REMOTE DATA COLLECTION DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19
Lessons from Rwanda

This document is based on the lessons that emerged from conducting an entirely virtual learning synthesis of the Responsible Finance through Local Leadership and Learning (RFL3) ⬇ Program in Rwanda.

The aim of this learning brief is to:

- Present examples of remote data collection options;
- Capture the successful remote elements of the RFL3 learning synthesis;
- Identify the challenges experienced with conducting the RFL3 learning synthesis remotely;
- Share examples of program partners, in particular MFIs, pivoting to virtual solutions and the sustainability thereof;
- Extract lessons from the learning synthesis that can be leveraged by other programs exploring virtual solutions for program management and data collection.

This learning brief explains the virtual approach used to develop the end of program learning synthesis due to the COVID-19 lockdown in Rwanda and travel restrictions in many other countries. A discussion ensues around the successes and challenges faced in implementing this approach. This is followed by an overview on ways in which stakeholders used virtual tools to maintain contact with their clients despite the lockdown. The learning brief concludes by extracting lessons from the uses of virtual approaches in the RFL3 program that are relevant to other programs exploring virtual alternatives.

The learning brief has been informed by an in-depth review of the program documentation and interviews with the SEEP Network, the Association of Microfinance Institutions Rwanda (AMIR), and other program stakeholders within and outside of Rwanda.

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1 For the purposes of this learning brief a Client Protection Consultant is a professional who has been trained in the Client Protection Principles and other components of responsible finance for the purpose of supporting financial institutions to become more CP compliant.

About The Association of Microfinance Institutions in Rwanda (AMIR) AMIR is the only umbrella body for microfinance institutions in Rwanda that seeks to build a flourishing microfinance sector through Advocacy and Information, Research and Development, Responsible Finance, Performance Monitoring and Capacity Building. AMIR was created in 2007 with 32 founding members. Currently its membership has reached 343 licensed microfinance banks, limited savings and deposit taking companies, and credit and savings cooperatives. Its membership represents more than 97% of the microfinance sector in Rwanda and serves close to 2.8 million customers. As a very strong partner to the Government of Rwanda and a member of the private sector federation, AMIR hopes to promote an enabling environment by facilitating collaboration amongst a wide range of private and public sector stakeholders by 2020. ⬇ www.amir.org.rw @AMIR_Rwanda

About The SEEP Network (SEEP) SEEP is a collaborative learning network. We support strategies that create new and better opportunities for vulnerable populations, especially women and communities affected by crises, to participate in markets and improve their quality of life. For over 30 years, our members have served as a testing ground for innovative strategies that promote inclusion, develop resilient markets, and enhance the livelihood potential of the world's poor. SEEP's 100 member organizations are active in 150 countries worldwide. They work together and with other stakeholders to mobilize knowledge and foster innovation, creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration and, above all, for scaling impact. ⬇ www.seepnetwork.org @TheSEEPNetwork

About The Mastercard Foundation The Mastercard Foundation works with visionary organizations to enable young people in Africa and in Indigenous communities in Canada to access dignified and fulfilling work. It is one of the largest, private foundations in the world with a mission to advance learning and promote financial inclusion to create an inclusive and equitable world. The Foundation was created by Mastercard in 2006 as an independent organization with its own Board of Directors and management. For more information on the Foundation, please visit ⬇ www.mastercardfdn.org @MastercardFdn

About the Responsible Finance through Local Leadership and Learning (RFL3) Program The Responsible Finance through Local Leadership and Learning (RFL3) Program, funded by the Mastercard Foundation has been working in Rwanda since 2017 to scale client protection (CP). The program was designed to catalyze systemic change around CP by addressing the underlying causes of market weaknesses. The program aimed to **(1)** promote an enabling environment through active engagement of all relevant stakeholders; **(2)** expand the organizational capacity of AMIR to serve as a sustainable and influential advocate for responsible financial market development; and **(3)** accelerate learning and knowledge exchange within Rwanda and the sub-Saharan Africa region. The program is concluding in December 2020.

Acronyms

AMIR	Association of Microfinance Institutions in Rwanda	**RFL3**	Responsible Finance through Local Leadership and Learning in Rwanda
CPP	Client Protection Principles		
CP	Client Protection	**SACCO**	Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion		
KII	Key Informant Interview		

What is a Learning Synthesis?

