

Making Online meetings just & sustainable



Guide for Virtual Hosting

Erasmus



drift
for transition



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Partners

We are a group of researchers across the Erasmus University of Rotterdam that share an interest in just sustainability transitions. This guide has been developed by the following partners:

Vital Cities and Citizens (VCC)

VCC is a collaboration between Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences (ESSB), Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC) and International Institute of Social Studies (ISS). The researchers involved focus on four sub-themes: Inclusive Cities and Diversity, Resilient Cities and People, Smart Cities and Communities, and Sustainable and Just Cities.

Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT)

DRIFT is a leading research institute in the field of sustainability transitions. We develop and share transformative knowledge to support people, cities, sectors and organizations to engage proactively with transitions.

UrbanA-project on Sustainable Just Cities

UrbanA aims to synthesize and broker knowledge for sustainable and just cities generated by prior research and innovation projects and translate this knowledge into action, empower participants to apply this knowledge locally, facilitate interaction among diverse participants, and influence policies in favor of sustainable and just cities.

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We would like to thank all the participants, facilitators, and speakers from our 4th event series on **“Making Online Meetings Just & Sustainable”** for sharing their time, experiences and ideas with us in order to develop this guide. We are particularly grateful to those who reviewed the draft of this guide, and to the Erasmus Initiative Vital Cities and Citizens for funding this publication and the abovementioned event.

[Link to visual notes](#) from webinar by illustrator **Menah Wellen**.

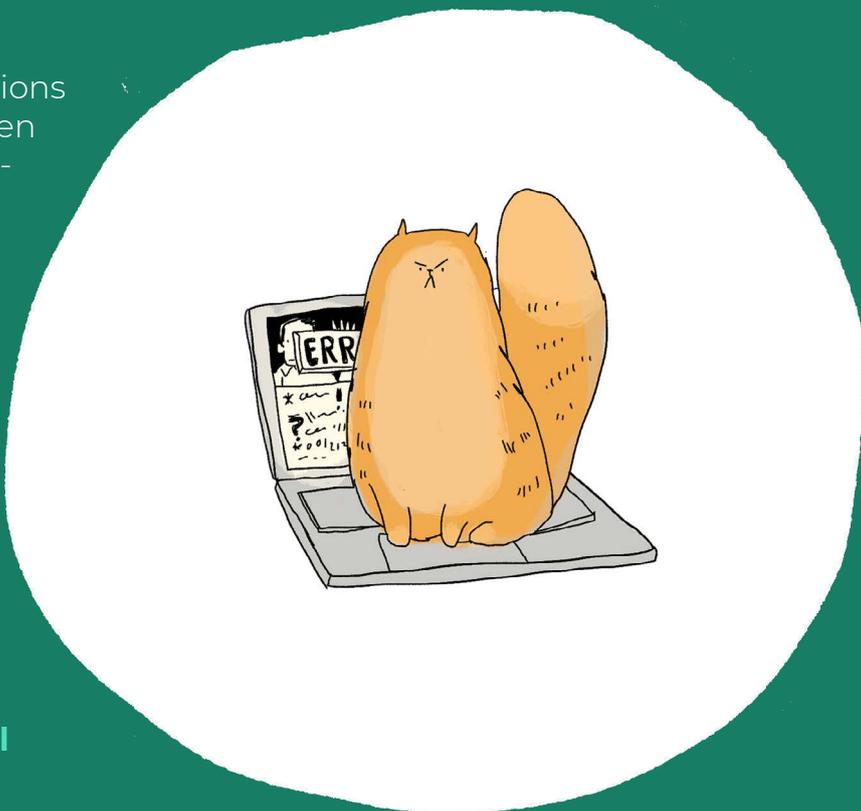


Introduction

Online Meetings have been around for a long time before the COVID-19 pandemic. The physical isolation during lockdowns led to an exponential rise in online meetings and other online collaborations worldwide. With or without Covid, online meetings are here to stay. However, physical distancing does not (need to) mean social distancing, as we can use the online universe to sustain and nurture our social connections. Online meetings inherently have a sustainability component to them as they are an alternative to the habit of flying around the world for professional gatherings. They can also save a lot of time, cost and avoid considerable amounts of CO₂-emissions and other unintended hazardous impacts. Yet, sustainability is more than tackling environmental issues. We believe there are social elements such as the human connection that need more attention in order to get the best out of online meetings in the future.

Furthermore, online interactions have the potential to unite humanity at an unprecedented scale across the world. The societal challenges that we are facing today, be it climate change, inequality, or health crises, require translocal collaboration and solidarity between different regions, cities, villages, cultures, and generations. Not only can online gatherings overcome physical distances, but there is also a potential to break through cultural, socio-economic, generational, or other intersectional barriers, possibly including and connecting more diverse groups of people. We believe that hosting online meetings in a more inclusive way is crucial to contribute to just sustainability transitions. Building on the earlier work of a variety of scholars such as **Agyeman et al. (2016)**, **Anguelovski et al. (2020)**, **Castán Broto & Westman (2017)**, and **Steenbergen & Schipper (2017)**, we broadly define just sustainability transitions as processes of change that aim to improve the quality of life – of present and future generations, of all humans and other living beings – and enable them not only to survive but also to thrive and flourish.

With the Just Sustainability Transitions (JUSTRA) study group, we have been experimenting with online connections in collaboration with many organizations. We are a group of researchers across the Erasmus University of Rotterdam that collaborate to deepen, translate and connect knowledge and practice on justice, sustainability, and transformative change through our **international events** and **publication series**. These efforts are a collaboration between the **Vital Cities & Citizens (VCC)**, the **Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT)**, the **Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (ESSB)**, and many others.



Most of the insights and knowledge in this guide come from networks and initiatives that have invested a lot of time and effort in social innovation, such as **ECOLISE**, the European Network for Community-led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability, **ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability**, the **Global Ecovillage Network**, the **Transition Towns Network**, and many others. In the past few years, we had the opportunity to collaborate with these and other partners in the **UrbanA-project on Sustainable Just Cities** and the **SONNET-project on Social Innovations in Energy Transitions**. Within those initiatives, we experimented with online and blended meetings such as the **SONNET Transformative Power Lab**, the **Urban Arenas**, and **Community Conversations** to connect change-makers across Europe.

One example of particularly inspiring input during the organization of the UrbanA arena events was the expertise of **Nenad Maljković** on **Virtual Teams for Systemic Change** and his **Remote Work Resources**. Furthermore, another source of knowledge was our last webinar on **Making Online Meetings Just & Sustainable** where we could collect tips and strategies from our participants and speakers.

