

Building Peace From a Distance:

An Assessment of Digital and Hybrid Learning Formats to Support the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda





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Situating the YPS Agenda in Changing Landscapes and Highlighting Challenges for Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the last years' technological advances, has catalysed rapid innovation in digital approaches and tools. In turn, this has allowed for the continuity of programmes during challenging periods for programme delivery, and has helped increase meaningful participation of young people in advancing the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda. While COVID disruptions were in many parts of the world temporal, this period opened challenges and opportunities for stakeholders engaged in youth empowerment to leverage digital and hybrid learning formats to expand the range of options for the positive contributions of young persons in peacebuilding, violence prevention, and conflict transformation.

Even after a return from social distancing, there has been no slowdown of inventions of digital solutions to the problems the world continues to face. Most recently, a surge in chatbots and AI technologies, as well as advanced computer programming, have allowed training institutions and instructional designers to experience exponential leaps in both accessibility and delivery-times of materials for young learners. During such periods of disruptions and in light of new digital horizons, the authors here provide actionable advice for peacebuilders that intend to take activities into digital arenas. Furthermore, they encourage reflection on what current limits exist for this increasingly common role of learning formats.

“ While the reflections and lessons learnt are drawn from the areas of training and capacity-building, the authors believe that the knowledge gained from this work could further inform the work of a wider range of actors in the YPS space, seeking to define the use of digital and hybrid formats to expand the scope of working mechanisms used to support impactful YPS programming. ”

This paper draws on lessons from youth, peace and security capacity-building and learning programmes conducted by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in Colombia as well as experiences from the YPS consultant Meghann Villanueva, based in the Philippines, who has been involved in the facilitation of national and regional (Asia) virtual peacebuilding training programmes. Building on lessons learned as programming was impacted by the pandemic and the work within these settings in the years thereafter, the authors are convinced that these insights *can guide the work of a variety of actors in the YPS field as they explore ways to use digital and hybrid formats to support impactful programming.*

As has been consistently highlighted across the three reports of the UN Secretary-General on Youth, Peace and Security (2020, 2022, and 2024), digital spaces can provide innovative and accessible opportunities for the advancement of all pillars of the YPS agenda. However, while wider digitisation trends may yield benefits for a broad range of actors, including young peacebuilders and their counterparts, there is still a lack of systematic assessment of how digital and hybrid spaces should be set up and sustained to support the overall objective of meaningful inclusion and participation of youth in peace and security activities.

Informed by the creation of advanced solutions to strengthen and build the capacities of young peacebuilders, this thematic paper presents some of the main challenges, solutions, and recommendations that the authors have encountered in navigating and consolidating new models for training delivery. Through concrete tips and food-for-thought for its readers, it aims to help strengthen conversations of how training, capacity-building, and learning can best support young persons' contributions to peace processes.



Perspectives on Challenges for Different Actors in Training Environments

Alongside other actors in the YPS field, training institutions such as UNITAR as well as professionals working in this field, were requested to support partner organizations and member states with the transition to digital and hybrid ways of working when faced with the monumental shift that COVID-19 caused on a global scale. Training, workshops, and other capacity-building events had to be put on hold until formats were redefined, and an assessment was possible regarding the likely reach and scope of working formats that could be continued even under lockdown conditions and social settings where people's movement and gathering were severely restricted. In many ways, the expansion of the pandemic resulted in a condensation of learning opportunities for young peacebuilders and their counterparts, where training and capacity-building activities were increasingly relegated to private spaces. A rush into digital and hybrid solutions ensued to meet targeted capacity-building goals.

Hybrid & Digital Events

Hybrid events typically combine face-to-face elements with a virtual/digital component. Digital events can include a wide range of formats, such as webinars, online conferences, learning sessions, online trainings or interactive workshops.



Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, the post-pandemic UN Secretary General's reports on YPS assert that young people continued to mobilise and demand fairer and more peaceful societies. On the other hand, the face of capacity-building and learning delivery has changed, impacting youth-led and youth-focused stabilisation and peacebuilding work within the contexts of ongoing or underlying conflict, situations of fragility, and post-conflict contexts. While recognising that the realities and experiences faced by young peacebuilders around the globe are diverse and multifaceted, the authors hope to contribute with this paper to the ever-emerging discussion on pathways for more inclusive youth-led action in the YPS field.

The recommendations are formulated by the authors with reference to two specific programming contexts, both characterised as situations of transition from conflict in support of implementation of recent peace agreements, namely the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in Mindanao, Philippines, and the 2016 Colombia Peace Agreement. The authors assessed the digital and hybrid learning formats to support the YPS agenda from the perspective of programmatic requirements and opportunities and based on this share considerations for trainers and education professionals for the methodological development of such formats.

Hybrid Learning

Hybrid learning, also sometimes referred to as blended learning, is an approach to education that combines online educational materials with traditional in-person teaching methods. It is not fully virtual nor is it fully in-person. It may take shape in various ways depending on the needs (e.g., combining virtual live classes with face-to-face practice, or virtual self-paced learning with job aids and in-person coaching etc.), including the increasingly common format where some participants or facilitators are joining virtually while others are present together in the training room.