A learning synthesis is the process of analyzing and evaluating information from various sources, identifying commonalities, making connections between the data and combining this information to provide recommendations and further learnings. The aim of the RFL3 learning synthesis is to bring together learning over the lifespan of the program since 2017, drawing on program reports, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with all stakeholders as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The synthesis resulted in three learning briefs focusing on: MFI experiences with improving their client protection (CP) practices, the program's use of Market System Development (MSD) approaches and finally this brief which focuses on virtual data collection methods employed for the learning synthesis and digital platforms used by program partners to engage their members throughout the COVID-19 crisis (find other briefs here).

The COVID-19 crisis is preventing in-person data collection in many countries. As such, virtual data collection is more vital than ever. There is a need to continue engaging with beneficiaries of programs – a key requirement of Monitoring and Evaluation. There is additional value from understanding the needs of program participants during a crisis like COVID-19. When 100% of data collection is virtual, additional ethical considerations are of paramount importance. Thus, maintaining high standards of data collection must be a focus even when done virtually.

It is important to note that even before COVID-19, virtual data collection methods were already used. This is because in-person data collection can be expensive and time consuming. The ideal solution – which was the standard approach prior to COVID-19, is a combination of both.

In the case of the RFL3 end of program's learning synthesis, lockdown regulations around the world, and specifically in Rwanda, hindered any in-person data collection. In Rwanda, the initial lockdown started on the 21st of March 2020 for 2-weeks, then extended for an additional 5-week period. Following the lifting of these constraints, additional restrictions to move outside Kigali and meet people remained, until mid-June. Some areas such as Rusizi and Rubavu remained restricted until mid-July. Both public and private employees were told to work from home and all borders were closed. As such, all components of the learning synthesis implementation were shifted to remote methods of data collection. In addition, program implementers, MFIs and AMIR, also had to shift towards virtual activities and engagement with clients.

Tools and Platforms for Conducting Virtual Data Collection

SMS SURVEYS: Dramatic increases in mobile phone ownership raise the prospect of SMS as a mode of data collection. SMS offers several potential advantages over other modes of data collection: it is inexpensive, may be easily automated, allows respondents to respond to questions at their own convenience, is often perceived as less intrusive than interviews conducted face-to-face or by telephone, and provides a convenient mechanism for incentivizing response through the delivery of talk time.

INTERACTIVE VOICE RESPONSE SURVEYS: Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Surveys offer a scalable platform to collect rich data at a fraction of the cost of traditional door-to-door surveys. Moreover, IVR enables data to be collected from target populations without having to send enumerators to the field, which can be costly, time consuming, and prone to bias and errors. In addition to this, there is no cost incurred to the survey recipient, and the user-friendly interaction takes place in one sitting. IVR surveys are also automated and anonymous. Research has found that the recipients' self-reported information can be as much as nine times more accurate than that collected via a third party. Lastly, the use of IVR allows for language and literacy barriers to be overcome, which is vital given the multitude of languages and low literacy rates in some project contexts.

ZOOM WEBINARS: The Zoom webinar platform can be used to host up to 100 participants for workshops or to conduct KIIs. This functionality allows for the selection of panelists, hand raising and a Q&A functionality. In addition, tools such as polls can be used to gather information and improve the interactivity of the webinar.

WEBEX: Webex is a platform from Cisco which allows for video conferencing, cloud calling, team collaboration and online event management. It has high level security in that its end to end encryption keeps messages, documents, and whiteboard content encrypted from one device to another.

GO-TO-MEETING: Another tool which can be used for webinars is Go-to-meeting and can host up to 250 participants. The platform also has a functionality for one click meetings and has a plug-in for Office 365.

WOOCLAP: A platform called Wooclap can be used to provide an audience-response system to engage virtual workshop or focus-group participants with real-time question and answer polling and feedback gathering.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS USED DURING THE LEARNING SYNTHESIS

The research methodology for the learning synthesis employed both **qualitative and quantitative data collection methods**. The diverse nature of the data facilitated triangulation and verification of the information collected. During the design phase, it was critical to ensure that the methods selected could be pivoted to virtual options as needed. While in this case the reason for the pivot was the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to understand that the ability to pivot data collection is not limited to this specific period. Other considerations such as accessibility of participants / beneficiaries, budget and language skills of the data collection team are all reasons for the increasing need for flexibility with in-person and virtual engagements.