Building on the latter experiences, we have learned that virtual hosting is a very particular 'art'. While we do not consider ourselves experts in online organizing, we have been and are learning how to facilitate connective action through online communication and would like to share some of our learnings along this journey. In that sense, this is not an ultimate guide on how to host online meetings but a guide on how to experiment with them and try new strategies to improve them in the future. In fact, this guide for virtual hosting started as an internal document for our team to collect and pass on knowledge and experience, but also to share remaining questions and dilemmas.

We believe that **unlocking the potential benefits of online meetings** is currently more a matter of **social innovation** than technological innovation. Even if technology is a necessary condition to create online connections, it is not enough: we also need alternative ways of doing, thinking and organizing to make optimal use of the existing technology.



This guide is structured as follows: Within the first section, we introduce our top strategies to host online meetings. Second, we present a set of tools and platforms to help you improve the online experience. Third, we invite you to reflect upon some of the dilemmas we have encountered (and still have) during our journey. Lastly, we take a step further and share some insights on blended meetings. Finally, we include some of the resources and articles that we have gathered and/or developed to expand your knowledge beyond this guide.

10 Strategies to host virtual meetings

1) Be prepared: Chill (but not too much!)

What could go wrong in an online meeting? Well, we have a lot of embarrassing stories about that. Even if there are many things one does not need to worry about in the online world (catering, chairs, tables, traffic jams, etc.): even then, online meetings can take more time to prepare than physical meetings. We have intensely struggled some times after leaving things to the last minute, wrongly assuming that all would work out and run smoothly. The positive aspect of those experiences is that we could learn how to plan ahead but also give room for unexpected circumstances. During our webinars/meetings, we aim to have a script which details each activity, responsible people for each of them, and the overall flow of the event. As this guide, our **template** is a work-in-progress process, and it is improved after every meeting.

Additionally, we always try not to be limited by our idea of what an online meeting is. We usually first think about our end goal and what we want to achieve with that meeting. Rather than starting with the format and structure, we think about the main takeaway/eye-opener our audience will get. Once we have a goal, we try to be creative and think beyond oral presentations. There is a lot more you can do: discussions, **watching a movie together**, exploring other online platforms, asking people to do other activities in their locations, and much more!



2) Sharing roles and responsibilities

Online meetings require more than just launching a platform and letting participants enter the digital 'room'. There are many different roles, and the bigger the audience and the longer the webinar is, the more explicit roles exist. Yet, this does not mean one single person cannot organize a webinar with a lot of

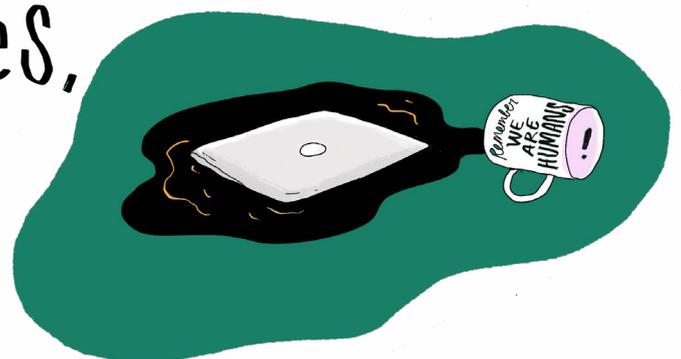
participants. We have done that, and we encourage you to do it as soon as you are aware of the different roles and find a good way to combine them. Examples of roles include:

- Main facilitator that introduces the overall topic and keeps track of the agenda,
- Speakers
- Breakout group facilitators
- Note-takers
- Time-keepers
- Virtual host(s) for managing the platforms, answering the chat, e-mails and helping participants with technical problems or questions.
- One can also involve a 'heart-keeper' to enter the scene to bring back energy to the group, for instance, by inviting participants to do some stretching/physical exercises.

As mentioned before, it is possible for one person to combine multiple roles, but if and when possible it is better to share tasks. Involving people to take up an active role might also enable them to be more engaged in the meeting and enjoy it more.

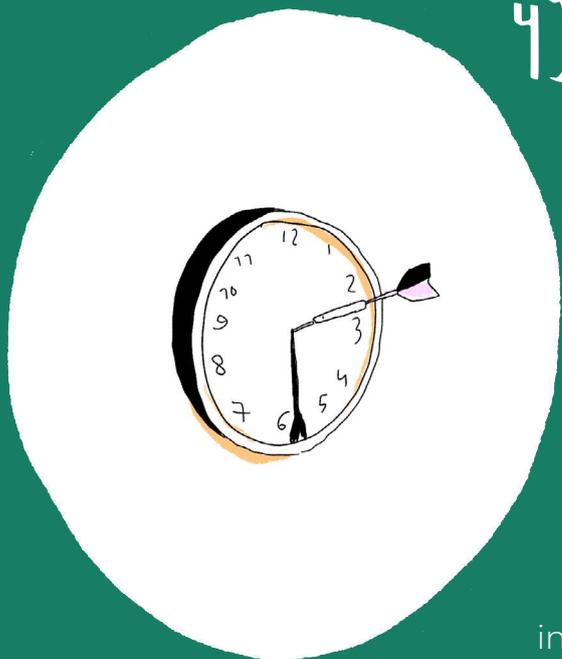
We have talked about organizing the hosting team, but not about how to be a 'team'. As we would normally do in the real world, we always strive to 'arrive' to the meeting one/half hour before to provide a space for the team to welcome each other, revisit the format, roles, responsibilities, test their devices, and check whether someone has a question, suggestions, or last-minute changes. Likewise, we do the same with speakers/external collaborators/volunteers, so they can get ready before the participants enter the scene. When the meeting is over, we often aim to have a short moment to share some reflections and have a little celebration with the hosting team and speakers (optional). We do this by either staying in the main meeting until all participants have left the room or sharing a new private link. We think that having space to connect before the event, and saying goodbye afterwards, are small details that are often forgotten and may bring the spirit of teamwork and collaboration to the virtual world.

3) Anticipate troubles,
but remember...
We are humans!



When we plan, we do so by thinking about the ideal event, but also for the worst-case scenario. We are not perfect, and there will be mistakes, but it is good to consider the most common ones and be ready to mitigate them. Some examples could be that a participant does not respect others (e.g., **Zoombombing**). In that case, the virtual host should warn the person about rules and behavior or remove them from the meeting. Likewise, a participant could accidentally unmute themselves during a presentation and should be muted by the virtual host.

