



How to Host a Virtual Summit

and get away with it

climate:red

VIRTUAL CLIMATE SUMMIT 2020
SEPT 9, 12PM - SEPT 10, 19PM CEST



10,000

PARTICIPANTS
REGISTERED



8,709

ELECTRONIC
CALENDAR EVENTS
DOWNLOADED



195

COUNTRIES
ATTENDED
THE SUMMIT



3.1Gb

OF INTERPRETATION
AUDIO SAVED.
THATS **22 HOURS!**



24,551 tonnes*

OF CO² EMISSIONS
SAVED IN
FLIGHTS ALONE



3,000

CONVERSATIONS
IN THE COFFEE
ROOM



81%

FELT INSPIRED BY
THE CONFERENCE



90%

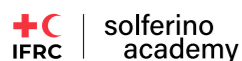
FELT THEY
HAD LEARNT
SOMETHING NEW



How to Host a Virtual Summit

and get away with it

“this event democratised the topic – that leaders and volunteers, experts and activists were all together on the same playing field, with one shared ambition”



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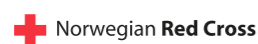


Climate
Centre



ALJAZEERA

openlab



solferino
academy

openlab

* 0.195g per Km travelled. Numbers are calculated on the lat/long of the centre of a country and based on a flight to Geneva and back. The Carbon metric adhere to the ICAO / BEIS metrics for CO² emissions for flights (0.195g per Km travelled).



The **Solferino Academy** aims to challenge and inspire the way people work, think, act and connect. It supports the IFRC network in transforming to be more fit for future and capable of thriving through the complex and dynamic changes occurring throughout the world in order to more effectively meet the humanitarian and development challenges. It aims to;

- 1 Be a leader in promoting cutting edge thinking in humanitarian work that can catalyse change and innovation in the sector
- 2 Support Red Cross and Red Crescent leaders and their National Societies in developing approaches for and implementing changes throughout their National Societies that will enable more innovative, agile and future fit organisations
- 3 Explore and support their experimentation with new and innovative approaches to humanitarian and development work.



How to Host a Virtual Summit and get away with it

On September 9th and 10th, 2020 we hosted [climate:red](#), a major virtual summit focused on Climate and Environmental Crisis. It was the first of its kind for the Red Cross and Red Crescent network and certainly the largest we have ever attempted. Over 10,000 people from 195 countries registered for the Summit. During the 31 consecutive hours it ran for, we had between 1,300 – 2,800 people online at most times – apart from the opening when 8,000 attempted to join and the platform crashed... but more on that later!

What follows below is the reflections of the joint Solferino Academy and Open Lab team on what went well and (mostly) what we thought could be improved. This paper does not address the content reflections, outcomes or next steps of the summit. That is led by the Climate Centre and IFRC and is addressed in more detail in the conference report.

Instead, here we focus on the mechanics, engagement, and insights to staging such an event. We do this in full knowledge that many of our National Societies will increasingly have to hold digital events, whether they be General Assemblies or thematic conferences, summits or large workshops happening virtually. We also want to ensure there is some detail available, so there is quite a lot below (you'll find a summary in the conference report).

We offer these reflections humbly as a team of people who had largely never held such an event virtually before, and in the hope that the reflections are useful for others planning such an exercise. If you have any further questions don't hesitate to write to us at solferino.academy@ifrc.org