In addition, it is important to be cognizant of the biases that may arise through remote data collection. These include:

- Respondents (person answering the survey) may be more likely to provide answers they think the enumerator (person collecting the data) would want to hear. This may occur during in-person data collection, but may be exacerbated during remote data collection due to the removed nature of the process and lack of connection with participants.
- Remote data collection makes it more difficult for the enumerator and the respondent to build a rapport compared to face-to-face data collection.

The ability for respondents to answer questions remotely due to time constraints and sensitivity may also present challenges.

The following methods were used for this learning synthesis:

Desktop review: This entailed a review of all available project documentation as well as applicable sector research. This method is traditionally conducted remotely using the likes of Dropbox, GDrive and WeTransfer to share large documents. As such, COVID-19 regulations did not hinder this component of the methodology, but it did emphasize the value of being able to share access across borders.

> Dropbox is a subscription-based file hosting service offering cloud storage for documents. This was the option selected as the most appropriate by The SEEP Network. This allowed the program team (based in Kigali, Rwanda, Dakar, Senegal, and Washington, DC) to create folders of applicable program documents and then share access with the Genesis team (based in Johannesburg, South Africa and Oxford, England).

Survey: A survey of AMIR members was undertaken. Genesis developed the survey content in English which was translated into Kinyarwanda by the SEEP team. The survey platform of choice in this case was Google Forms. Thus, capturing the information in this way is a cost effective and efficient means of storing information in a ready-to-access and ready-to-analyze format as data can be exported to Microsoft Excel. The selection of Google Forms was thus based on the available budget; Google Forms did not require additional funds to administer [2], is also simple to use and a link to the survey was shared with participants via email.

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2   Other options which were considered included Survey Monkey (requires a subscription free), Kobotoolbox, not considered given the relatively simple nature of the survey.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): KIIs are in-depth interviews which entail detailed questions to secure nuanced qualitative feedback. Prior to COVID-19, the plan had been to conduct these in-country. Sadly, this was not possible due to travel restrictions and the Rwandan lockdown. As such, the engagements were conducted entirely remotely using either Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp where connectivity was challenging. In terms of engagement, shifting the KIIs virtually was not challenging. A KII guide was developed containing questions specific for each of the different stakeholders based on the learning questions for the project.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs are an excellent way to engage people collaboratively to discuss a specific topic. The value of a FGD compared to a KII is that it provides a group of similar stakeholders to engage with *each other* about the same topic or problem. This can lead to identifying commonalities and differences within a group setting leading to additional cross-learning. For in-person FGDs, the approach is to keep the group size between 8 and 10 participants and approximately two hours. This is variable based on the type of participants, language and the content. However, for virtual FGDs it is best to keep the group size to no more than three participants and to shorten the time to one hour only. This was informed by experience facilitating remote engagements and ensuring that everyone not only had an opportunity to share their feedback but also to keep all participants engaged. Our platform of choice was Zoom as we used their Poll function to support engagement. FGD discussion guides were developed and all information collected via the FDG was recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

SUCCESSES EXPERIENCED CONDUCTING A VIRTUAL LEARNING SYNTHESIS

The virtual approaches used during the data collection for this learning synthesis were successful thanks in large part to existing relationships which facilitated open discussion, using surveys to collect data in a cost and time efficient manner and adapting the type of platform used for engagements. Flexibility was also key in that stakeholders remained available, contactable and willing to participate remotely. Overall, the success of this learning synthesis was that all components which were planned to be conducted in person, were achieved virtually. This ensured that work could continue although stakeholders, participants and the consultants facilitating the learning synthesis were limited to working remotely from their homes.

PREVIOUS INTERACTION WITH STAKEHOLDERS SUPPORTED EFFECTIVE DATA COLLECTION

Part of the success in conducting remote interviews came from prior in-person engagements with the stakeholders which contributed to the comfort level of stakeholders to participate in the discussions. The prior in-person engagement included in-country missions as well as a Genesis team member accompanying Partner MFIs and AMIR on various study tours. As such, a good rapport had been established with program stakeholders over the lifetime of the RFL3 program.

In addition, stakeholders actively engaged during both the KIIs and FGDs and were open and enthusiastic in sharing their experiences of the program. This made for a rich discussion and great depth of information shared which enabled both this learning brief, and the other two learning briefs produced from the synthesis (find here).