Hybrid ideally should not mean an in-person lecture followed by hours of digital 'homework'. Hybrid learning allows for the creation of a unique mix of various training formats that respond to the specific needs of the target audience and that are adapted to their context, learning environment and access. Blended learning, for contrast, is usually a combination of online and in-person elements that is typically completed asynchronously.

Programmatic Perspective: Youth-led Peace and Reconciliation in Colombia

While the 2016 peace agreement is an important milestone towards achieving sustainable peace in Colombia, the envisioned 'total peace' is yet to be realised. Towards this end, young people have an important role to play in rebuilding the social fabric and in contributing towards a peaceful future for their communities and the country at large. To support youth-led peacebuilding and reconciliation, UNITAR partnered with Ciudad Don Bosco and a network of 37 local organizations and institutions, reaching some of the most conflict-affected and marginalised communities in Colombia.

When the COVID-19 infection rates increased across the country, public life was curtailed, with people's movements and gatherings being severely restricted. At the same time, it became evident that the pandemic had exacerbated individual and community violence in many ways. Therefore, it was critical to continue programmatic activities to support Colombia's peace and reconciliation process by strengthening the resilience and conflict prevention capacities of young people, their families, and communities. This section details the core consideration that ensured the effective continuation of activities.



First, it became clear that in the event of a rapidly developing pandemic, it would be necessary to define agile and effective alternatives for network members (educational organizations and institutions in different parts of the country) to continue their work. This required an assessment of the diverse circumstances faced by trainers, community leaders and youth. Elements that were assessed included: the access to digital networks and data connection, the general use of different information technologies, digital literacy and access to educational spaces and institutions. Secondly, for periods of confinement, new methods for purposeful learning had to be created that would allow for reaching communities with little or no internet access. Furthermore, for those instances where health regulations permitted, it became necessary to find safe meeting spaces in territories with no internet access, to deliver training materials and instructions to participants.

Once the initial state of shock that ensued from a health crisis of unprecedented scale was overcome, the situation as described above laid the foundation for the development and use of an incredible wealth of innovative approaches and ideas that combined many different formats transcending digital and analogue spaces and tools.

These included: trainings through radio programmes, combined with lessons distributed through WhatsApp; digital learning journeys, supported by small group gatherings in different locations; as well as hybrid training formats with the trainers joining a group virtually with trainees assembled in one space. Section three of this paper offers a systematic overview of lessons learned and best practices that emerged from this process, along with observations that the authors hope will be useful to individual practitioners seeking to work with a variety of digital and hybrid formats.

As part of the rapid innovation process another important observation emerged that carries weight for the implementation of the broader YPS agenda. While navigating the obstacles that the pandemic posed, it was evident from the onset that, more than ever, effective YPS programming would be dependent on local ownership. What was unexpected, however, was how the pandemic's context aided in the development of new systems for the empowerment of participating communities. Generally, the design challenge of reaching those with limited access to the digital space made this obvious. Young leaders and counterparts



took the lead in identifying alternatives to face-to-face pieces of training, such as the activation of local and secure cooperation networks that served as bridges to deliver materials and instructions to participants. In this regard, the use of local paper shops and libraries, among other places, became especially valuable. In another instance, when some confinement restrictions were lifted, this became evident by the solidarity shown by communities towards the challenges of finding safe places to conduct face-to-face sessions with small groups, the success which can be attributed to the participation of the families that generously offered their own homes and community rooms for training purposes.

Undoubtedly, the experiences gained in Colombia with digital and hybrid learning formats during the pandemic reflect significant advances in the empowerment of the young people who participated in the project. Some even became integrated with the project's objectives, and its trainers and participants, that they continue to support the institutions that accompanied them during their training process in the pandemic, even up to the present day, some four years later. This experience moreover is reflected in the significant progress of the adults who participated in the project as trainers, as they found, albeit fortuitously, new ways of connection with and have dialogue with young people who are naturally immersed in technology, and who have diverse languages and ways of thinking of how to explore and understand new training formats.

In conclusion, hybrid approaches have proven to be effective tools for overcoming geographical and socio-economic barriers, allowing young people to access educational opportunities more equitably and to actively participate in peacebuilding from anywhere. The adaptability of digital

resources has facilitated the development of key life skills in an increasingly globalised world, and supporting and strengthening these approaches contributes not only to the educational agenda of young people, but also to building a more inclusive and empowered society to address future challenges.

The challenge ahead will be about how to effectively harmonise the flexibility and unlimited reach offered by technology with the richness of face-to-face interactions, to create new ways of implementing safe spaces, uphold core values, and to forge deep human connections. It remains valuable to continue to ask how we can best merge the worlds of digital versatility and in-person-experiences. This challenge implies a careful reading of the needs of communities and detailed planning that responds to those needs, to integrate technology synergistically with face-to-face elements, ensuring that hybrid environments not only nurture knowledge, but also emotional connection and the building of core values to truly support real and lasting peacebuilding.

Perspectives from YPS Training Professionals: Supporting the YPS Agenda in the Philippines and Asia

Young people are at the core of establishing a culture of peace and non-violence in Mindanao, the Southern Philippines. Since the signing of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in Mindanao, many actors have been contributing to peacebuilding and development efforts as well as the re-establishment of social cohesion starting at the community level with the aim to address interlinked drivers of conflict. The persisting presence of violent extremism in Mindanao is one of the key areas of concern standing in the way of establishing lasting peace in the region.