Summary of Insights

- **Inclusion is easier but there are still gaps:** You can open it to more people and to those who might not normally be able to travel, (which means you can have more diverse people in the 'same room' together) and since pre-recording is an option (along with not traveling) you can also get high level speakers more easily. But it still excludes some people, multi-language delivery is complex and it can be harder to drive meaningful collaboration and engagement for all.
- **It is more expensive than you'd think:** It is certainly a cheaper mode than an in-person format particularly when you consider the costs of flying, accommodation, rooms, catering etc (and the environment). but there is still real costs in platforms, interpreters and most importantly human resources which leads us to....
- **It takes a lot more work than you might think:** There is a huge amount to it. Managing all the various design and production elements is hugely time consuming and requires skill sets that may not be ordinarily present in your organization. There is a large amount of coordination and planning involved and it can suddenly get significantly bigger as the barrier to entry is very low, (registrations doubled virtually overnight on more than one occasion) so make sure you plan for this.
- **The tech side is hard:** It requires a range of sophisticated skills, from user design, to visual design to coding and virtual community management and others. Humanitarian organisations haven't typically had all these skills previously so partnerships are essential. Even with the best planning too things will go wrong. Test as much as you can.
- **Despite all this you can deliver an engagement that is compelling and effective:** one that connects people and that helps people meaningfully learn from each other and collaborate. And you can do this to a far bigger and more diverse audience than you might expect. Virtual tools have developed and people are more comfortable with the format (particularly since COVID) so a great deal can be achieved. And it is fun!

What we were trying to achieve

When we originally conceived of the idea to host a virtual summit in late 2019, such things were not all that common. The humanitarian sector notoriously likes to fly around for big meetings and conferences, and we wanted to challenge this. The technology was now good enough that we could effectively bring people together virtually and achieve similar outcomes. The broader climate:red team (including the RCRC Climate Centre and IFRC Climate teams) identified 3 main goals that we wanted to achieve in building such a summit;

- 1 **“To put the wind in the sails of the climate agenda”:** Strategy 2030 was just adopted at our IFRC General Assembly and prioritised Climate and Environmental Crisis. We had also adopted a Movement framework to the Climate Crisis and a number of other similar policy commitments at our statutory meetings. We now needed to action those commitments and significantly enhance our work globally on this.
- 2 **To demonstrate that a meaningful conference could be held virtually:** We wanted to create a virtual space where people could genuinely connect and collaborate, where they could learn, be inspired and get ideas for action at a large scale without having to come – and especially to fly – to face-to-face meetings. We wanted to show that it's possible to manage digital tools and create a virtual user experience in such a way that participants could get as much or more from the online event than traditional in-person events.
- 3 **To promote the Red Cross and Red Crescent as a major climate actor:** While the organisation has been raising climate in its major meetings since at least the 1980s, this is the first time that it has ranked so high on its global agenda. We wanted to send a signal that we were prioritising climate and that we wanted to learn and to partner to be more effective at jointly addressing these challenges.

In this paper, we will focus on goal 2; the other two are more substantially addressed in the conference report.



We are here to

▷ INSPIRE

▷ ACT

▷ TRANSFORM



OPENING KEYNOTE

— IFRC President, Francesco Rocca

Welcome!

to our first virtual summit

Climate:Red



180
COUNTRIES

30
HOURS



How we organised ourselves to plan the Summit

We set up 3 main working groups for the summit;

- **Core organising team (6-8 people):** responsible for the overall experience and for all key decisions and design principles, meeting weekly (online, of course!) for about 4 months.
- **Tech team (4-6 people):** responsible for converting the design needs of the summit into workable platforms and solutions, including building the summit platform.
- **Programming team (4-8 people):** responsible for managing the agenda, including organising all high level sessions (which we called headline feature sessions) as well as managing and making decisions on all the proposals for crowd-sourced sessions.

Representatives from each of the teams sat on the other teams to ensure that design needs were flowing across all areas of work. The overall event coordinator also sat on all three teams.

We used Asana® as the main project management platform alongside numerous Google® sheets and documents including speakers lists, scheduling and agenda, donors, partners and meeting minutes and tasks.

We, the Solferino Academy and our partner Open Lab, were primarily responsible for the platform, tech, hosting, communications and media, partners, event production, volunteers and interpretation/translation. Climate Centre and IFRC/National Society representatives were responsible for elements related to content, including overall thematic focus, composition and themes of high level panels and crowd-sourced sessions.

Our Key Insights

1. Making it as inclusive as possible

To be fully aligned with the mandate and principles of the RCRC, we wanted this virtual event to be more accessible to the entirety of the network, including the Volunteer and Branch base and across multiple languages, but also to community members and others interested in the issue. We felt it was important to convene and hear from those working *'on-the-ground'*, and from community members alongside the high-level conversations.