USING ONLINE SURVEYS FOR DATA COLLECTION

Another successfully implemented virtual method was the AMIR Member Survey. This was created using Google Forms and distributed via email. Even if other data collection would have been conducted in-person, this survey would likely have remained virtual. As usual, all data was captured automatically and then analyzed remotely.

Our standard data quality approach meant that it was possible to ensure that the submissions analyzed were only those in the sample – despite the fact that the survey link was distributed beyond the sample.

VARIOUS PLATFORMS FOR VIRTUAL KIIS AND FDGS SUPPORTED ADAPTABILITY

In terms of KIIs, **the virtual nature does not appear to significantly affect engagement with interviewees**. Conducting Zoom or Skype interviews is becoming more and more common – even prior to COVID-19. As people become more accustomed to such platforms, so too their comfort levels improve, thus enabling more effective remote engagement. In addition, conducting KIIs and FGDs digitally did not alter the quality of information collected. Pre-COVID-19, **KIIs were routinely conducted remotely as they are much quicker and more cost effective**. In-person KIIs are traditionally reserved for those who would be unable or unwilling to engage remotely, or those whose role in the organization is such that it would require a longer engagement.

Using a variety of platforms from Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp, meant that **stakeholders could engage using a tool with which they were comfortable**. This in turn supported the active participation of stakeholders during the discussions. It also allowed for circumstances whereby if one platform was not suitable due to connectivity issues, then the team could easily switch to another to ensure that the engagements could still continue. In one instance, the team resorted to conducing the KII via a WhatsApp call as this platform was the most stable option for the stakeholder who was located in a rural area with particularly poor connectivity.

VIRTUAL DATA COLLECTION FACILITATED FLEXIBILITY

During data collection, the team was acutely aware that participants' circumstances presented additional challenges in the form of working from home and additional childcare responsibilities when children could not attend school. For this reason, **efforts were made to be as flexible as possible for all stakeholders**. While this is always a priority with data collection – including in-person – due to travel arrangements required, it is not always possible to accommodate everyone's schedule. With virtual approaches, this is much more feasible. Wherever possible, efforts were made to accommodate stakeholders at a time which was most convenient. This often meant the team conducted calls after hours.

REMOTE WORK ENABLED BUSINESS TO CONTINUE 'AS USUAL' DESPITE MULTIPLE COUNTRY-WIDE COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

During the time of the data collection both Rwanda, South Africa and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, were in the midst of national lockdowns. Despite this, **the stakeholders contacted were, for the most part, able to participate in the learning synthesis – sharing their feedback via numerous online platforms**. Once the data had been collected, the analysis and drafting commenced – again virtually – with both consultants based at home.

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED CONDUCTING A VIRTUAL LEARNING SYNTHESIS

During any assignment of this nature one expects there to be some challenges. With in-person fieldwork, this can include unexpected delays caused by poor road conditions, flight delays or demonstrations, and problematic transport or accommodations. With virtual methods, the type of challenge is different, but one can still expect hiccups along the way.

VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The virtual tools selected for this learning synthesis relied heavily on internet connectivity. This was a deliberate choice, having experience in Rwanda and understanding the stakeholders involved would have access to internet. However, the quality of internet does vary based on location, device and even the weather. Although this was a challenge in some cases, it was still possible to conduct all the data collection remotely, reflecting the success of the virtual approach.

There were instances where stakeholders attempted to join either the FGD or the KII and were unable to because of the poor quality of the internet connection. Of the stakeholders who had scheduled engagements, **11% required us to reschedule as they had been unable to join at the appointed time primarily due to poor connectivity**. As such, internet did not significantly impact participation – especially as in 100% of these cases we were able to reschedule and complete the interview without a challenge.

Engaging virtually is always very different to in-person. For example, with an in-person FGD, we ensure there are drinks and snacks both to put people at ease as it creates a more casual atmosphere, and as a means to say thank you. In the case of virtual engagements such "perks" are not possible. **Wherever possible, the interview team tried to facilitate the video functionality for the discussion. It is our experience that this helps participants engage more fully.** Sadly, due to connectivity, this was not always possible for the full duration of the FGD or interview. In those cases, we introduced ourselves while on camera and thereafter shifted to audio only. Virtual interviews also meant that some stakeholders were less conscious of the time and date agreed as they wouldn't be "meeting" us anyway. In some cases, this was problematic with people not being available when they indicated they would be, or running into difficulties with internet because they were driving or "between places".