The initiative “Virtual Youth Safe Spaces” (VYSS) is part of a broader project on Youth for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence in Mindanao (YOUCAP), implemented by the German Technical Cooperation, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). This project is GIZ’s contribution to the YPS agenda in the Philippines. VYSS builds on a successful training model, implemented by the Interfaith Dialogue on Violent Extremism (iDove) – a joint initiative established in 2017 by the African Union Citizens and Diaspora Directorate and GIZ. The co-author of this paper is the lead consultant and trainer of VYSS, contextualising this successful training model in the Filipino and Asian context and supporting the implementation of the approach in the Mindanao region. While the original training model was built based on face-to-face training approaches, the project was adapted to a hybrid format,



Virtual Learning

Virtual learning is a learning experience that is enhanced through utilising information and communication technologies (ICT) both outside and inside the facilities of the educational organization. The instruction most commonly takes place in an online environment. The teaching activities are carried out online whereby the teacher and learners are physically separated (in terms of place, time, or both).

Furthermore, virtual learning can also be defined as distance learning conducted in a virtual learning environment with digital study content designed for self-paced (asynchronous) or live web-conferencing.

“ *The lack of personal interaction challenges a trainer’s core competencies in ensuring that learner-centred approaches are still responsive.* ”

with a virtual learning phase, followed by face-to-face practice and implementation phase. However, due to the pandemic, the face-to-face phase had to be re-adapted. The following section outlines core considerations informing this transition process.

From a trainer’s perspective, where training approaches have been based on experiential learning methods (i.e., learning by doing through interactive exercises, simulations, roleplays; games used to elicit learning), the shift from face-to-face to online/virtual settings drastically challenged the ‘interactive’ and ‘skills-based’ learning elements of peacebuilding training activities.

Specifically, the lack of personal interaction challenged a trainer’s core competencies in ensuring that learner-centred approaches are still responsive to the situation of young people at any given moment. This shift also brought an important consideration on the value of peer-to-peer co-facilitation and co-creation, as one facilitator may often not be sufficient to oversee breakout groups, debriefing, and discussion sessions. Concrete solutions based on the lessons learnt about this challenge in the Philippines, and more, follows in the next chapter.

This co-author is also the lead facilitator and YPS resource person of the Philippine National Action Plan on Youth, Peace and Security, under the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU). One of her roles with OPAPRU was the facilitation of monthly YPS multi-stakeholders’ meetings - a coordination body composed of government agencies, civil society organizations and youth associations. She also facilitated both face-to-face and virtual consultations

on YPS. These consultations combine a mix of virtual and face-to-face elements, and while some have an 80% physical - 20% virtual composition, other consultations are purely virtual.

In 2021, OPAPRU held ten regional consultations to gather Filipino youths' inputs for the National Action Plan on Youth, Peace, and Security. Eight of the ten regional consultations were face-to-face, with some digital elements in-between. In December 2021 two online consultations were held, with relatively little participation and engagement. In both circumstances, there is a significant difference in terms of youth participation, youth interaction, and youth responsiveness. Consultations that used the 80 percent face-to-face format were more likely to produce a more cohesive group than those that just met for two days online. After the face-to-face activity, the group cohesion served as a significant springboard for more proactivity in online spaces. Young people are more likely to volunteer to support other legs of the YPS consultation because they have been empowered by their hands-on, personal YPS experience. In one region (Caraga), the participants who were able to meet during the face-to-face YPS consultation formed a Regional YPS Coalition, a youth-led group currently being coordinated by young people

through online and some face-to-face activities.

In 2022, with lesser restrictions and more opportunities to meet and do people-to-people exchange, digital and virtual elements of YPS-related training continued to develop. Young people involved in VYSS and YPS-related activities became more competent in handling virtual/hybrid training formats. Capacity-building of youth in virtual facilitation proved to be very valuable in the YPS field.

The Philippine National Action Plan on YPS was presented at the end of August 2022 through a hybrid format. Since only a few people were able to attend the event physically, it was important that all the contributors, writers, and participants of the consultations were invited to witness the historic moment. Having a hybrid event was considered a priority to ensure that young people were invited to witness the concrete output and the fruits of their participation in the different meetings and activities leading up to the presentation of the National Action Plan. Attended by government institutions and officials, the hybrid event was a symbolic commemoration of the meaningful inclusion of young people as owners and torchbearers of YPS - wherever they may be.

A key takeaway from this experience is that while online and hybrid formats may ensure the continuity of programming in disrupted contexts, there are numerous dividends of face-to-face engagements that can be lost. Implementers should innovatively address serendipitous opportunities for learning and networking, contagious motivation, interpersonal skills development, and team building, as these elements are essential gains in capacity building and engagement programs, and risks being compromised in digital and hybrid settings. Therefore, when possible, it is recommended to explore ways of hosting some face-to-face elements in order to create a 'momentum' and activate peer-to-peer interest in the field of YPS. If meeting face-to-face is not possible and practical, such as in the case of the multistakeholder group meetings, meeting on a regular basis (i.e. monthly - the 3rd Thursday of each month) is a good strategy to ensure that the group grows together as a collective through regular activities. Creating working groups and rotating the hosting of meetings also help in ensuring each organization plays a significant role in the meetings, thereby increasing their sense of ownership of the process, as well as their sense of belonging to the group.