We tried to ensure inclusion in various ways, such as:

- Opening and promoting various possibilities to participate for various networks through many channels. We offered **many ways to be a part of this event**, such as speaking in a (high-level) panel, hosting your own panel/workshop/session, submitting an ignite talk, sending an entry to the **Innovation Competition** linked to the summit, volunteering in the organising team, and of course participating as an attendee. These opportunities were widely shared to different networks ranging from RCRC leadership, staff and volunteers to our partners and other humanitarian actors to government ministers and decision-makers to grassroots activists and community members around the globe.
- Considering **platform accessibility** to the majority and running the event live through all time zones.
- Ensuring **language accessibility** in Spanish, English, Arabic and French. We translated the event info, various guidelines, our main platform and help desk Chatbot®, promotional material and the basic info of all of the 200+ sessions in all four languages. We also provided **live interpretation** of the 17 main stage sessions. It enabled 1000s to participate and experience something that is usually only available to those who can attend international conferences.



2. Engaging the audience early in agenda building

The idea was to crowd-source the agenda from within the RCRC network and to complement this effort with more structured high level panels and plenaries, much as it happens in face to face conferences.

We reached out to the RCRC global network and asked them to propose sessions. Our aim was for the majority of content to be driven by people that make up the RCRC. We also knew that the societies had been making a massive leap in digital transformation since the start of the COVID pandemic and we wanted to provide an opportunity for people to practice and refine their skills in running virtual meetings and workshops.

The crowd-sourced part of the agenda took a very long time to finalise, in part because it was over the northern summer (and many were on holiday) but also in part because people didn't submit or finalise their session proposals until the last minute. We did try to implement rolling submission dates (where early submissions would be guaranteed better places on the agenda), but regardless we got most of our sessions last minute. We had to close the sessions submissions late, very close to the actual event happening, because so many were asking for extensions. Producing and updating the crowd-sourced agenda was also complicated by our dedication to translate everything to all four official event languages.

Until just a couple of days before the event, session hosts could also update their session information online via our Chatbot®. This was a very cool, effective and easy to use function – to the extent that there were 1,258 amendments to the sessions by the hosts. Most of these edits came with (re-)translation needs, and all required our content management volunteers to upload all of these changes to the website (in future we would likely make this fully automated). While all this was a good example of crowd-sourcing and global collaboration, it also meant that we couldn't release a full public agenda until about a week before the event. And even after the agenda was published, changes kept coming.

The interest to participate and host sessions was much larger than we anticipated and the agenda grew very quickly. We received over 300 session submissions

from within the RCRC network alone. The opportunity for people who wanted to connect and help design the shared agenda was obviously well received.

To manage this massive volume of session proposals, we had a group of volunteers helping us organise the session submissions, to get the essential info for each session translated, to communicate with hosts about their session proposals through emails and also contacting hosts with missing info in their proposals. We were very reluctant to refuse National Societies the opportunity to present or host, and started to run a series of capacity building webinars online (See below) to help people to better design both their proposals and their sessions. We also offered individual support to hosts asking for help.

In the end some 220 sessions were accepted and available in the agenda. This was a lot for a 31-hour period in which there were only some 20 time slots available – these including plenaries and headline feature sessions that ran without other concurrent sessions. The upshot of this was that in some slots there were around 20 sessions running consecutively. It was hard to ensure an audience for this many sessions and a lot of sessions had only 20-30 participants attending. This is still pretty good and of course not too different to some face to face conferences, while recognising also the value of those smaller group conversations, it did cause other complications;

- A **Too much choice can be overwhelming.** Despite a very good search function that allowed searching by every category (speaker, theme, organisation, session type, etc.), and despite a clearly designed and laid out agenda, due to the massive volume of sessions we received some feedback that it was still challenging for participants to navigate and find sessions they were interested in.
- B **Some workshops and sessions were very similar in nature and could have been combined.** We managed to do this with about 10 of the sessions but many more could have been combined, the main challenge was that there were so many to review and many were received so late that it stretched our capacity to be able to review the workshops and contact people to see if they could combine sessions in such a short time frame.
- C **Combining was further complicated because many had guest speakers and session designs that did not allow them to combine with oth-**

ers. Most also had specific scheduling needs, which meant they couldn't be moved around easily. As a result, often these similar sessions ran in parallel and made it difficult for people interested in the subject to choose what to join.