Virtual FGDs are more challenging than virtual KIIs - as they involve establishing a dynamic among more people. It is for this reason that with virtual FGDs we elected to invite fewer participants and instead conduct more FGDs. This allowed us to shorten the time commitment – valuable when engaging people remotely – but also maximized the potential for a collaborative discussion. In the case of the learning synthesis, the stakeholders who were invited to participate in the FGDs had already met each other – at least once. This was helpful as they understood each other's perspectives and already had a valuable base for the discussions.

VIRTUAL STAKEHOLDER FOLLOW-UPS

If the data collection was conducted in-country as originally planned, the first day or two would have been allocated to engaging with both AMIR and SEEP – not only for their own interviews but to secure contact information for the survey recipients, and following up directly regarding the engagement with other stakeholders. As travel was not possible, **the team relied on AMIR, the partner organization in-country**, to assist. This presented some challenges as it meant dependence on AMIR to distribute emails to the external stakeholders and to share the survey link to the selected MFIs. Given their limited resources, **AMIR staff have a myriad of competing priorities and thus were not always able to action the requests when required**. This is more challenging to manage from a distance as opposed to being able to ask for help in person and see it is completed.

VIRTUAL QUALITY CONTROL OF DATA COLLECTED

There were some challenges with the AMIR member survey. It was not possible to acquire the necessary contact details for the sample of institutions we selected to complete the survey, therefore it was agreed with AMIR that they would manage its distribution. They initially shared the survey only with the members that were part of the sample, but subsequent to our requesting assistance in following up with the existing sample to increase the response rate, it appears that AMIR shared the survey more broadly with the full member base. This was confirmed during data analysis, when we found that AMIR members not part of the sample also completed the survey. Fortunately, we were aware of this, and as such, we ensured that only the respondents from our original sample were included in the data analysis, thus successfully mitigating any risk to the data quality.

Virtual Solutions Employed by AMIR

During the lockdown, AMIR staff continued to engage with RFL3 program partners and the rest of AMIR members via WhatsApp and Skype – replacing in-person meetings. In addition, efforts were made to shift training sessions to virtual platforms such as Skype. This had variable success – largely influenced by peoples' internet connectivity and their comfort with various internet communication platforms. As the lockdown period increased, people's adaptability and comfort with the likes of Skype and Zoom has also increased.

According to MFIs, AMIR organized virtual meetings to understand how their members were coping. AMIR also ran a remote survey of MFIs regarding the COVID-19 crisis and its effects on their performance. This information will be used to help inform AMIR on how to best support their members during these unprecedented times. In addition, one training workshop focused on Corporate governance was delivered via Zoom to 70 participants over a 5-day period.

> Internet connection is a challenge in some parts of the country. [Also], not everyone is conversant or familiar with these platforms (Skype, Zoom, WebEx). When we started it was challenging [but] we don't have issues with that anymore.
>
> **AMIR**

Virtual Solutions Employed by Partner MFIs and CP Consultants

As with RFL3 and AMIR, MFIs were also required to adjust their method of engaging with clients. Due to the CP progress already achieved, MFIs were even more conscious of prioritizing what would be the best solution for clients during the challenging lockdown period. MFIs, particularly given their progress aligned with the Client Protection Principles (CPPs), sought to maintain contact with their clients throughout the lockdown period. This included sending SMSs and making phone calls where branches were not able to open, or clients were unable to travel, in order to understand client needs and adapt to these.

> A lot of institutions adopted "pull and push" [payments] via mobile phones. That was mostly initiated during the COVID-19 period. This function is now free (supported by the government). It has a lasting impact!
>
> **THE SEEP NETWORK**

Given the restrictions on movement, MFIs needed to explore options, not only to ensure they could continue to engage with clients, but also that their clients could still access their funds but in a responsible manner. One such solution was Rwanda's PUSH/PULL mobile banking product. This links a client's MFI account with their E-wallet (hosted by various mobile phone providers). It allows clients to transfer funds from their MFI account to their mobile E-wallet instantly, and vice versa. While this had not been implemented by all MFIs prior to lockdown, it became a priority for clients during this period, resulting in MFIs seeking ways to implement this solution.

One institution reported that they had started to implement PUSH/PULL towards the end of 2019 but their clients had been slow to adopt the new technology. People did register, but they did not appear to use the product. Given the lockdown restrictions, they saw a rapid uptake of this solution with increased utilization.

