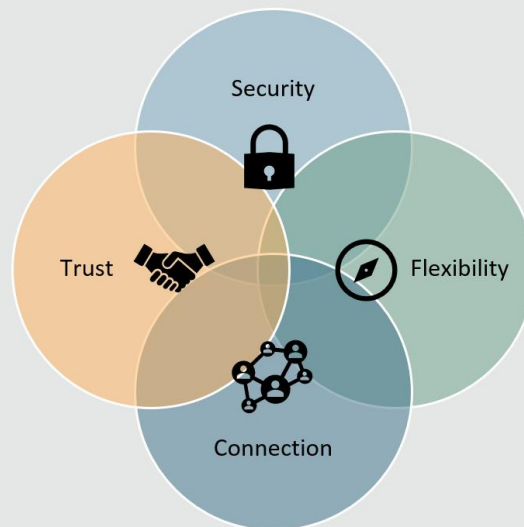




Throughout the past few months, given the new global circumstances, the Ottawa Dialogue has looked for new ways to engage and connect with our stakeholders, while transitioning to an online model for dialogues. Online meetings present a new set of needs and challenges which can be difficult to navigate. At the same time, this transition represents an opportunity to think more intentionally about how to build resilient relationships and processes and how to further the momentum we have garnered in the last decade.

Many in the mediation, facilitation and peacebuilding field are adjusting the structure of their work to face the challenges imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. While tailoring the work of the Ottawa Dialogue to an online world is an ongoing process, the work we have done thus far has allowed us to record some guidelines and values that have anchored our virtual engagement as it currently stands. We felt it useful to share our reflections and add to the already-existing knowledge on the subject. We have organized our observations under four pillars to emphasize our main guiding values: trust, security, flexibility and connection.



About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world. We create forums where parties can explore difficult issues in an analytical, problem-solving way to develop new paths forward. We then work with our partners to transfer these ideas to places where they can make a difference. As a complement to its field work, Ottawa Dialogue pursues a rich research agenda focused on conflict analysis, third party dialogue-based interventions, and best practices relating to “Track Two Diplomacy”.

Trust

Online meetings used to be a supplement to in-person gatherings; a way to quickly address specific points or questions. Having to rely on this different form of engagement as the primary mechanism of dialogue is new. Even if a dialogue has been taking place over many years, and trust has been established with and between the participants, it is important to translate this trust into the virtual space, to the extent possible. It is also important to recognise that the same level of trust we enjoy in the in-person space simply may not be possible online; one cannot push it beyond where the dialogue participants are ready to go. Trust may, indeed, be lost if one tries too aggressively to do so. The Ottawa Dialogue views the following as key points when it comes to establishing and retaining trust in the online dialogue space:

- Establishing a set of flexible and mutually agreed-upon **ground rules** can contribute to creating structured and efficient meetings. These should be structured to increase the trust and sense of familiarity of participants – in regard to speaking times, protocol to request the floor, etc.
- Encouraging regular individual and group **feedback** from participants and developing mechanisms to solicit it allows us to adapt and adjust quickly. This increases participants' sense of ownership of the dialogue process, highlighting that their opinion and input are still valued in the virtual space – perhaps even moreso.
- An element of trust is the extent to which people feel comfortable with technology. Creating a **written guide** for the online platform of choice and offering to do test-calls with individual participants ahead of time is a way to offer ongoing support. It also helps resolve technological unknowns before they become difficult, and potentially embarrassing incidents during meetings.
- Participants connecting to the meeting remotely may have concerns regarding network and cyber risks. Some people simply have an innate sense that electronic communications can never be made absolutely secure – they may be right! Showing an acute concern for the **online security and privacy** of participants and discussions is key to establishing trust and making sure participants feel safe in engaging online. It is also important to recognize that there is so much we can do in this regard, and that the agenda may simply have to be modified to remove highly sensitive matters until such a time as in-person meetings are again possible. At the end of the day, participants will determine the level of sensitive discussions they are comfortable with and they cannot be pushed if trust is to be maintained.

Security

Following on from the last point, security is typically the main concern with moving dialogue to online platforms. While no digital space is fully secure, heavily researching security solutions to ensure participant safety and privacy can expand the list of subjects participants are prepared to discuss. At the Ottawa Dialogue, we have found the following guidelines to be useful in increasing the security of our online meetings:

- Researching the most secure available meeting platforms and using their **security features**, like passwords or waiting rooms can enhance privacy and discreetness.
- Offering a **VPN service (Virtual Private Network)** to participants is a way to provide encrypted connection and ease concerns about network surveillance, if it is preferred.
- Generally asking participants to remain in a **private area** and **remove any personal information** from view of the camera is important to ensuring this information stays within the group.