At any point, the whole meeting could also crash for whatever reason. Before the meeting starts, we usually tell participants they should reconnect or wait until they receive a new email from the hosting team if something goes wrong. For that reason, we strive to have an alternative meeting link with a different platform account. Similarly, we have learned that online meetings will more often than not involve unexpected issues such as videos getting frozen, bad sound, problems sharing slides, just to mention a few. If, for some reason, someone gets cut off during the meeting, trust that the person will try to reconnect later to the meeting or via email/messages/phone afterward. In a few words, if your 'ideal online meeting' faces any of these problems, stay calm, go with the flow, and make the most out of it with what you have.



4) Taking time: No time is the right time

There is a natural tendency to keep online meetings as short as possible. While understandable, it is important to remember that we might actually need more time to connect with each other in the virtual environment. We do not have informal chats that usually occur 10-15 minutes before and after the meeting. When not taking into account the time needed for bonding and networking during an online event, there is an obstacle to achieving human connection.

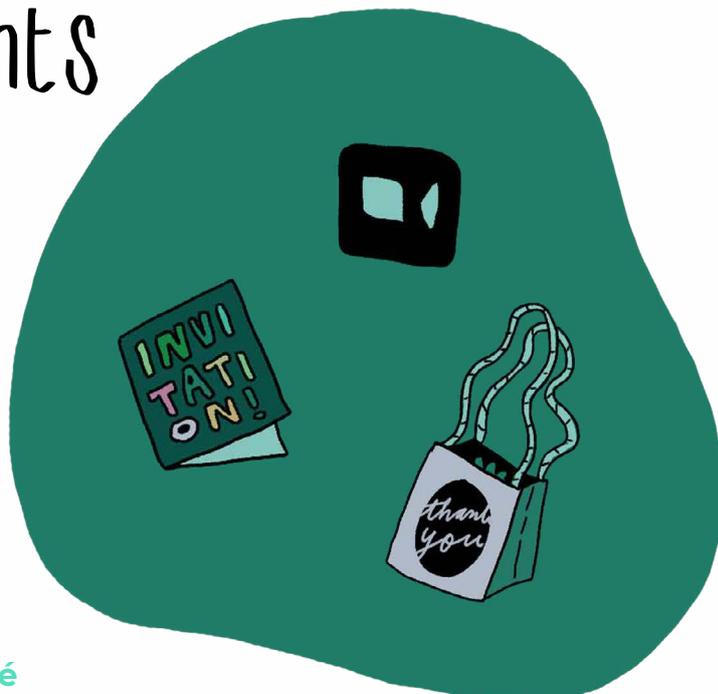
Sometimes, it is better to have the meeting take a bit longer to be able to ensure that there is enough time for interactions, questions, and a break. An online meeting does not need to consist of people sitting in front of screens all the time - there are many ways in which we can integrate physical movements or even go offline for a while as part of our online meeting (see also strategy **#6** and **#10**). If the meeting is longer than 1,5 hours, we usually integrate a break, even if it is self-organized as part of break-out group sessions. There we also invite participants to take responsibility for their own physical and mental needs and not be afraid to take a break if they need one!

Take into account that it can be really challenging for people that live in different continents/time zones to join meetings that are always at the same time. This is one of the main challenges to making our online meetings more inclusive. For that reason, we will try to add more flexibility by rotating the time of every second meeting to make sure participants have equal access to online webinars that aim for more just & sustainable cities. Whether we organize small or big meetings, we can offer different times/days to our participants through voting systems such as Doodle and select the one where most of the participants are available. Last but not least, another interesting and easy idea we could implement for incoming events is to refer to the **UTC system** (with +/- x amount of hours) when we inform the time of the event. In that way, everyone can more easily make the conversion to their local time.

5) Engage participants before, during and after the meeting

Before

Before the event starts, we share 'virtual étiquettes' for participants to follow when, for example, they want to speak to the audience. It may also be useful to send any relevant links regarding new virtual tools, methods, or formats (e.g., [World Café](#) and [Fishbowl](#)) that your audience may not know about in order to run the event as smoothly as possible. In our experience, something that is often appreciated by participants is sending the agenda before the meeting starts. In that way, participants get a general idea of what to expect in terms of participation, topics, timeline and get ready for it. While this may sound obvious to some, we have participated in many online events where the agenda is actually not shared beforehand.

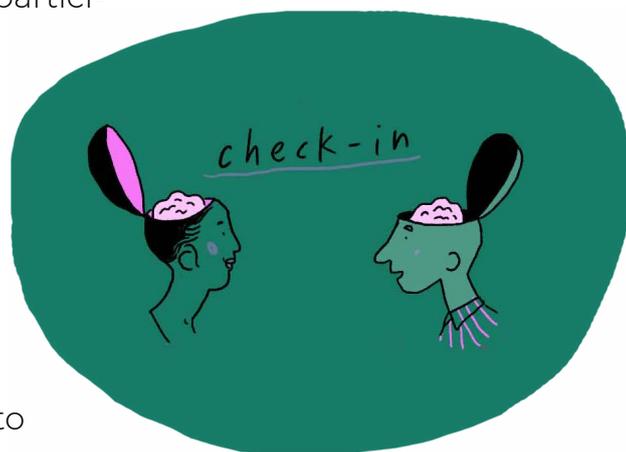


One strategy we want to try in the future before our events is to invite people to share their opinions in a survey about what they expect from the event, how active they want to be, what they would like to hear/discuss or, going to the next level, and ask them to vote for movies/topics/speakers. In that way, we could adapt our original plan and have participants engaged from point zero.

During

Where possible, we aim to start each meeting with a 'check-in'. This can be a very quick round of thoughts or comments in the chat about who they are, where they are located, and how they feel today. It makes a huge difference for the atmosphere, and it often saves time: when people feel connected and heard from the start, they feel more at ease and less of a need to over-explain themselves. After everyone has spoken, organizers/facilitators know what the general mood of the team/participants is and how to work with it.

Taking the time to get to know each other at the beginning helps people to open up during small discussions and plenaries. If there are many people, the previous ice-breakers could take the form of group exercises such as polls before (e.g., 'How is the weather in your city right now?') and after the meeting (e.g., 'Describe your experience of this webinar in one word'), informal talk moments in break-out rooms, or going to



platforms such as **Gather Town**, and have “the task” to ask a few informal questions to (at least) two people (e.g. ‘What is your favorite dish?’). Another way to engage participants is through a live document where they could take down notes, follow the conversation, have a space for brainstorming, and possibly add their thoughts (**See Collaborative note-taking**). Last but not least, we strive to have a check-out at the end of the meeting too. This could even be just one word, either spoken or in the chat or using a Word Cloud like **Mentimeter**.

After

There are plenty of opportunities to engage participants after the event. One of them is sharing what happened during the event on social media and newsletters. This allows participants to not only share their thoughts, but also connect with other people that could not attend. After each event, we strive to send an email with news, insights, pictures, visual harvesting, social media posts, and/or future actions.