Another institution conducted an online assessment to understand the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown on their clients. This information helped the MFI understand how best to support their clients through rescheduled loans or payment holidays.

Program implementers also adapted. CP Consultants were required to halt their in-person engagements due to restrictions in-place in Rwanda. Fortunately, the majority were able to pivot these to online platforms such as Skype or Zoom relatively easily. In terms of supporting MFIs with policy revisions, these could also be done remotely.

> [We] had already introduced the "push/pull" mobile banking solution in October 2019 (25 000 people registered). But during lockdown a large number of people registered - 45 000 registered!
>
> **MFI**

LESSONS FROM THE RFL3 LEARNING SYNTHESIS THAT ARE RELEVANT FOR OTHERS CONDUCTING DATA COLLECTION REMOTELY

- **Limit the number of people engaging at one time:** remote meetings or discussions rely heavily on internet connectivity. The fewer people involved, the better for all connections and for ensuring the discussion can continue with minimal distractions.

- **Use platforms which have a poll functionality e.g. Zoom:** This was helpful when engaging with multiple participants during a FGD, for example, as it provides some variety and thus helps to keep everyone engaged. This is particularly relevant where video is not possible due to poor connection.

- **Weather affects the quality of remote calls – especially in rural areas:** We had a number of instances where rain or poor weather made it impossible for us to continue the call. This is an unusual consideration, but important, especially when roofs are made out of corrugated iron which, during severe rain, is particularly loud.

- **Creating a rapport via an online platform is more challenging than in person:** Virtual engagements are most successful when there are client-led introductions as they help to establish a rapport prior to the actual interview. Stakeholders with whom an established relationship existed were far more responsive in both the lead-up to, and duration of the actual interview.

- Our experience has shown **us that a remote data-collection tool should be shorter than normal** to ensure respondent engagement and limit fatigue. The questions included in the remote data collection should be carefully constructed and the questions selected for inclusion should also be reviewed to meet the objectives of the survey and limit the length of the survey.

- Being **adaptable to the needs of stakeholders supports effective data collection**, for example switching between platforms such as Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp supported stakeholders to effectively engage during KIIs and FDGs.

- In some ways, conducting **interviews virtually created some flexibility**. If a stakeholder was running a few minutes late, other work could continue until the stakeholder was available, something which is not always possible for in-person interviews.

LESSONS FROM RFL3 PARTNER MFIS ENGAGING WITH CLIENTS

- The use of **digital banking such as mobile banking and push/pull services supports access to services for clients**. While these services may have started prior to the pandemic, the take-up expanded exponentially during this time.

- Using **online surveys/assessment, WhatsApp and calls served MFIs well to understand clients' needs** and allowed them to roll-out/further expand the PUSH/PULL mobile banking product.

- **Keeping in touch with clients** to better understand their needs is a key principle of CP and should continue post COVID-19.

- **Virtual engagements and training provided by AMIR also supported MFIs** and provided opportunities to share experiences and find solutions during this challenging time.

- **Ensuring that participants are familiar with the digital platform is key.** There was some investment required by AMIR to make sure participants were conversant with the functionalities of Zoom before the training was provided. A one-on-one discussion with each participant was organized, with assistance provided to set up ID/accounts for those who had never used the platform; demonstrating how to raise hand, how to mute and unmute oneself, how to share screen, to communicate via the chatbox, and to change the settings of the speaker. This preparation was done one week before the training.

A FINAL WORD

This learning brief has highlighted that **virtual data collection can be used to conduct a learning synthesis using KII and FGDs effectively**. As countries' lockdown restrictions are eased and when travel becomes once again a feasible option, it is helpful to understand which virtual solutions can be maintained and might even be preferred as the world shifts back to in-person engagements. In our experience virtual KIIs, and to a lesser extent FGDs - are more efficient remotely compared to in-person engagements on the condition that the interviewees have access to quality internet.

Travel is a significant portion of traditional data collection. This not only has direct budget implications, but also warrants a time factor. Given the myriad of different COVID-19 lockdown approaches, it is likely that virtual solutions will remain the priority for a while still. In-person engagements are preferable specifically with beneficiaries who are not office-based and / or do not have access to reliable internet connections. It is critical that these types of engagements continue in-person when this will be allowed and safe to do.