Course for Farmer Field Schools (FFS) on Nutrition and Local Food Plants¹. We organized this course to help potential master trainers to prepare and conduct trainings of trainers (ToT) for these FFS. FFS are the main instrument in the work on nutrition of the global Sowing Diversity=Harvesting Security (SD=HS) program, which aims to rescue and promote crop and food diversity. SD=HS is implemented by Oxfam and partner organizations in eight countries and coordinated by Oxfam Novib. The program's work on nutrition and local food plants contributes to the objective of improving dietary quality and diversity, and reducing the length and severity of the food scarcity season.

Participants in the first course series (June to August 2020) – organized for our partners in Asia, Latin America, and Africa as part of the SD=HS program – included staff from the National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) in Laos; Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (Li Bird), and Oxfam Nepal in Nepal; the Farmers' Seed Network (FSN) in China; Asociación de Organizaciones de los Cuchumatanes (ASOCUCH), extension agencies from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Food (MAGA), and Secretary of Food and Nutrition Security (SESAN) in Guatemala; Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers' Forum (ESAFF), Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM), Community Integrated Development Initiatives (CIDI),

International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), Community Empowerment for Rural Development (CEFORD), and Oxfam Uganda in Uganda; Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT) in Zambia and Zimbabwe; and district nutritionists from the Ministry of Health and Child Care in Zimbabwe.

This document presents our reflections on the online course, from its initial development to the weekly meetings held with course participants.

We are grateful for the funding support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

We hope that this document contributes to discussions in other programs and organizations that are re-inventing agricultural trainings.

¹ Also commonly referred to as neglected and underutilized species, or NUS. We prefer the term 'local food plants' as it is better understood by local farming communities.

WHY RE-INVENT

AGRICULTURAL TRAININGS?





Why re-invent agricultural trainings?

The spread of COVID-19, and the measures taken by authorities to contain it, meant an abrupt end to our ways of working. The SD=HS program heavily relies on the FFS approach as a way to empower farmers and build local food and nutrition security. Its core elements include a schedule of trainings and a network of trainers, with one or two local trainers facilitating regular meetings of farmer groups in their communities. The core group of local trainers is prepared, and a national group of master trainers established, during national-level ToT. The first ToT series would normally be conducted with the program's support team, based at Oxfam Novib in the Netherlands, and local external experts. The FFS approach also entails regular visits between farmers, trainers and experts, which would involve the Oxfam Novib team supporting national teams.

National ToTs on Nutrition and Local Food Plants had been planned for early 2020 – the first ToT series for most countries participating in the program – involving major roles for team members based in the Hague. Then international travel came to a halt, and many countries introduced restrictions on the numbers of people who could meet, and domestic travel. Like many other sectors, we were forced to reconsider and re-invent our ways of working.

The objective of our work – to improve diets and nutrition based on the use of local food plants – was even more relevant in the context of COVID-19, as healthy diets strengthen the immune system. Focus on local agrobiodiversity is also key to increasing community food sufficiency in times of economic crisis. We did not stop and wait – we wanted to act quickly.

We began by holding virtual meetings with country partner organizations to discuss how COVID-19 was affecting their ways of working and the farming communities that participate in the program. By the end of March 2020 it seemed likely that domestic travel restrictions would be eased before staff from the Hague would be able to travel to program countries. We decided to organize an online course to prepare people in-country to organize the national ToTs, and provide long-distance support to the ToTs as soon as it was possible to conduct them. During lockdown periods we asked trainers to focus on learning and preparing to start the implementation of FFS activities in the communities as soon as the circumstances allowed. Of course, the health of program staff and community members was always our top priority.

Why re-invent agricultural trainings?

We designed the online course to explain the contents and delivery methodology elaborated in the FFS Field Guide on Nutrition and Local Food Plants. This includes concepts related to nutrition, local food plants and gender; the FFS diagnostic stage; FFS activities that can be implemented to improve the management of local food plants and nutrition; planning, reporting and evaluation; and special topics. The first online course series took place from June to August 2020, to prepare future master trainers and ToT organizers in Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Guatemala, Nepal, Laos, and China.

