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BLOG

Distant learning

Training climate negotiators during the COVID-19 pandemic



Sonam Wangdi, Chair of the Least Developed Countries Climate Group, addressed the 2020 Webinar

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These are testing times for most. For us at the [European Capacity Building Initiative](#) (ecbi), it is the time to test, among other things, the extent to which webinars can replace face-to-face training for aspiring climate change negotiators.

ecbi has organised Regional Training Workshops for new negotiators in Asia and Africa since 2005. The Workshops, organised by the [International Institute for Environment and Development](#) (IIED) and a regional partner organisation, aim to create a level playing field in the international negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC negotiations can be complex, technical, and even somewhat intimidating for newcomers, and in the absence of any training, handicap their ability to represent their national interests. Over time, the two-day Regional Training Workshops have contributed to strengthening the voices of developing countries, and particularly the [Least Developed Countries](#), in the negotiations as our trainees have strengthened the capacity of these countries to participate. Trainees have risen through the ranks to take on senior positions in national and Group delegations.

This year, however, the training workshop for the Asia and the Pacific region, initially scheduled for March 2020, was cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, a 90 minute online workshop for the region was organised on 21 July 2020. To what extent was the webinar as effective as the face-to-face training workshop? There were clearly some advantages: lower greenhouse gas emissions, no travel, and lower costs. However, we found that there were also considerable disadvantages.

Nominating trainees

To begin with, the selection of trainees for the webinar posed some challenges, though this was not directly related to the format of the training. The participants are usually nominated by National Focal Points (NFPs), with some assurance that they will be part of the national negotiating team for future UNFCCC sessions. “We had to follow up with the NFPs several times for their nominations,” says Raju Pandit Chhetri, [Prakriti Resources Centre](#), ecbi’s regional partner in organising the event. “One challenge they encountered was that since future UNFCCC meeting dates are uncertain, they could not be certain about who will be part of the future negotiating teams.” Another challenge, says Chhetri, was that with the uncertainty around the dates for future negotiations, the climate negotiations were less of a priority for the NFPs.

Problems with participation

While most of the countries in the region did eventually nominate trainees, not all the nominees were able to participate in the end. This could be either because of the time difference even within the region, or due to connectivity issues. The countries that were in the right time zone made up for this to some extent by nominating more trainees to participate. “Clearly they had heard of the usefulness of the earlier Workshops from colleagues who participated, and without the constrain of limited travel budgets, they wanted to take the opportunity to make them available to more people,” says Chhetri. As a result, while 16 trainees were nominated initially, 25 participated – most of the additional trainees were from Nepal and Bhutan. Many nominees from the Pacific islands, in particular, were unable to attend.

Limitations to the agenda

For the organisers, deciding on the agenda posed some challenges. The two-day physical workshops usually cover a mix of history, thematic issues, and hands on, practical “mock negotiations” to give the newcomers a chance to practice how to make interventions in a formal UN setting, and how to develop country and group positions on specific issues. The sessions in the online 90-minute webinar had to be shorter, covering only what usually takes place in one session of the physical workshops (a general overview of the UNFCCC), and were more focused on theory than practice. There was no time to get into the ever-expanding list of thematic issues in detail.

The “mock negotiation” sessions in the physical workshops usually get the highest rating from participants in feedback forms in previous workshops. In addition to helping trainees improve their communications skills, these practical sessions provide an opportunity for them to interact with each other. They are a critical part of encouraging trainees to participate and speak up. Chhetri points out that a particular challenge for the Asia and Pacific region is that junior negotiators have not been exposed to international meetings, and not all of them are confident about engaging, particularly in English. The mock sessions help them build up their confidence and engagement skills. They also train them on UN negotiating etiquette – how to formulate their interventions, how to ask for the floor, and the rules of engagement, for instance, about in making points of order. Even over the course of two days, the resource people, who help the trainees with their interventions, see their confidence and enthusiasm grow. This was not possible in the online training.

The thematic sessions in the physical workshops also help trainees to identify the themes that they would like to follow, based on their own preferences and national priorities. They are advised to focus on one or two issues if their delegation size allows it, so as not to feel overwhelmed by the whole agenda of UNFCCC sessions.

Challenges for resource persons

During the physical workshops, resource people are asked to keep their presentations short, try to first gauge the level of knowledge and experience on the floor and alter their presentations accordingly, and to make the sessions informal, with more discussion than presentations. Trainees are encouraged to intervene and ask questions, no matter how basic – the resource people try and create an atmosphere where trainees feel comfortable to do so. None of this was possible

in the virtual workshop. As a resource person, Chhetri said “talking to a screen” without knowing whether the trainees were listening and understanding what was said was a challenge. The online sessions were focused more on the delivery of information, and resource people were less able to judge if the audience was getting a bit lost, to change their tone, or alter the level of the information they were communicating.

The resource people in physical workshops are usually able to cajole a discussion in their sessions even with the most taciturn participants, asking the trainees questions if none are asked of them, or doing a tour de table. This was not possible during the online session.

Networking

A critical element that was missing in the online workshop was the opportunity for trainees to network, and to build a regional cohort to support each other during the negotiations. The Training Workshops emphasise the importance of networking and “corridor diplomacy” in the negotiations, and encourage the trainees to get to know each other, including each other’s national priorities in the negotiations, and establish contact thorough email or WhatsApp so they can be in touch during the negotiations. In the past, trainees have decided on their own to set up thematic groups amongst themselves, connecting, for instance, those who were planning to follow up on capacity building. With online training, however, they miss out on the opportunity to make friends who can support them during the negotiations; and learn the importance of lobbying other delegations, or holding informal talks, during the mock negotiations.

Identifying talent

The resource people for the workshops are often senior negotiators from the region. The workshops are a chance for them to spot promising young negotiators, and encourage them to contact the thematic leads of their Groups. For ecbi, they are an opportunity to identify potential recipients of a limited number of bursaries for trainees to attend UNFCCC sessions. The senior negotiators also often narrate their own stories of the challenges that they faced in the negotiations when they started – this helps to encourage and motivate the negotiators, and gives them role models. This kind of interaction is not possible online.

Overall, we found that the physical training workshops can motivate participants more, keep trainees engaged, and create a more connected alumni and support network. The online workshops, meanwhile, have the advantage of allowing wider participation. In balance, the physical workshops have several advantages over the online version, but in future, having additional online sessions could help to strengthen and maintain the capacity built through the physical workshops.