6) Awaken the Senses

Stimulating the senses is an excellent way of energizing people and bringing them back to the discussion. After hosting many webinars, we have a whole list of strategies that we use:

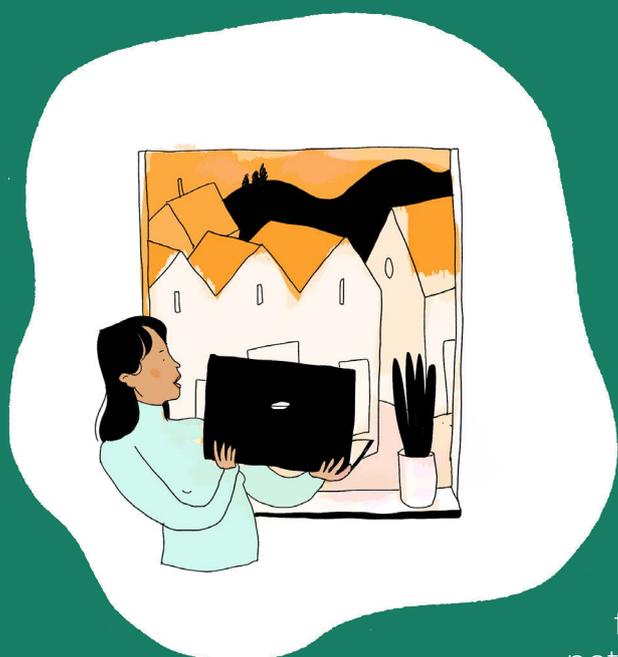
Visual

With online meetings, the use of visualization is even more important than in on-site presentations. When possible, we aim to involve local artists that help to visualize the main insights from presentations and discussions. This helps to not only explain abstract concepts but also spark further enthusiasm in the audience. Many projects have, for example, travel budgets that are not being used. These budgets can be re-allocated to invest in local art communities and let participants use all illustrations to help spread the word.

But even without such art budgets, we can get creative too. For instance, we often ask people to change their background according to a specific theme or question that is central to the meeting. During one of our events, the **Transformative Power Lab**, we asked participants: “What image represents power for you?” and asked them to add that image as a background image in Zoom. People were then invited to talk about it in small groups as a way to introduce themselves to each other while also informally easing into the topic of the meeting. In addition, throughout the meeting people could marvel at the ‘mosaic’ of different power-related background images.

Hearing

What is more relaxing than waiting while listening to a nice song? Well, we need to recognize that listening to elevator/call centre music may be very annoying too, so the type





of music we strive to use is always related to the topic of our event. By using this simple tool, people can connect to the same mood by listening to the same song, and sometimes even dancing! We usually do our 'walk-in' with music related to the topic of the event while we wait for participants to arrive. For our webinars, we have our playlist [#Powerintransition](#) with 100+ songs about resistance, protest, liberation, political change & social critique. As the time to play music is often limited to the waiting time before starting and breaks, another fun part with the hosting team is deciding which songs to share.

Touch

After some hours of being in front of the computer, we need energizers! Our facilitators often ask people to get off their chairs and try out some stretching exercises or whatever movement comes to their minds. Sometimes the heart-keeper starts facilitating this with exercises and passes the ball to another participant. Another way to involve this sense is by asking participants to draw and write something on paper or making craftwork with available materials.

Smell and Taste

When there is a budget, we can send a package of food or drinks to make participants smell or taste something similar during the meeting. When there is no budget, we often encourage participants to make themselves a drink or come back to the screen with a nice drink or e.g. piece of fruit. We could also invite participants to go outside and smell their surroundings (flowers, trees, city life) and share that when returning to the online universe. The fact that we are physically separated does not mean we cannot share physical experiences with each other!

7) Be fully present in body and mind

This is one of the biggest lessons we have learned. We aim to treat online meetings as if they are onsite/face-to-face meetings. We make sure there is an agenda, a clear purpose, clarity on roles, and facilitation style. We also strive to avoid dividing our attention into different tasks while we are in a meeting. It's easier to get distracted by another screen, emails, phone, or preparing coffee. This is one of the things



that makes online meetings exhausting and cumbersome for everyone involved. As the hosting team, we always strive to turn on our videos and encourage others to do the same (if the internet and personal circumstances allow it) and interact in the chat. Some people hide their self-view if they are distracted by it: Everybody tends to look at themselves quite often and that makes people less present. Another way to engage with the audience and speakers is reacting to what other people say by waving one's hands, clapping, or giving a thumbs up, rather than using reaction emojis. This can make the silence from muted people more bearable. One inspiring example in this direction is the hand signals that the **Occupy Movement** uses in its protests and general assemblies as a way to not interrupt the speaker while using the microphone. Even though it was not made for online meetings, it could be a different way of communicating reactions.

When we facilitate, we strive to draw connections between different speakers, and when necessary, rephrase or customize what was shared so far. When we want to facilitate a discussion, we clarify how people can engage. There are many different options depending on the group: people can raise their hand when they want to speak, we can invite people to just unmute and share in a **'popcorn' or other styles**, focus on using the chat for questions and comments, or using a platform to send and vote questions. If the group of participants is large, creating small teams facilitates more meaningful conversations. In our events, we have experimented with formats such as the **World Café Method** by inviting people to discuss multiple questions in multiple rounds of breakout groups.

Whatever method we choose for facilitating discussions, it is important that the facilitator can be fully present and dedicated to seeing and hearing the group and tune into it. While it is possible to combine this role with the role of a speaker, time-keeper, or technical host, in our experience, meetings improve when **facilitation is a dedicated task**.

8) Create a safe and flexible space

One of the main challenges for online meetings, and for meetings in general, is to create a safe space where participants can feel welcome and free to share their thoughts and engage with each other. Lucia di Paola emphasized in her talk the need of having uncomfortable conversations around different/contradictory opinions and statements, so participants can navigate disagreements and differences (See epilog). There are many layers to this challenge, but one of the simpler approaches is to make sure to set some etiquettes on how to interact. As we mentioned before, at the beginning of every meeting, we aim to set some etiquettes, not only about technicalities (e.g. mute yourself when not speaking, raise your hand when you want to speak, etc.), but also include some guidelines on mutual respect and consideration when formulating questions or sharing thoughts. In that sense, we make sure to give a clear warning for people who do not respect other participants, and let them know beforehand that they otherwise might be removed.