Based on this experience, the next chapter presents practical recommendations for organizing future online activities for agricultural training, in particular in the format of the FFS. We then reflect on the re-invention of agricultural trainings in response to COVID-19, including the pros and cons of going virtual, power shifts and cross-country learning. An Appendix documents the preparation and delivery of the online course in further detail.



Why re-invent agricultural trainings?

Box 1. **FFS and agricultural trainings** **before the COVID-19 era**

The FFS approach is consistent with formal and non-formal adult education, and rooted in the conviction that the strongest way to learn is through experience. It is not about ‘teaching’ farmers but facilitating exercises and experiments by and with farmers in which they make their own observations and draw their own conclusions. The FFS approach assists them by providing external support, materials and technical capacity where needed, through the involvement of public research institutions and government agencies. Local knowledge and skills are respected as the strongest foundation to develop new knowledge and skills that are owned by the farmers.

The FFS model provides methodologies and tools to enable farmers to carry out experiments, gather and analyze data, and draw their own conclusions, building on traditional knowledge systems and using new knowledge that is shared with them. The approach builds

critical thinking, self-confidence, and capacity for experimentation and decision-making. Through experiments based on new ideas or existing practices, experiential learning, and group discussions, farmers are assisted to collectively identify solutions to their local challenges.

Establishing a group of master trainers is a prerequisite to successfully scaling up the FFS approach. Master trainers may be selected from agriculture extension officers, farmers, and staff from NGOs and development organizations who have proven facilitation skills, a background in social learning, technical knowledge on the FFS topics, and the motivation and commitment to support this work for several seasons. Master trainers are responsible for supporting the facilitators assigned to organize and manage the local FFS in the communities. Master trainers coordinate ToT to train a new generation of master trainers.

The ToT facilitates participants’ learning based on their own knowledge and experiences, additional information from resource persons, and guidance from the master trainers and the FFS Field Guide.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR SHIFTING TO ONLINE
AGRICULTURAL TRAININGS



Main recommendations for shifting to online agricultural trainings

We can draw some recommendations from our experience with the first series of the online course that could be useful for other organizations that follow similar approaches. While this course was focused on nutrition and local food plants, we believe the recommendations may be applicable to other types of training involving farmers in local communities. The infographic 'Keys for success' presents the main issues that have to be addressed before, during, and after an online course.

Shifting from conventional to online agricultural trainings to prepare for FFS work requires a shift in mindset to:

- Envisage the lasting effects of COVID-19 once the immediate crisis has ended;
- Plan a radical change in implementing global development programs;
- Remain ready to shift more responsibilities to national teams; and
- Reassign travel budgets to strengthen global IT connections and increase trainings in a national context.



Building a first generation of ToT trainers online:

KEYS FOR SUCCESS



1. DESIGNING AN ONLINE COURSE FOR FFS

Recommendations on how to prepare and organize the course.

2. DURING THE ONLINE COURSE

What has to be taken into account to run the course successfully.

3. ORGANIZING THE NATIONAL TRAINING OF TRAINERS

Advice to conduct the ToT once the online course is finished.

4. ESTABLISHING THE FFS

Set up after the ToT, the FFS work comprises diagnosis, curriculum preparation, implementation of activities, knowledge sharing and dissemination.

5. FFS EVALUATION

Reflections, lessons learned and planning for the next cycle. It includes the FFS end-of-cycle and national level evaluations.

AFTER THE COURSE

Notes:

- The FFS end-of-cycle evaluation provides feedback to subsequent ToTs and FFS activities.
- Reflections on four and five are not included in this publication.



DESIGNING AN ONLINE COURSE FOR FFS



1 /

COURSE CURRICULUM

Draft a course curriculum, preferably with the same number of modules as national ToT days.



2 /

VIDEO PRESENTATIONS

Prepare video presentations.

- Slides should have questions to guide discussions, i.e. mimicking sub-group discussions and plenaries.
- Draft PowerPoint presentations should be made available to be adjusted and contextualized for actual ToT.
- Videos could be uploaded to platforms such as YouTube to facilitate sharing and access.



3 /

ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE

Define the organization of the course delivery, i.e. different countries together, or per country.



4 /

SELECTION OF COURSE PARTICIPANTS

Selection of course participants, focusing on potential master trainers, and those who would participate in the in-country organization of the ToT.