Challenges and Recommendations

Emerging from a need for a rapid shift in the delivery of training and capacity-building opportunities that were directly linked to the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing years of new lessons for training environments, the authors have consolidated a collection of considerations and recommendations that may be helpful to institutions and individuals, seeking to apply virtual and hybrid formats, in combination with diverse methodological outreach tools in support of the YPS agenda and beyond. These recommendations build directly on the youth-led and youth-focused work in the two peacebuilding/country contexts as described in the previous section, and beyond, and are structured in two subsections: analysis and the selection of training formats; and the resulting methodological choices.





Analysis – Building the Grounds for Effective Use of Digital and Hybrid Training Formats

Know Your Audience

- *Functionality* - Understand your audience in terms of demographics, needs, abilities and limitations to help in planning and designing more effective online sessions.
- *Technological baseline* - Include a variety of technology-related considerations for online training in your needs assessment. This may include participants' internet connectivity or digital literacy levels. This allows you to choose a level of technology that allows more people to participate in and benefit from your online event.
- *eLearning experience* - Verify how much experience participants have with online events and with the technology used and to what extent they feel comfortable to participate online.
- *Demographics* - Consider an intersectional analysis by assessing factors such as gender, age, geographical location, family status, ability, etc., which will constrain and shape your participants' ability to engage and meaningfully contribute (example: youth who are studying and working may have different time availabilities).
- *Special needs* - Ask if there are other needs that the training team should be aware of and try to identify possible barriers that inhibit the desired target audience from equal participation.

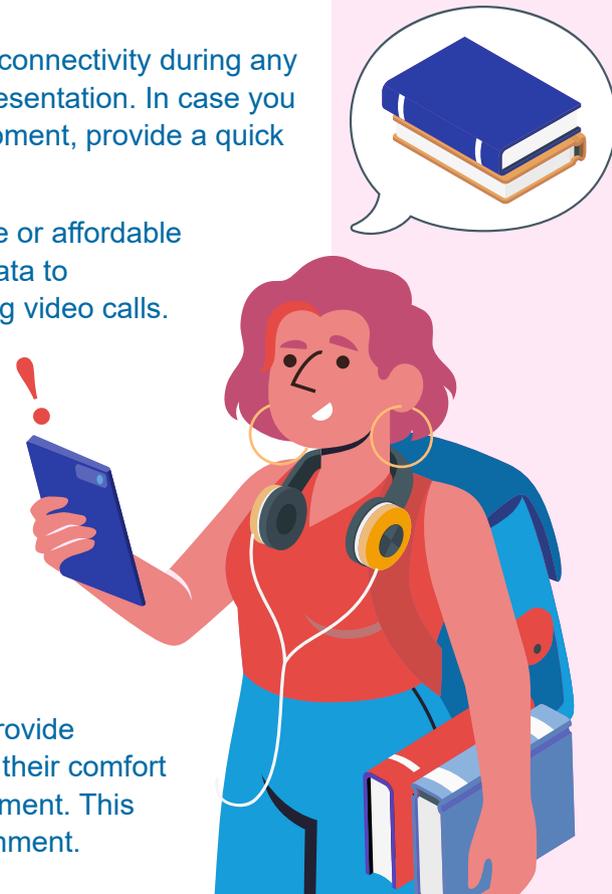
“ Consider including a system of graphical and written instructions that allow participants to feel guided and accompanied at all times. ”

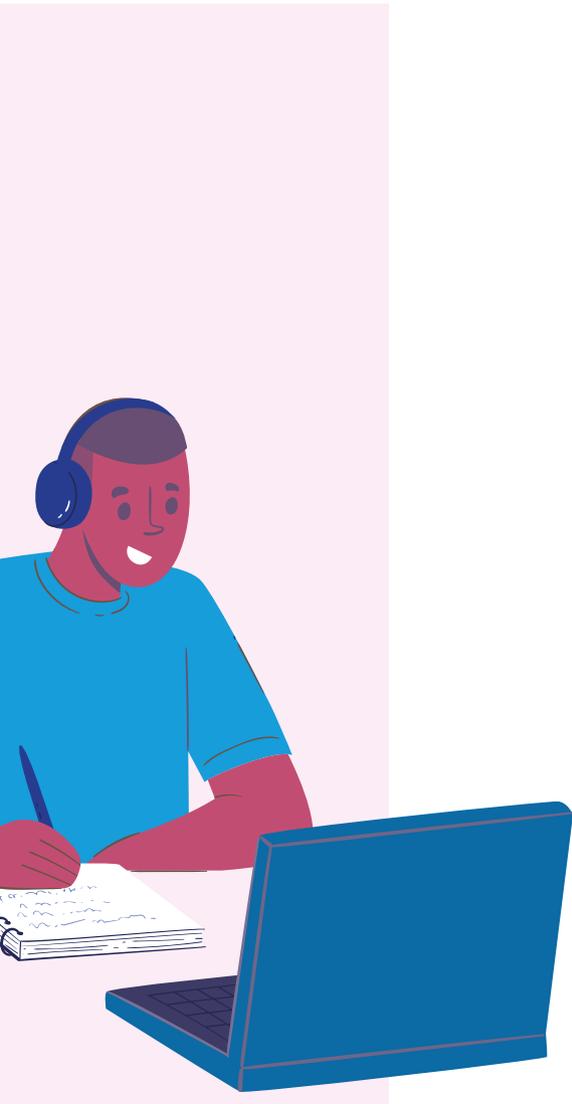
Technological Choices

- *Keep it simple* - Sometimes low-tech solutions which require low-bandwidth and are easy to use may be the most appropriate and effective.
- *Fit-for-purpose* - As much as possible, make sure that your choice of technology does not distract or interfere with the learning experience. Ensure the technology is necessary and enhances rather than inhibits the learning experience.
- *Equitable approach* - Make sure that advanced levels of technology do not make people feel inadequate or left out because they do not understand how to navigate it. Consider doing a ‘tech-check’ before the online event where you explain how to use the necessary technology and tools.