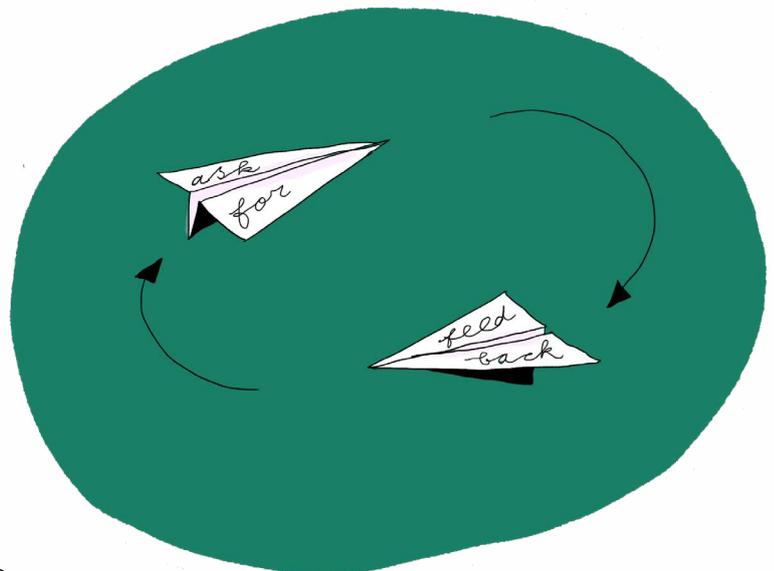


Furthermore, we are always looking for ways to balance between on the one hand encouraging people to participate in discussions, on the other hand accepting when people do not want to participate. According to our experience, people often run away after the facilitator says: "Now, we are going to the break-out ro...", and boom! Half of the participants quit the meeting... Sometimes, they do not feel like debating with a small group, or they simply cannot talk/turn on their camera. Yet, that does not mean that participants are neither interested in what happened within the small group and plenary discussions with speakers nor that they have to leave the meeting. Offering other options is a good way to keep participants engaged and stay until the end. One idea is adding a 'listening room' when

having group discussions in break-out rooms. This consists of having an extra break-out room where another speaker/facilitator offers a bonus talk with a Q&A section or a break-out room without any interaction until everyone comes back from the discussions.

9) Ask for feedback

We learn by doing, and every time we host a meeting, we get new insights. We usually ask for feedback right after the event, either verbally or through surveys, and later on, through newsletters or follow-up emails. We always take feedback seriously and strive to make time to implement it. Yet, we are still testing different ways to do this as the response rate we have gotten so far is still low.



Some ideas we would like to test during coming events is inviting people to give feedback before, during, and after the event. As we mentioned in **strategy #5**, feedback is not only about filling a survey. It could also turn into different alternatives. We think that asking participant's opinions before the event would help us to sharpen our agenda/topics/format according to finding a middle point between their reflections and our goals. Feedback during the event could take the form of an extra activity before finishing the session and giving the closing words. This could encourage participants to not postpone it for later and evaluate the event with fresh thoughts. Lastly, social media is a good tool to engage with participants and non-participants to collect thoughts after the webinar. We often share the 'snapshots' and quotes from speakers/participants to engage our followers in a conversation.

10) Go offline

Paradoxically, to meaningfully connect online, we also need to be offline. Being in too many on-line meetings is an exhaustive joy kill for anyone. We sometimes try to involve offline elements such as going outside to do some exercises and coming back to reflect with other participants (**See strategy #6**).

We think that providing offline time during meetings rather than running one-hour meetings could help people to be more active during discussions and plenaries. Finally, not all meetings that cannot happen face to face (due to Corona or otherwise) need to become online meetings. Some of them may become emails, documents, postponed, or simply cancelled.



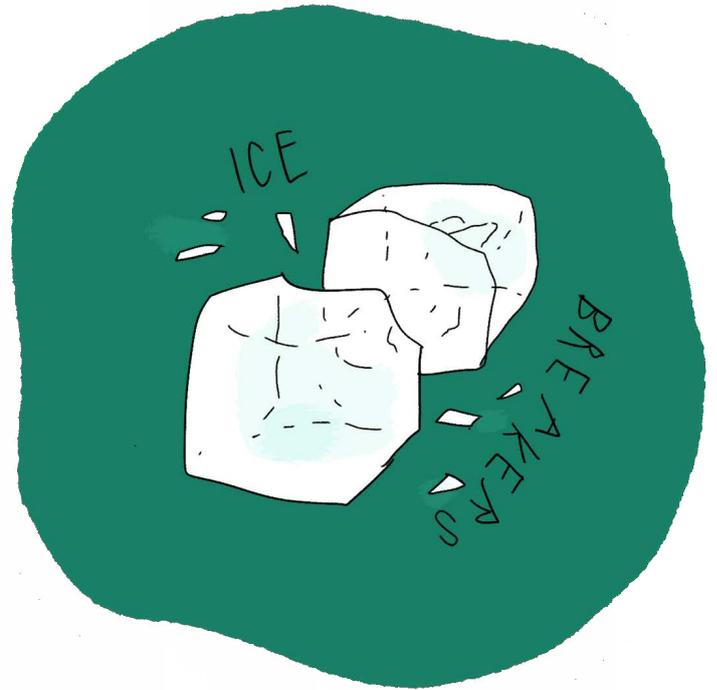
Tools to improve the online experience

During the last years, many new platforms and tools became available to make a little change in the traditional format of someone speaking and the audience listening. Here we present new tools we have tried/will try in past/future events that complement some of the strategies mentioned before.



Ice breakers / Virtual worlds

Starting an informal conversation during online meetings could (sometimes) be quite awkward because everyone expects the 'actual' meeting to start and go through the planned agenda. In the 'offline world', there was a moment before the meeting where people could gather and have small conversations that were not related to the meeting and possibly getting to know a new person.

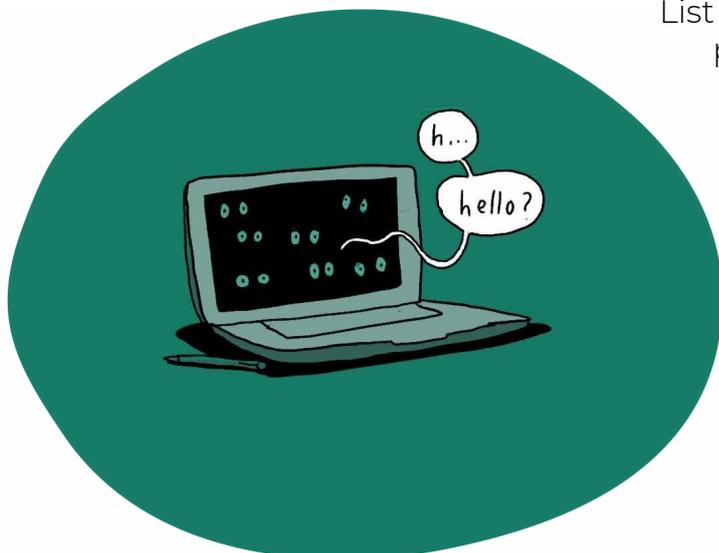


One good way to bring back that moment is by creating a completely new 2D/3D world for participants.