5 /

ADDITIONAL MODULES

Be open to including additional modules based on the preferences of course participants.



DURING THE ONLINE COURSE



1 / SHARE THE VIDEO PRESENTATIONS

Share the video presentations with course participants before the start of each module.



2 / ONLINE Q&A SESSIONS

Organize online Q&A sessions for questions and answers (Q&A) and exchange of experiences at the end of each week/module.

- Encourage course participants to send their questions in advance to the weekly meeting.
- Share (password-protected) recordings of the Q&A sessions with course participants.



3 / SHORT SUMMARY

Invite course participants to prepare a short summary of each module to be presented at the start of each weekly Q&A session.



4 / EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

Invite course participants to share their previous experiences on the topics discussed in a module (e.g. by giving short presentations) during the Q&A

- Encourage cross-country and cross-continent experience exchange.



5 / SEND SURVEYS

Send surveys at the end of each session to assess the usefulness of the content and adequacy of the delivery methodology: what worked, did not work, and can be improved.



6 / CROSS-COUNTRY LEARNING

Plan follow-up activities to continue fostering cross-country learning and experience exchange.



AFTER THE COURSE, ORGANIZING THE NATIONAL TRAINING OF TRAINERS



1 /

ORGANIZATION AND PLANNING

Prepare the ToT agenda.
Prepare the presentations in local language.
Plan the location and dates.

→ Split up participants as necessary to conform to local regulations on maximum gathering size.



2 /

ENSURING THE LEARNING PROCESS

Include master trainers with experience in FFS work, so they can guarantee that the process works as intended – e.g. empowering the team, ensuring everybody participates in sub-group discussions, paying attention to gender group dynamics, and involving youth.



3 /

SELECTION OF TOT PARTICIPANTS

Select the participants: they will be the first generation of facilitators.



4 /

ONLINE SUPPORT

Organize online support by master trainers (e.g. organizers of the online course).



5 /

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND DOCUMENTATION

Include as part of the ToT program monitoring and evaluation of FFS work, documentation and reporting, and reflections on how gender and age affect the sub-group and FFS group dynamics.



6 /

FFS NATIONAL CURRICULUM

During the ToT, FFS national curriculum, adjusting and contextualizing the existing FFS Field Guide.

Main recommendations for shifting to online agricultural trainings

Box 2. Perceptions of online course participants

The online course consisted of six modules. After each module, participants were asked to comment on course quality. In total, 128 contributions on the six modules were received and analyzed. Overall, the course and presentations were considered highly useful, with an average score of 4.6 and 4.4 points, respectively, out of 5.

Particularly valued features of the Field Guide were the logical presentation, informative narrative, comprehensive contents, focus on empowerment, range of options, and suggested role of experts. Suggested improvements included more practical examples and attention to technical aspects, more photos and infographics, more attention to marketing and policy, a wider range of special topics and more integrated use of baseline results.



LESSONS LEARNED

FROM THE ONLINE COURSE
FOR FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS



There is an emerging literature on COVID-19 and FFS, but it has so far focused mainly on ways of working to reduce the risks of exposure to the virus. To the best of our knowledge, the issues discussed below have hardly yet been explored in other publications.

Pros and cons of going virtual

Our first response to COVID-19-related measures was to shift our internal communication in the global program from a mixed of physical and virtual exchange to almost exclusively virtual, using tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. However, it soon became clear that we would need a new strategy, tools and content to deal with the changed circumstances.

For example, it proved difficult to keep participants' attention and motivation in virtual meetings taking longer than two hours, so the new online approach could not mimic a full day of training in a physical setting. We decided to prepare video presentations that course participants would watch in advance of a one-and-a-half-hour weekly meeting, which accommodated questions and answers (Q&A), discussions, and experience exchange. In future,

we will ask participants also to prepare contributions based on their own knowledge, experiences and ideas.

The use of recorded video presentations, instead of real-time online presentations, had other advantages: participants could watch them more than once, use them for the ToT, share them with their colleagues, and they could watch the presentations even with poor internet connectivity.

Participation in the courses was limited to those able to speak English (Asia and Africa) or Spanish (Guatemala). We chose not to arrange for consecutive interpretation, in part because it would add to the difficulty of maintaining attention, and in part because – without a budget for professional simultaneous interpretation – it would take up half of the time available for discussions and interactions.