Accessibility

- *Digital accessibility* - Those with fewer resources may have less access to some digital technologies such as high functioning smartphones, laptops, or software. Do not assume all participants have easy access to these.
- *Internet stability* - Participants may have difficulties accessing a strong and reliable internet connection. Consider arranging times for the event when internet connectivity may be more reliable or accessible for them or reconsider session plans and timings accordingly.
- *Provide alternatives* - Ensure that those who lose internet connectivity during any meeting can catch up, such as by receiving a copy of a presentation. In case you have a small group and participants were lost for just a moment, provide a quick summary of what was missed.
- *Data costs* - Consider that not everyone has access to free or affordable Wi-Fi and some participants may have to pay for mobile data to participate which can become expensive especially for long video calls. Some participants might need assistance to support their data connection (through data load credits). Load allowances can replace transportation costs if the event were to take place in a face-to-face setting.
- *Assign responsibilities* - Use a co-trainer or technical assistant, who can update those participants who lost connection once they are back online.
- *Feedback* – Regularly request feedback. Participants may hesitate to admit they are unfamiliar with the platform or have technical difficulties. Therefore, it is important to provide an anonymous feedback channel where they can express their comfort level with the technology and any suggestions for improvement. This allows for a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.





Environmental Limitations

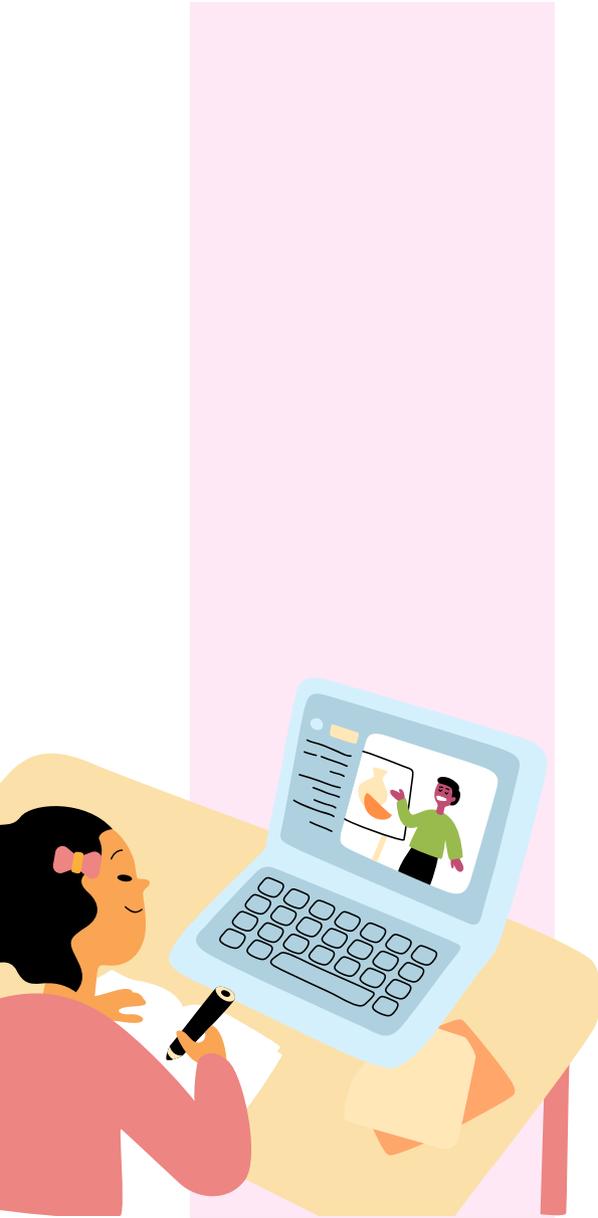
- *Household constraints* - Consider participants' household constraints, such as household responsibilities, or caregiving chores which may limit their participation, and plan with availability in mind when setting agendas and timings, as well as for ways to provide flexibility in this regard. According to the situations expressed by all stakeholders, it may be worthwhile reconciling and finding the best times to schedule pieces of training.
- *Unpredictable environments* - Some participants are surrounded by unpredictable factors such as family, children, or construction work, which are often out of their control. Include a tech-check that ensures participants know how to deal with disruptions, such as the mute function. Be patient and understanding if such elements slightly disrupt your session.
- *Noise* - Some participants may be joining from spaces where they cannot talk freely, for example by having to share a space with others or with noise in the background. Be flexible if they are not able to participate as actively as a result.
- *Time zones* - Consider the time zones of participants and whether access to your event will be more challenging for some participants due to the time you choose. To divide the burden, you could schedule your event across multiple days or repeat sessions at different times. Pre-event surveys can be a useful tool for such planning.