During the **fourth UrbanA event on Sustainable and Just Cities**, we started the online meeting as usual on our zoom platform, and after a quick introduction to the agenda overview, we invited participants to switch to another 'less formal' web app. This platform was **Gather Town** (See more apps on the list below), a video chat platform designed to make virtual interactions more human. As this app was new for almost all our audience (including us!), we spent a couple of minutes explaining how to use it. People could 'have a walk' in a 2D world, make their own avatars, and find other participants to talk about topics that were not related to the meeting. All participants had one mission: Talk to at least 2 people. We can use it at the beginning and at the end of the meeting as informal places, but running all the webinars on such a platform could also be possible.

We would like to stress that we have had some issues when using these apps because sometimes the audio and video needs to be disconnected from the main platform (e.g., Zoom, M.Teams, Google Meet) in order to switch to another app. Otherwise, people may hear overlapping voices and consume more data.

List and links to 'ice-breakers' and relevant platforms:



- **Gather Town**
- **Topia**
- **Spatial Chat**
- **Famera**
- **Virtuali**
- **Portal**

Collaborative note taking platforms



Note-taking is key for every meeting, not only online, but online meetings make the creation of a collective memory especially relevant. Having someone in charge of notes frees other participants to actively listen to the speaker, and it allows organizers to re-use that material for follow-up research/social media/newsletter/blog posts.

Sometimes there are note-takers assigned before a meeting. Other times, we ask for volunteers for note-taking during the meeting. Especially when having a large number of break-out groups, we invite the groups to self-organize and appoint a note-taker. Here it is important to have a collaborative note-taking platform, so participants can skim through the notes of every group. By having all notes in a 'common space', people can easily check the notes of other groups, and look back at the notes of their own group. This document can also be used to invite participants to add notes after the meeting and/or to correct and complement the notes that were taken.

Note-taking can also be a way for facilitators/participants to more actively engage with the meeting. Here it is important to stress that note-takers are not only writing machines - whether they are pre-assigned or volunteering. When appropriate, note-takers should have the chance to participate and contribute to the discussion. Sometimes we need our pre-assigned note-takers to listen and gather participants' opinions and sometimes to participate and add their questions and perspectives to the group.

One thing that we have learned is to be careful about using complex visual note-taking platforms. As not everybody is up to date with new interfaces, this may distract participants from engaging in discussions. Whenever possible, we aim to find volunteers and explain to them beforehand how the platform works. If that is not possible, we shortly give instructions to participants before the discussion.

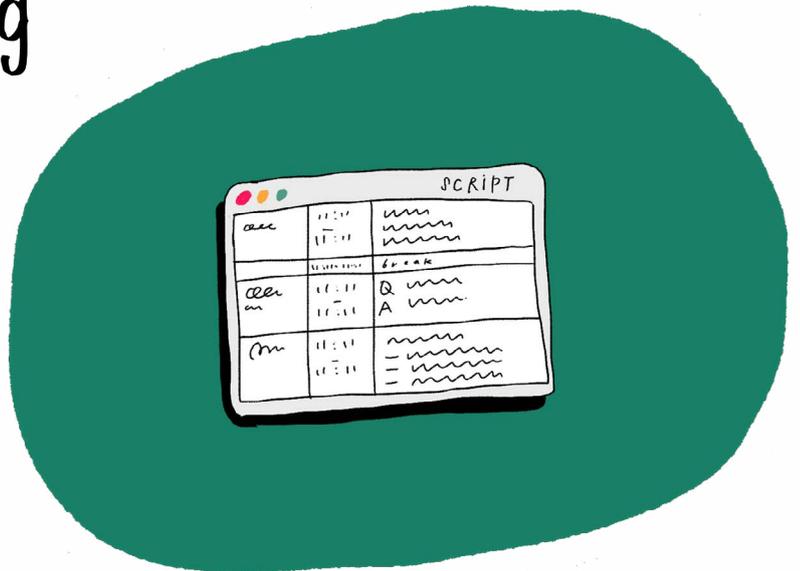
Here are the names and links to some note-taking platforms we have used during our webinars, and alternatives:

- [Google docs](#)
- [Miro](#)
- [Jamboard](#)
- [Lucidspark](#)
- [Invision](#)
- [Mural](#)



Script for hosting online meetings

So far, we have mentioned strategies, tools, roles that we have tried during our online meetings. There are many different elements and it is hard to remember all of them. This is why we have developed a script template that we can have at hand at all moments of the online event. This script is a guiding document and planning tool with a series of steps (e.g., activities/tasks, duration/time table, and responsible person/s or roles) for our hosting team to follow at the webinar/meeting.



Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that all those steps are not fixed elements and could be adapted according to the goal and format of the meeting. As we mentioned before, this script is always re-assessed and improved every time we host a webinar. In fact, the comparison between the script and what happened during the meeting is already good feedback for the next event. The script is divided into three moments: before, during, and after the event.

Here it goes! ([Link to the script](#))

The bright and dark sides of online meetings



We have spoken about how to host virtual meetings so far, but this is only one of the goals of this document. We also strive to make online meetings more just & sustainable for everyone. In that sense, we will share some of the dilemmas we came across during our journey and how we have chosen to deal with them for now. We think the transition from physical to online meetings is happening everywhere, but at the same time is leading to positive and negative consequences. We do not have all the answers to solve these dilemmas yet, but we would like to invite you as a facilitator to reflect along with us, so you can react to them during your planning and help us to find better solutions. Even if not all dilemmas are puzzled out, we think some of them could be avoided with better preparation and planning.



The digital divide

As we navigate how to make online meetings just and sustainable, the first and foremost questions that come are: Who is participating? And Who are we (not) including in our online meetings? **Vaishali Joshi emphasized in her talk** that while online meetings enable larger participation in many dimensions, they could even widen the gap between people in many ways and reproduce injustices.

To deal with this dilemma, we cannot assume that everyone has immediate access to an online meeting just by publishing a link on the web. The digital divide between those actors who have ICT access and those who do not causes new unforeseen costs on many actors due to challenges in access and prices of data, power supply, and electronic devices. The longer the meetings, the higher the costs. When moving physical meetings online, possibly some of the travel budgets could be reallocated to facilitate the access of speakers and participants to online meetings. This could help to reduce mental stress produced due to the infrastructural and monetary challenges encountered.