Flexibility



The resilience of processes should not be taken as a given. A group's dynamics often depend on the resilience of its individuals. Connecting and listening to participants, and showing flexibility in the face of their concerns, allows for a better understanding of needs, reservations and potential fears. Here are some elements that has allowed the Ottawa Dialogue to remain flexible in the online world:

- Technology can be unpredictable, therefore, proactiveness is key. Circulating short troubleshooting guides is a way to quickly fix or find alternative routes to common technological issues, like microphone issues, connectivity, etc.)
- Having **team discussions** to establish potential concerns or downfalls in an online meeting can help prevent miscommunications, while clarifying shared goals and enhance cohesiveness.
- The **agenda** and decisions reached during our previous in-person meetings may have to be put aside for the time being or reconceptualized amid the new global circumstances. Anticipating these changes and encouraging new ideas is a key adaptive technique.
- **Debriefing** as an organizing team after a meeting is a key step in documenting, processing and understanding new practices and dynamics of meetings on these new platforms. This ensures that the team has a shared understanding of meetings and is able to effectively create an action plan afterwards.
- Encouraging **feedback** from participants whenever possible and being prepared for constructive criticism and learning curves allows for an adaptive and collaborative dialogue structure.



Connection

Dialogue not only rests on verbal communication, but it also relies heavily on non-verbal cues. Such non-verbal cues may be even more important than what is actually said. The conditions created by in-person meetings cannot all be transferred to an online setting. This creates challenges, but also opportunities to foster new group dynamics. These are the Ottawa Dialogue's key takeaways:

- **Monitoring** group processes online can be tricky but tools like anonymous polls or private chats help in understanding the participants' evolving mood. This may require the organizer to break the ice in this discussion and express sincere reflections themselves.
- Online meetings require a different kind of focus and energy than in-person meetings. Designing **shorter, recurrent sessions**, of a few hours each, allows for a more engaged and involved meeting and a clearer sense of progress in the digital realm. The option to meet in smaller, more focused sub-groups can also be used to enhance efficiency and better gage temperament.
- On that note, **subdividing** agenda items into smaller, more specific items and questions can be helpful in avoiding burnout and general loss of focus or interest in online discussion.
- Delineating **clear roles** for the organizers (i.e. tech support, note-taking, facilitation) is important for ensuring structure and methodical work.
- There will be many changes to the regular agenda, and new ideas and concerns will be expressed.
- Clear and efficient **notetaking** during meetings is important to document our group processes and ongoing dialogue progression.
- These notes also become useful when it comes to **transparent communication with funders**. In this turbulent time, we believe that discussions with funders around expectation management are important in maintaining an open and healthy relationship.



Conclusions

While navigating the new challenges of online meetings, we have to remember that some aspects of in-person experiences simply cannot be reproduced virtually. Spontaneous discussions held in informal contexts help create relationships and bonds between people even if the issues discussed around the table are polarizing. Anyone who knows the field, knows that the real magic of a multi-day, in-person meeting often takes place during the coffee breaks, the meals and the informal strolls around a local bazaar. The online space makes it very difficult to recreate those “humanizing” experiences, especially without the help of the five senses, lowered non-verbal cues, and heightened propensity for distraction.

In a highly general sense, the central problem with online dialogue from which most challenges stem, is the difficulty with forming human connections through a screen. For this reason, a key consideration in the decision to move to an online format must be the ambition of the agenda. When moving dialogues into the digital space, it may be unreasonable to expect the same types of results as one strives to achieve in the in-person space. Disregarding boundaries of participants to achieve “results” will not lead to breakthroughs; it will likely only result in the rapid erosion of the fragile trust and bonds which make these dialogues possible in the first place.

Meetings in the digital space should not strive to replicate in-person dynamics, and we simply have to recognise that the online space limited, even if it is all we have to work with at the moment. At the Ottawa Dialogue, creating online discussion is an ongoing process, with new lessons learned with each meeting. We recognize that different practitioners operate in vastly different realities and welcome any feedback or discussion, as this is a collective challenge and a learning curve for the world of dialogue facilitation.