Spontaneous discussions appeared less frequent than in physical settings, and the absence of other opportunities for informal interactions at national and international levels may negatively impact on team performance. However, preparation for the Q&A sessions – such as encouraging course participants to send their questions in advance – resulted in more structured interactions.

The FFS concept is based on empowering communities by building their members' capacity to learn from each other and increasing their self-confidence and self-reliance. It is important for the FFS facilitators to help communities to resolve their challenges themselves, mobilizing community knowledge through discussions between community members, assisted by additional local experts. The online format made it challenging to train facilitators in practical, rather than theoretical, terms on issues such as group dynamics, participatory approaches, action learning, and community empowerment. We will attempt to develop new online activities focusing on how learning is tightly linked to experience and group interaction.

Online settings do not facilitate an experiential learning cycle, a crucial part of the FFS work: facts (concrete experience) are the basis for observation and reflection, and findings (abstract concepts) are transformed into experimentation and further actions (the following infographic illustrates the experiential cycle of learning, based on Kolb's learning styles). An online course can help only with reflective observation and abstract conceptualization; the process of building on experiences and experimentation remains theoretical.

Power shift due to the COVID-19 crisis

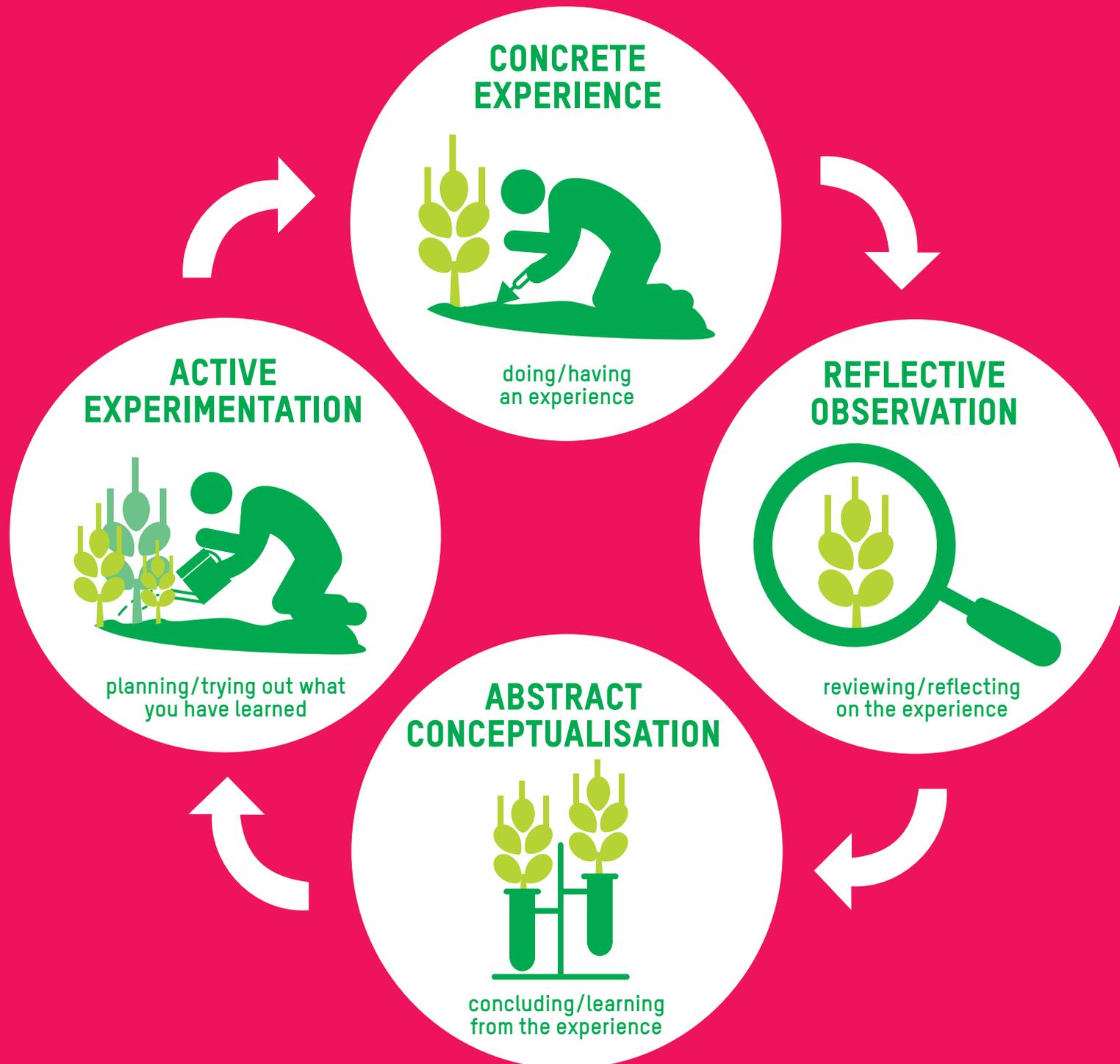
The COVID-19 crisis changed our relationships within the SD=HS program. Responsibilities were transferred to national teams in an earlier phase of program development and implementation. National teams of master trainers had to organize themselves to arrange for the ToT with only remote support from the Oxfam Novib team in the Hague, which would usually have co-organized the training activities. Partners became far more self-reliant. Direct interactions between partner organizations within and between regions were strengthened. All exchanges and interactions became more structured, with the informality of physical exchange being lost.