On the other hand, accessibility is not only about resources. We consider that reflecting upon the access of people that either speak other languages, or have sensory (hearing and speech) impairment, is part of this dilemma too. In that sense, new ways of organizing and enabling these users to be part of this medium are a big challenge for the virtual world. In order to narrow down this gap, another thing to strive for is to include different types of translators during online events.

On a different note, the digital divide comprises underlying power structures that could be addressed when planning new online meetings. The high number of meetings hosted and organized from the global north can become problematic for members of the global south, for all the reasons above. Besides the aforementioned considerations, there is also work to be done in terms of deciding if, when and how to host and organize new events. This could happen through an open dialogue between members from different regions to agree upon different time zones, culture norms/practices, and resources needed.

Another way to get an understanding of our audience's needs could be adding questions/polls during the event about under which conditions people joined the meeting (e.g., finding a proper space, office, home, fast/low internet connection, local time, sharing laptops, and using smartphones). Having that in mind can help us to improve the planning for future events.

Digital platforms

Power relations are also present among high-tech companies that compete with each other to find their spot within the virtual market. At first, we may think that platforms such as Airbnb, Uber, and Zoom decentralize the power from typical monopolies such as larger phone companies, but in the end, another monopoly comes from that process. That concentration of power is producing a lock-in situation where people have gotten used to specific platforms and their features like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet and don't explore new platforms. In their attempts to replace larger companies, startups and social enterprises are improving their efficacy, breadth of tools, pricing, apps integration, security, privacy, and sustainability components such as low power consumption, and even getting their power from renewable energy systems.

The transition to better platforms may require more time and energy from both participants and organizers to explore and learn practices from other more sustainable alternatives. We can only hope that as more people are getting used to online meetings, they will become more aware of the latter issues, and therefore more open and adaptive to other platforms. However, we think that simple guidance for using new alternatives by hosts can further increase the usability of the platform and new tools.

We are still dealing with this dilemma, and we have chosen to keep using Zoom as our main platform. Our team did look at open source alternatives (See list below), but we concluded the features integrated into our current membership would provide us extra benefits and possibilities to deal with other dilemmas as described above. Even though this is our current choice, it does not need to be the main preference for everyone. We will again reconsider the use of new platforms in the future and hopefully change to a better option.

Another related dilemma is that most of the platforms mentioned before within the **tools section** (e.g., ice-breakers and collaborative note-taking), as well as having the camera off/on, have a big impact on data usage. As a result, the resources we need to access online meetings are higher. Here we go back to our previous dilemma about the digital divide, but also to many of the strategies we mentioned before. Our decisions in this regard are always according to the purpose of the meeting. After that, we choose the 'trade-off' we want to make to achieve our main goal and aim for more just & sustainable online meetings.



Open source alternatives:

- **Big Blue Button**
- **Fair Teaching**
- **Meet Coop**
- **Jitsi**

Others:

- **Whereby**
- **Highfive**

Overstimulation of visuals

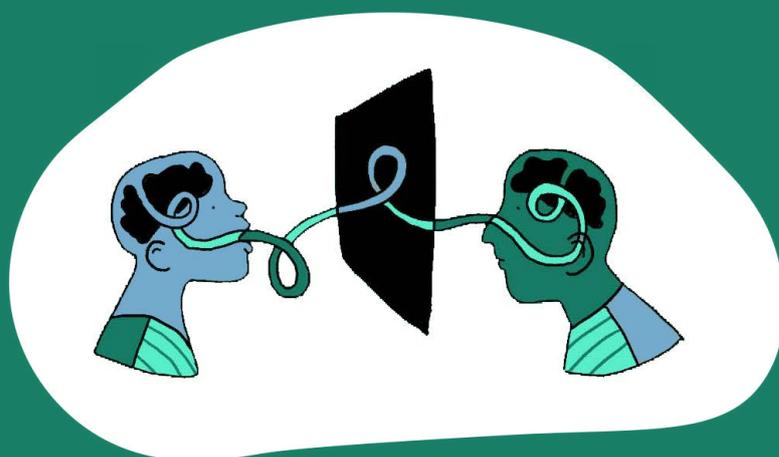
We have advised you to stimulate the participant's senses, but everything has its limits. Bombarding participants with endless visuals for the sake of it can be as distracting as large amounts of text, just as icebreaker apps without proper introduction or need can alienate your participants from the meeting.

Moreover, not all visuals are equally inclusive. As we mentioned before, people with sensory disabilities, specifically vision impairment or color vision deficiency, could have issues understanding certain messages. For instance, if 8% of the male population in the world has a colour deficiency, is that something we can take into account **when preparing presentations and visuals**, by e.g. **avoiding certain colour combinations?** Having in mind these kinds of issues can help us to plan our visuals, presentations, and formats.

Language barriers - Mind the gap!

Most international meetings are happening in English - and while it is great to have a language that is spoken around the globe, we cannot forget that not everyone speaks English well enough (or has access to English education) to follow discussions and/or express themselves as they would like to.

On the one hand, we would like to have online meetings in many different languages, including translators, but on the other hand, we often do not have enough budget to hire those professionals.



We think some strategies we could try in the future are spending part of the budget for artists on translators instead and using subtitle/transcription tools, and adapting our lexicon for a more comprehensive terminology. Another way to deal with this dilemma is experimenting with international events or break-out rooms entirely in other international languages (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, Portuguese, and French). We believe that those actions are key ingredients for making online meetings more inclusive.

Finding a comfortable space...



We have heard many times the phrase: “Please, try to find a quiet space during the meeting”. Sometimes participants are in transit or have their children or other housemates running around their working space, and they simply cannot turn their camera/microphone on. We always want participants to be active, turn on their videos, and get involved during discussions, but at the same time, we want them to be there, even if they do not have the possibility to speak.

To address this dilemma, we invite participants to communicate their circumstances when appropriate so they can check whether it is okay to listen to (a part of the session) while taking a more spectating backseat position. We have also learned that, as the hosting team, we should be flexible in these matters and not assume people can always find a quiet/comfortable space for online meetings at home.

Online meetings versus physical meetings

Another dilemma is the endless discussion about whether online meetings will ever be able to fully replace physical meetings. On the one hand, we have discussed many strategies to infuse online meetings with more human connection and that sense of togetherness that comes with live encounters. On the other hand, it is often quite hard to stimulate within the online medium the same informal exchanges that occur before, after, and during meetings.

