Online Project Reviews in the Time of Covid19: What worked, what didn't and what lessons we learned along the way

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The Covid19 pandemic has had a profound impact on almost every aspect of life for the vast majority of the worlds' population. In addition to the more obvious impacts or health, food security and political stability, Covid19 has led to a rapid shift in working paradigms, with many of our formerly face-to-face workday interactions transferred online.

For many in the field of International Agricultural Research for Development the shift has been pronounced. Where our working life once centred around in-country fieldwork and face-to-face interaction with our overseas colleagues, we are now largely confined to sitting behind screens in makeshift home offices/schools trying to mentally re-adjust to the new reality of cyber-interactivity and virtual collaboration.

Possibly one of the aspects of collaborative research that has been impacted most are the "set-piece" large face-to-face gatherings related to project mid-term and final reviews. These are traditionally one of the few times during project life spans that all of the Australian and in-country researchers, together with ACIAR representatives can get together and interact face-to-face.

Needless to say, these events were valuable for far more than the formal interactions. The interactions over coffee, dinner or at cultural events often contributed more insights and led to more relationship building the any of the formal sessions. All of that has now changed, with mid-term and final reviews being held via video-conference rather than face-to-face. With no real end to the pandemic currently in sight this "new reality" will likely be with us for a while.

The final review for the two sister projects in our Cassava Livelihoods and Value Chains Program (AGB/2012/078 and ASEM/2014/053) was scheduled for July 2020 in Dak Lak, Vietnam. In hindsight it seems incredible that as late as mid-March 2020 we were still assuming that we could hold a face-to-face review. An "online review" was a contingency plan, but one that we assumed we would not have to put into place.

Of course, that all changed in a matter of days in mid-March once the pandemic hit our partner countries hard and our travel lockdown began. So, an online review it was going to be. None of the team had done an online review before, nor had either of reviewers.

We had picked an ambitious program to make a test of online reviews – our cassava program covers 5 countries, 2 research programs, 9 partners and 8 field sites.

This note outlines some of what we did, what worked well, what didn't work so well and what lessons learned we took from the process. I do hope that there is some useful information in here that others could apply in their own cases. I have deliberately avoided repeating some of the more obvious of the discussion points around online meetings (for example the well-worn "long zoom meetings are tiring") as I think that almost everyone is aware of the generic challenges of online meetings. This note aims to distil some of the more nuanced experience we had with the online reviewing process.
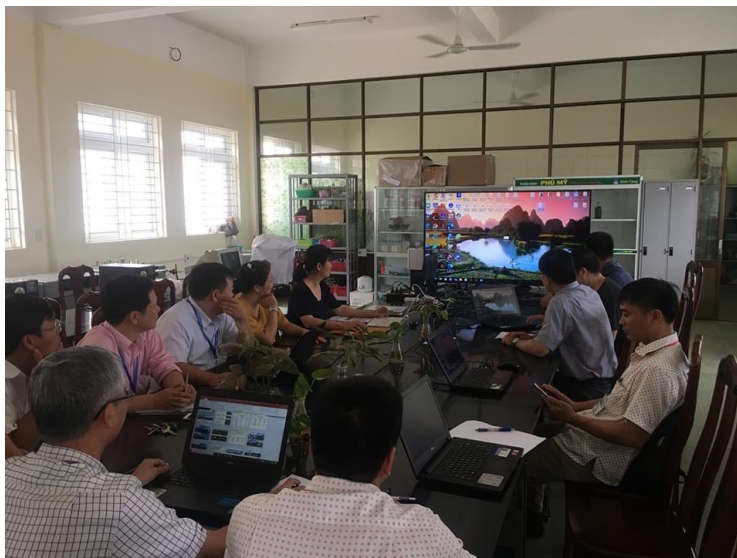
What we did

Once we had committed to an online review, we connected with our friends Stephen Ives, Oleg Nicetic and Le Thi Thanh Huyen from ACIAR project LPS/2015/037 for their advice. They have just completed an online mid-term review, and their advice was invaluable for us in planning for our review.

In coordination with our partners across the five countries of the program we agreed that the review would include four main information sharing modalities.

(i)   The first modality was a dedicated final review webpage within our project website. We had already utilised dedicated webpages for our mid-term review in 2018 and for our regional research symposium in 2019, so we were experienced in putting together the required elements.

(ii)   The second modality was to have all presentations pre-recorded and narrated and uploaded on the review webpage as embedded Youtube videos and downloadable pdf files. This was to enable reviewers and ACIAR and other review attendees to review all 19 of the presentations in advance to be well prepared for the review meeting.

(iii)   The third information sharing modality was to use padlets (www.padlet.com) embedded within our final review webpage to enable review participants to post information, ask questions and comment on material that had been posted.

(iv)   The fourth information sharing modality was using the zoom platform to allow all the meeting participants to login, videoconference and chat. Zoom also allowed the use of "breakout rooms" for reviewers to meet with groups from each country.

The review was held over a five day period. The implementation modality changed from day to day as we practiced adaptive management principles and flexibly re-evaluated what worked and what didn't each day. On the first day we held the review as a "traditional" type

of zoom meeting and all watched the pre-recorded presentations together during the meeting and then discussed the presentations as they were completed. The rationale for collectively watching shared screen presentations was to keep the format close to that of a face-to-face meeting and for those who had pre-recorded presentations to know that their presentations were being watched by all participants.

One the second day, given the challenges of bandwidth, we still kept a "traditional" review format, but instead of streaming the presentation videos from a shared screen, we asked participants to individually screen presentations on their devices and then reconvene for discussions after each presentation.