The fundamental shift in balance in development cooperation, from the Hague to the South, is likely to stay. In our view, coordinating partners in Western countries have to reconsider their roles, while maintaining the globally shared features of the program.

Partner organizations have assumed more responsibilities in organizing the ToTs, with reduced support from the global team.



KOLB'S LEARNING STYLES



While the global team provided the technical training materials and shared guiding questions, partner organizations – with support from their respective Oxfam country offices and external experts such as nutritionists and extension staff members – organized and conducted the ToTs on their own, with support limited to Q&A sessions. This experience allows us to shift to a work mode in which the global team will focus more on developing training materials while partner organizations take the lead in contextualizing training materials and organizing all in-country trainings.

Empowering through cross-country learning

Members of the national teams met in the weekly Q&A sessions with teams from other countries in their region. This strengthened regional interactions: it was good to see how future master trainers were sharing their views, experiences and concerns across countries. Course participants highlighted that they would like to continue having these online discussions and cross-country exchanges of experiences. It is important to ensure that they continue to happen during the ToT and FFS implementation, to allow discussions about common challenges and solutions. Selected master trainers from the program countries were asked to present some topics from the course to their fellow trainees, in

their own and other regions. This proved to be empowering for the presenters, strengthening their self-reliance, and a rich experience for the course participants.

For example, the program's nutrition officer in Zimbabwe, Thamsanqa Khanye, presented and facilitated the Q&A session on low-cost food processing technologies and the role of food and seed fairs. She shared experiences from Zimbabwe on how seed and food fairs can help to ensure knowledge exchange across different generations, cultures, and communities, enabling cross-country learning for participants from other countries. She also benefited from the interactive weekly discussions, coming to appreciate the global reliance on monotonous diets and how local food plants could provide more diverse and nutritious food.

One of the new master trainers from Uganda, Joshua Enyetu, remarked: 'The seven-day time interval between individual modules allowed me to go through the content more than once and provided enough time to formulate questions or note anything which was not clear. Sharing of recaps as a start of each next question and answer session provided a good opportunity to share lessons with participants from other regions, which empowered me and improved my presentation skills. It enabled me to master the subject because whenever I had to present, I had to fully absorb the learning materials.'

LASTING EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS



Lasting effects of the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 crisis forced a radical change in how we implement our international development programs. As some of the effects proved to be unexpectedly positive, we are looking at how we can embrace these beneficial changes. We envisage shifting more responsibilities to our program countries, as we take on more of a supporting role while coordinating a common approach across countries.

We will also redeploy part of our travel budget to invest more in IT connections and online trainings instead. Online cannot replace in-person training, as it affects group dynamics by making it harder to have informal, spontaneous discussions, and to elaborate the participatory nature of the FFS. However, we believe it will be possible to find a new balance that improves efficiency by substantially reducing expensive international travel.





Appendix

An Appendix to this document, explaining what we did and why in a chronological order of ideas and developments, can be downloaded [here](#).



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