Selecting Training Formats and Methodological Choices

Digital Training Formats

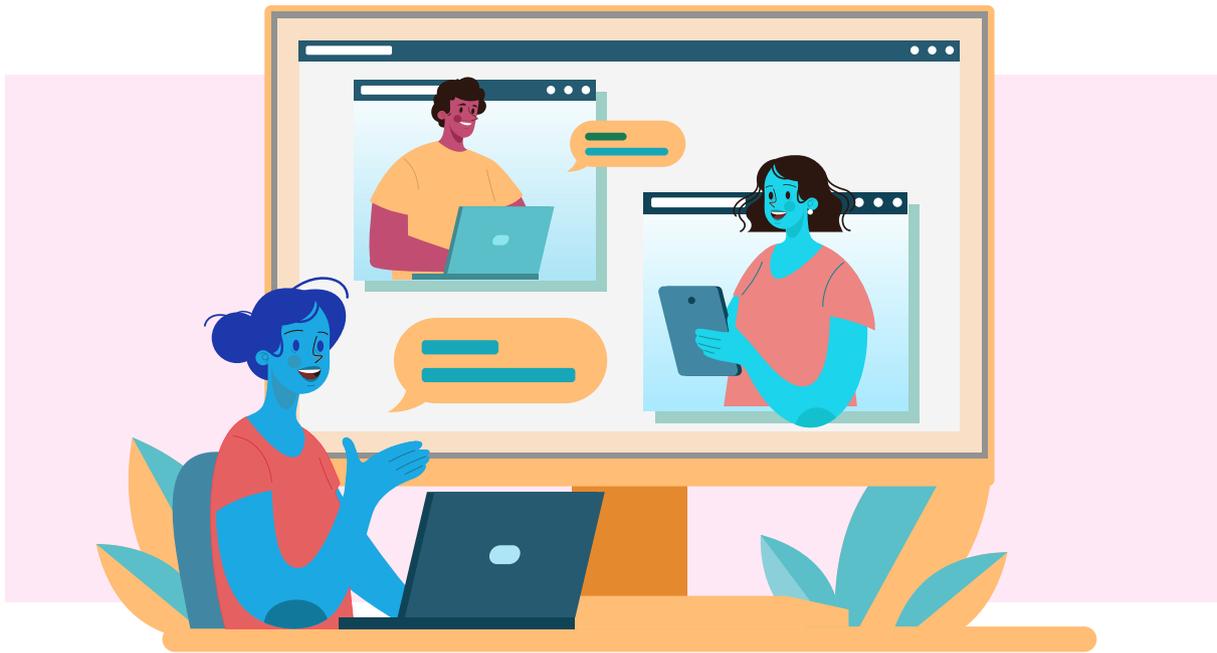
- *Spaced learning* - Be aware of 'digital fatigue' and avoid planning lengthy sessions without breaks or having too many hours of online synchronous learning in one day. Sessions may need to be implemented over several days or even weeks.
- *Energisers* - Maintaining the interest of participants during online trainings or event days may be difficult, taking into account the exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to computer screens and the fact that being trained from your household can pose many distractions. It is therefore important to learn about and apply new and innovative training technologies that can help energise virtual meetings, such as interactive whiteboards, survey tools, and games.
- *Peer-to-peer facilitation* - Consider using online 'peer-to-peer' facilitation to lead small group discussions. One way to engage participants in an online space is to break them into





smaller groups so they can maximise the time and space to discuss. When these 'breakout groups' happen, it would be good to have a practice of allowing participants to organize themselves into a) small group moderation, b) documentation and c) reporting.

- *Direct connection* - Recognising the true interest and 'presence' of participants in digital trainings behind their devices can be challenging, especially in those cases where cameras are not present or largely turned off in virtual meeting rooms. To mitigate this, establishment of direct and personalised channels of communication with participants may help validate how people are progressing during the event.
- *Active learning* - Explore creative ways to allow young people to be 'engaged active learners' rather than passive learners - in many cases, young people are asked to listen to what the trainer/facilitator says, and only at the end do we open spaces for 'questions' - this 'usual format' may allow us to lose the engagement of our audience in the middle of the presentation/conversation.
- *Engagement points* - Incorporate multiple opportunities for active participation during synchronous trainings. This could involve answering questions in the chatbox, clicking on polls, engaging in small group discussions, or participating in collaborative activities. These points help learners stay focused, alert and ready to engage anytime.



Hybrid Training Formats

- *Manage dynamics* - Depending on where the trainer/facilitator is, managing training sessions with two types of dynamics (a face-to-face on the one hand and a virtual one on the other) may be challenging. A few elements at play to consider will be 1) time management between online and offline formats; 2) ensuring learning needs are addressed from different trainee perspectives. Additionally, it's useful to plan in-person sessions around the beginning of the programme to break the ice and build a bond between participants. This results in a more engaged and cohesive crowd during the virtual sessions.