To complicate things further, we are constantly reflecting within some projects whether we should have meetings on-site again (if possible) with a small group of people, meaning that we will increase our carbon footprint, or whether we should try to organize all meetings online to allow more people to participate and eliminate travel from the equation. With the JUSTRA Study Group, we have chosen to deal with this dilemma by going and remaining mostly online as this decision will help us to strengthen our **translocal** collaborations and solidarity.

What's next? The future is blended

Many of our colleagues are living outside of Rotterdam, even in different countries, and they are not always available at Erasmus University or may frequently work from home. We think it is imperative to provide them with an opportunity to connect remotely for the organization's activities, and most importantly, for participating in project meetings. With institutions and countries reopening again after the COVID-19 pandemic, people changed their mindset about working from home at the office, aiming for more flexibility between both environments. We believe online meetings, as well as online tools mentioned in this guide, are here to stay, and therefore the next step is the fusion between the virtual and real world.

Hybrid meetings present a different opportunity: the flexibility to attend or not in person, but there are, of course, many other challenges we need to face in order to bring a pleasant experience. First of all, more people/equipment are needed, and different roles take place both online and offline. According to our experience, it requires more time for planning and a larger script for the organization with the description of roles and tasks. However, the biggest challenge we may face in terms of blended meetings is finding the right balance of participation between both publics. This means not focusing too much on live participants and including online ones in discussions, plenaries, and Q&A sections. Here it is essential to ensure that online participants see what is presented, know what is going on in the physical room, and can hear clearly. In the same way, on-site participants should clearly hear and see online participants.

Within this subject, organizations like DRIFT have already **shared their extensive experience** with the hybrid world together with useful tools, descriptions of roles, and some rules that could help us to plan our meetings. Similarly, the UrbanA project on Sustainable and Just Cities showed us how even before the pandemic started, hybrid meetings were emerging as the 'new normal' for all kinds of events around the world. In **this interesting blog**, Nenad Maljković explains how to be 'remote-ready' whether you are an online participant, on-site participant, or facilitator.

As a concluding remark, we see going online in our several activities as a time-effective, cost-effective, environment-friendly, and inclusive transition. Although online meetings do get exhausting at some point, with some good practice and following some of the strategies and tools we shared, they can be joyful. Let's make the best out of them!



Epilog - 'Power' for thought

In the online events that we have organized, we have tried to create environments that feel safe, welcoming, and free for participants to share their thoughts and impressions. However, we realize that these meetings in themselves are not power-free bubbles. Unequal power relations happen in the real world, and online meetings are no exception. In order to make online meetings more just and sustainable, we need to question power structures and recognize that people who participate directly or indirectly have unequal positions and diverse interests and values.

This is an ongoing discussion we are having across different projects (see e.g., the **SONNET-power guide** and **UrbanA Power Key**). Explicit discussions about power inequalities can be awkward, difficult, and heavy, and these can be even more difficult during online meetings where people cannot look each other in the eye and use less explicit body language. Nevertheless, we are convinced that online meetings can also offer new opportunities in that regard and that holding these uncomfortable conversations and encouraging people to share and recognize the grief, anger, and pain in the world is a prerequisite to re-energize activism for just sustainability transitions.

This aspiration also invites us to reflect upon our own privilege, and who we are inviting, and the kind of conversations we are having/would like to have when we organize online meetings. We need to take into account who is speaking most of the time, to whom we give more/less space to speak, how we invite people to speak according to whom's norms, and who is setting the agenda of what we are speaking about. In this guide, we have focused on rather practical and technical principles on how to host online meetings that enable a more just and sustainable human connection. We recognize that there is a whole deeper layer of understanding how power inequalities affect online meetings, which we have not yet fully addressed and which cannot be 'solved' by this or any other how-to guide.

As such, an important task and challenge for future events and potential follow-up publications is to connect more explicitly to **ongoing discussions** about how to tackle power inequalities and exclusions around race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability, and the intersectional connections between each of those. To make online meetings contribute to just sustainability transitions, an important task for all of us remains to learn (and unlearn) the drivers of injustice and unsustainability, at the level of society but also within each and every one of us.



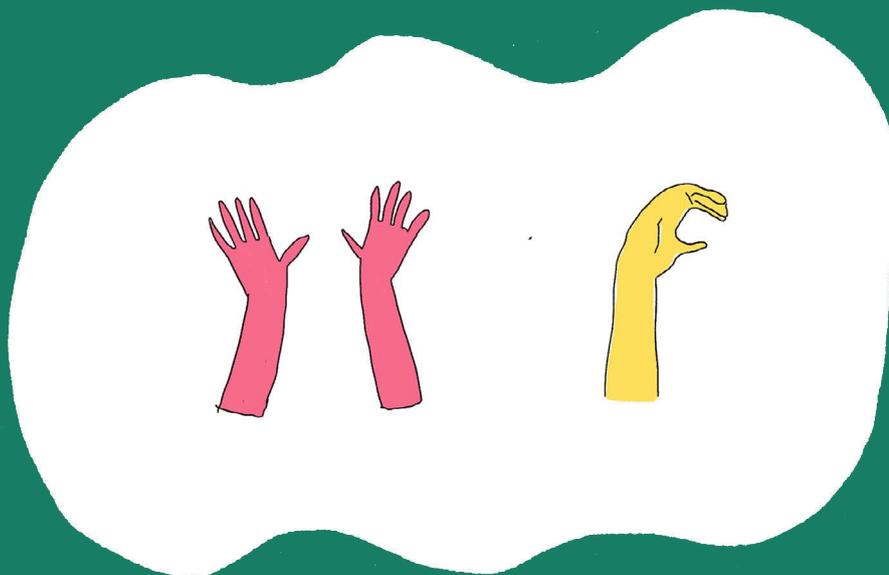
Resources/articles about online meetings

Group discussion methods:

- **World Cafe Method**
- **Fishbowl Method**
- **Two better ways to have group conversations**
- **Hand signals by the Occupy Movement**

Articles/Blogs:

- **Webinar Making Online Meetings Just & Sustainable**
- **The art of connecting online: 7 social innovation insights**
- **The art of connecting online 2: DRIFT's transition to online & blended meetings**
- **Seven social principles for online meetings: an illustrated summary**
- **For a blended event, BYOD**
- **Fearless Experimentation: doing Open Space event online**
- **Virtual Teams for Systemic Change**
- **Power Dynamics and Inclusion in Virtual Meetings**
- **TRANSIT (2017) Manifesto for Transformative Social Innovation**
- **SONNET (2021) Power guide**
- **How to Prevent "Zoombombing"**
- **Guide to planning and hosting virtual events by Zoom**
- **Optimizing presentations for people with color blindness**
- **How to design for color blindness**



Guide for Virtual Hosting

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