From the third and fourth day, in order to maximize the time available for discussion with in-country partners, we asked participants to review all the presentations in advance and kept the entire meeting time for discussion (with very short introductory presentations given "live" to guide the discussions. This allowed for a much more fruitful in-depth exchange of ideas.
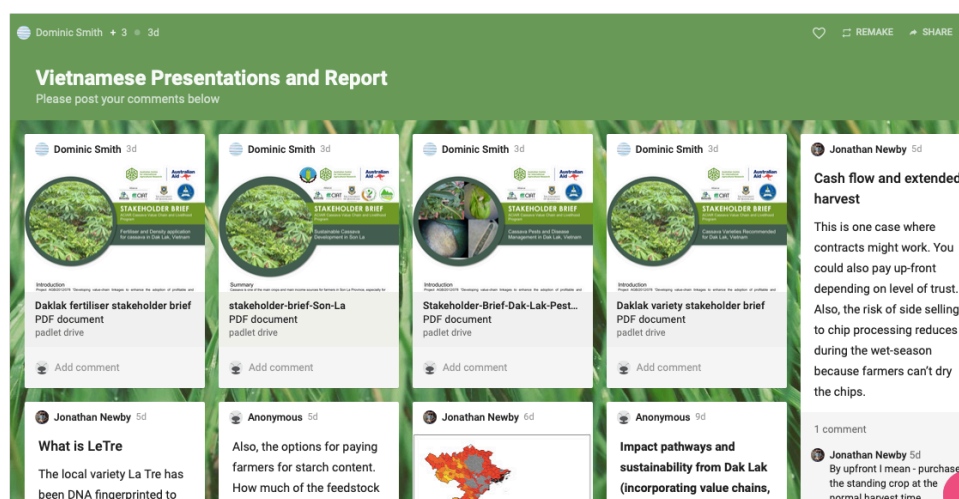
For the final day we also had participants review the presentations in advance and the day also included breakout rooms where reviewers were able to discuss individually with country teams. This was followed up by a plenary wrap up session.

What Worked

Review Website – having a dedicated project review webpage as part of the project website was a very effective way of collecting all the necessary information, padlets, presentations, documents and schedule in one place.

Pre-recorded presentations - these worked very well, the researchers were able to produce well thought out narrated slides that really helped to transfer information effectively and form a good basis for discussion. Presenters also benefited from having time to perfect narration. I would recommend even when we return to face-to-face meetings that presenters prepare pre-recorded presentations in advance that participants can review. Then during the meeting, the presenters could present a short recap summary to guide discussions.

Padlets – Although not all participants utilised the padlets, the participants who did were able to use the padlets as a quick and easy way to share information and files and to ask and

answer questions. The other advantage of the padlets is that they (and the information they contain) are still on the review webpage.

Breakout Rooms – these were surprisingly easy to set up and use, and provided an effective, private forum for country teams to share ideas and opinions with the project reviewers.

Having participants review presentations prior to the online meeting – this was a key to being able to have time and space to generate good discussion with country partners. Reviewing presentations beforehand meant that there was enough time to have interactions, and that participants were well informed enough to ask pertinent questions.

What didn't work so well

Watching presentations together from a shared screen –this utilises a significant amount of bandwith, meaning that not all participants will be able to watch with good audio or video. It also uses up a large portion of the online meeting window – leaving much less time for actual discussion. Having discussions straight away after the presentations also gives limited time for participants to formulate questions and responses.

Not having agreed tight moderation guidelines and question focus – this was a particular challenge in the first couple of days were the topics open for discussion were quite broad, and the discussion quickly escalated to the type of "higher level" discussions around the future of research for development, rather than concentrating on sharing experience and ideas from the in-country research teams.

Keeping everyone's video on all the time – this was a nice idea so that we could all interact, but also took up so much bandwidth that it was not feasible.

Lessons Learned

Prepare well in advance – online reviews don't have the logistic challenges associated with face-to-face reviews, but still need a lot of advance preparation. This included having practice runs with test padlets, preparing presentations in advance and developing a short training video on how to record presentations. The webpage and program preparation was also started well in advance.

Share online meeting operational tasks – In the first couple of days of the online review we had the discussion moderator also being the zoom meeting "host", monitoring the online chat and managing approvals for padlet posting. This was not effective, and after these tasks were divided, the meetings were able to proceed more smoothly.

Speakers video should be on – While some people are shy about appearing on video, it is very important that when a participant is speaking, their video should be on, in order to enable a feeling of contact with an actual speaker, rather than a disembodied voice.

Upload videos to Youtube – it is better to upload videos of presentations to Youtube and then embed them in your website. This uses far less storage space on your website and also the server speed for downloads from YouTube will generally be faster.

Keep an open "back-channel" for communication – team members will need to communicate during the course of the review meetings (especially on logistic matters) and it is more reliable and secure to do this through a different platform than the main one used for the videoconferencing. We utilised Whatsapp for communication during the review and Zoom for the main videoconferencing platform.

Adaptive management and flexibility – recognising when an implementation modality for an online review is not working and having the confidence and courage to take advice and change the modality to a more effective one is key to a more successful experience. We needed to change the implementation modality of our online review three times during the course of the five days. These adaptive changes were based on ongoing monitoring and evaluating what was working and what was not working in the process.

Conclusion

I am looking forward to the day when we can return to having face-to-face reviews and meetings. However, as discussed in this note, there are certainly things that we can learn from the on-line experience that hopefully will make our experience of future face-to-face meetings better than before.

All in all our first on-line review went reasonably well. Of course the success of the meeting was due in no small part to the team of professional and enthusiastic researchers that we work with in Australia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Myanmar. Without their efforts and rapid adjustment to the "new normal" the review would have got nowhere. I am very grateful to them for the great collaboration, not only during the time of Covid19, but for the last 4.5 years.