Asynchronous Training Formats

- *Use of various media* - Tools such as WhatsApp, radio, and printed materials can be indispensable to facilitate the transmission of contents that, although initially designed for face-to-face meetings, with speed and effectiveness can be adapted to support youth using a diversity of resources and pedagogical strategies.
- *Adapt designs* - In using technologies such as WhatsApp as a tool for learning, the design of simple and illustrated slides in a vertical format for cell phones that condense suggested activities, and guide participants through different types of experiences - such as reading, writing,

painting, watching videos, listening to audios, moving the body, etc. – can be used with great effect and low data requirements.

- *Use storytelling* - When using radio or other auditory tools for learning, consider the use of brief metaphors and life stories to evoke emotions to keep listeners' attention and to foster their capacity for imagination.
- *Visual cues* - In the creation of printed content, consider including a system of graphical and written instructions that allow participants to feel guided and accompanied at all times, even if they are alone, throughout the sequencing of activities. Metaphorical threads, as well as simple and concrete questions, may also be valuable for facilitating understanding and to prompt interactions and connections between participants and the tool.
- *Motivate learners* - Recognise small achievements to keep participants motivated to successfully complete the trainings on their own. In many cases, conducting reflections and appreciation sessions or posts that are fun and engaging will help boost and encourage those who are in the verge of falling out of a training programme.
- *Differentiated instruction* - Create materials for different learning styles, to cater to various learners' strengths and motivations.
- *Open communication* - Maintain an open and effective line of communication between trainers and participants so that support may be provided whenever necessary.
- *Consider culture norms* - Understand the cultural context when designing learning experiences. Aligning with existing resources and what is accepted culturally, learning materials become more accessible and accepted by the community. For example, in some contexts when addressing younger populations, caregivers may be more allowing of the following of a learning activity on TV or radio, but less so toward having learners be on their phones for a long time, even if they are learning.

Conclusions

When considering the use of digital as well as hybrid formats to support the positive impact and contributions of young persons in the fields of peace and security, every situation comes with a unique set of factors and challenges that need to be evaluated carefully. Across the youth-led and youth-focused work that built the basis for this paper, there are however a few cross-cutting considerations that the authors consider key to the successful use of digital and hybrid formats for greater impact in the YPS space and beyond.

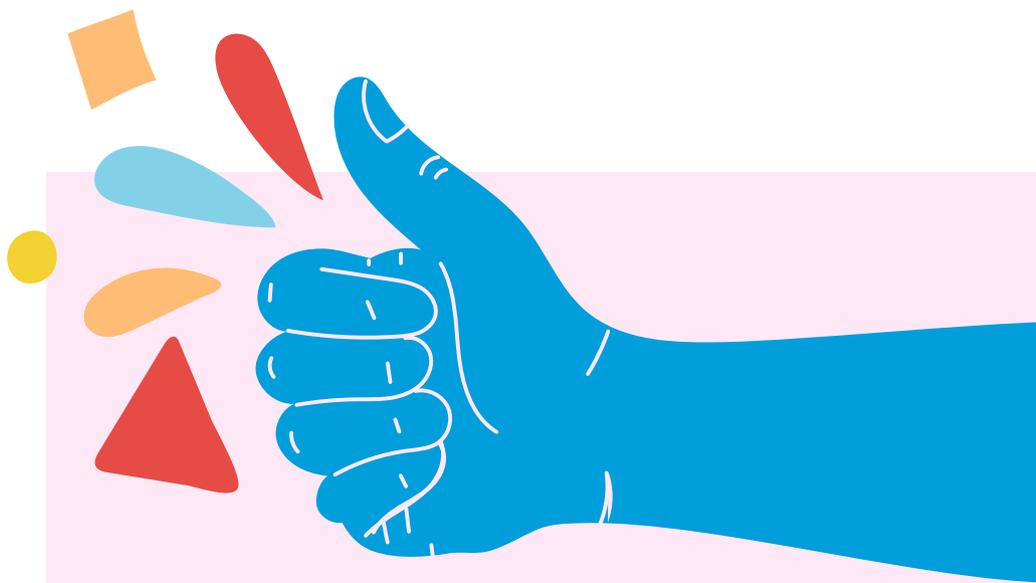
1. There is No One-Size-Fits-All

Clearly, digital and hybrid formats ensure continuity during unexpected disruptions, such as natural disasters, health crises or in situations of reduced mobility and where in-person meetings are not feasible. While these formats hold great potential for sustained activities, broader reach to participants, and sometimes easier access to learning, the authors would like to caution against considering hybrid or digital learning formats as the only way forward. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to digital and hybrid formats and remaining cautious of this will allow for more creativity in terms of ensuring meaningful participation of youth while also leaving no one behind. Offline formats, such as radio programming or assisted self-paced learning journeys may be chosen over hybrid or digital formats, also in times of disruptions. In many cases a combination between digital formats and offline formats will lead to the greatest impact.



2. Leverage Human-Centered Approaches

There is a digital divide to consider on a case-by-case basis. It is sometimes easy to assume that ‘everyone has access to the internet nowadays’ when the reality is that ‘access’ to digital spaces means different things for different young people. To some, reliable internet connectivity and data connection is the greatest challenge, while for others, it is rather the lack of appropriate technological gadgets or limited digital literacy. Other factors may include the difficulty to understand a major language in a training or event setting, or something as basic as a lack of proper space or an environment to be able to attend a training or event in a conducive manner. These circumstances, which are further reinforced by the complexities of conflict environments, require that support to youth is both human-centred and youth-responsive.



3. Carefully Consider Youths' Various Realities

With the lack of essential elements of face-to-face encounters, increased focus on leading with empathy and listening in an online space are measures to ensure continuity of the hosting of safe and encouraging spaces for our activities. It is important for training organisers to be aware that while youth are engaged in online training, they compartmentalise their online participation with other responsibilities at home, at school, or at work. Some young people might have an extra burden on their shoulders as breadwinners for their families, for example, which may interfere with their full prioritisation of online training activities. It is also important not to romanticise young people's positive participation in digital spaces, or how expertly participants can navigate digital tools, without mindful consideration of their needs and realities.

Actors in the YPS field and beyond, carry the responsibility to start from a point of deep understanding of their audience before determining the tools and approaches used, with the overall aim of contributing to closing the digital gap instead of inadvertently widening it. Youth peacebuilders themselves are often best placed to help determine the challenges and proposed solutions to overcome the digital divide.



4. Nurture Connections and Trust-Building

Peacebuilding in general relies on creating meaningful connections and building trust between individuals as well as between communities at different levels. Compared to face-to-face formats, digital spaces do not fully fill that gap as certain levels of informal connection and communication will in many cases be lost. Hybrid formats may offer an intermediary solution. However, the work ahead of us now is to learn how to discern the best point of combination between the virtual and the face-to-face in order to extract the maximum possible benefits from both worlds, guaranteeing the integration of learning in an optimal way.



5. Recognise Intergenerational Opportunities

Virtual and hybrid training formats provide great opportunities to promote intergenerational dialogue, exchange, and learning valuable for the YPS field. Online spaces may better allow everyone to be on 'equal footing' in terms of how participants are expected to participate, as it may stimulate exchanges on short notice and with less resources, compared to offline spaces where adults are often invited to only one session or as speakers during trainings. Learning sessions and exchanges on YPS in the Philippines are examples of this, which offered a great opportunity for young people to reclaim their space and showcase their good practices through facilitated virtual and hybrid learning exchanges. Intergenerational processes, where different stakeholders including adults, local leaders, academia, religious sector actors, and even leaders of government can, efficiently and cost-effectively, sit side-by-side and be in the same 'panel' with young people. This, along with skilled moderation and open interaction among the audience, has reaped fruitful outcomes in the Philippine context. This supports the YPS objective of young people to be recognised as 'equal partners' in peacebuilding alongside other stakeholders. Such opportunities can also be leveraged in virtual and hybrid training activities by giving opportunities for young people to become co-facilitators, albeit it should not take away from face-to-face incentives to reach the same outcomes.



6. Support Innovations for Localised Peacebuilding

The years following 2020 have required rapid innovation for support to young persons. This has also presented major opportunities for learning about new ways to localise peacebuilding. Multiple expressions of leadership for such ends have continued to emerge across the globe, in response to the health contingency and in its aftermath. In Colombia, as a sign of the proactivity, generosity, and enthusiasm of the trainers for wanting to keep trainings alive, trainers lived during the pandemic with their communities as they were 'forced' to create new bridges of communication and interaction with participants, especially in those territories with little connectivity. As another example, in the Philippines, the fact that participants connected from their homes meant that they were closer to their families and communities on a more regular basis. On a few occasions, participants were able to interview their parents, family members, and neighbours about their understanding of PVE, which allowed participants to gather insights by involving people around them, instead of getting inputs from people far away or limiting their references of these peacebuilding concepts to UN or other international documents. These cases demonstrate that youth have been at the forefront of engaging in peacebuilding and the co-designing of suitable solutions for training implementation at the most basic levels.



7. Learners' Mental Well-Being and Cognitive Ability in Times of Crises

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of considering learner mental well-being in the design and delivery of learning programmes. The unpredictable and often-dangerous nature of the crisis created a continuous state of worry and uncertainty, impacting learners of all ages and backgrounds. In times when every learner knows someone that is at high risk or in acute danger, it's important for learning designers and trainers to adopt a trauma-informed approach, acknowledging the potential negative effects of crisis on cognitive function. Safety and security are fundamental preconditions for effective learning. When these are compromised, the ability to absorb new information and engage in critical thinking is diminished.

Learning content should be adapted with flexibility and agility in mind, reflecting the inherent uncertainties of crisis situations. For instance, training programmes focusing on career development during economic downturns could benefit from a shift towards adaptability and resilience-building skills, rather than solely focusing on previously-adopted strategies. Recognising that perfect answers may not always be readily available fosters a more empathetic learning environment.

Trainers play a crucial role in supporting learner mental well-being. By demonstrating empathy and regularly checking in on learners' emotional states, trainers can create a safe space for open communication. Openly acknowledging the challenges of learning during times of uncertainty normalises these experiences and fosters a sense of community within the learning environment.



Brought together, digital and hybrid training formats will continue to offer new and fresh opportunities for meaningful youth participation and engagement in the youth, peace and security field.

The methodology taken and considerations made during the training design processes determine how well these opportunities are realised. Learning from the current experiences of young people will continue to lead to improvements and growth in the capacity-building field as lessons are learned, and good practices are adapted and replicated to scale up impact. Reflecting on the knowledge, skills and attitudes that young people and trainers acquire in different training formats, is already an important milestone in building peace from a distance.