- D **Everyone of course wanted the prime time slots, so those sessions were particularly busy.** While the event ran continuously for 31 hours, between midnight and 7am CEST it was mostly only the Americas and Asia Pacific that ran sessions and the audience was reduced to about 800 in parts. The largest audience numbers came from Europe, Africa and North America.

Nonetheless, it was an enviable problem to have, that of a large scale interest in participating and in delivering sessions. It demonstrated a clear interest from the network in participating in these sorts of opportunities and should serve as a signal to others in the network that it is worth considering similar formats to help drive engagement in key topics.

Promoting quality of sessions and building user experience

To support potential session hosts on their journeys from idea all the way to delivering a session at climate:red, we ran a series of online training webinars with our partner Climate Centre. Our aim was to provide session hosts an opportunity to have peer-exchange on what they were hoping to accomplish with their sessions and on how they were going to run them. During each webinar, we provided them with the critical information they needed, but also broke them up into small breakout groups so they could share and support each other.

The first two webinars were focused on 'how to submit a winning session' and getting them to think through their goals, who they wanted to engage, and how to articulate that. We also talked about the summit's themes and goals and gave the participants an opportunity to think about how their session would fit into the summit.

The next three online trainings were focused on providing session design principles and formats that would maximise participant engagement. We had requests to run these online trainings also in French and Spanish, so we trained

two facilitators, one for each language, to run the training webinars in their own languages, and we encouraged them to use our format but to 'make it their own' and share their expertise.

We also wanted to encourage session hosts to shape their designs to serve the incredible diversity of perspectives and knowledge that were likely to be present at this global event, so we specifically asked them "what do you want to learn from the people that come to your session" and "how will participants benefit from attending". We also reminded them about their roles as participants and encouraged them to attend other events at the summit. At the end of each training webinar we asked "What advice would you give to another Session Host at climate:red"?

Handbook

Along with our webinar series, we put together with the Climate Centre a "[Session Hosts Handbook](#)" that compiled all the information covered in the training and all the additional information session hosts might need in order to run a successful session at climate:red. This included a calendar, a checklist and a step by step guide to planning a virtual session. We are hopeful that the Handbook will be a foundation to support people across the RCRC in putting together virtual sessions. Our Handbook was inspired by [MozFest's Facilitator Handbook](#) and [RightsCon's Session Organiser Handbook](#).

Community guidelines

In order to ensure that participants could maximise the community aspect of the summit, we provided [guidelines](#) to help create a safe and positive community experience for all. Rather than providing a 'code of conduct', we erred on the guidelines frame as we wanted to promote the idea that each participant had their own role to play in creating a safe space, rather than policing others. The guidelines were inspired by the [Mozilla Community Participation Guide-line](#) & the [RightsCon Participation & Privacy Guidelines](#)

As noted above, we are grateful to be part of a community of organisations and institutions that share learnings on how to support individuals to create

sessions, along with outputs like handbooks and guidelines. This allowed us to build upon their efforts, rather than starting from scratch and reinventing the wheel.

Insights and recommendations

The host sessions provided an opportunity to begin to shape the culture of the event and to help give people ideas that would increase the quality of the sessions overall. We wanted to encourage people to design highly interactive sessions, with engaging formats and content that focussed on participation, sharing learning and collaborating.

COVID-19 had already forced a lot of people to rapidly acquire virtual meeting and workshop design skills which increased the overall quality perhaps further than it might have otherwise.

The host training sessions while useful to some but overall not very well attended, only about 100 attended in total across all the sessions, despite offering them at varied timeslots and languages to suit different needs.

It was hard to pitch the level of training as hosts were at very different levels, some wanted more advanced guidance, others were earlier in their journey and needed more basic support. More individualised support would have been preferable (some of which we did) but given resourcing we could only go so far with this.

The overall strength of your summit rests heavily on the quality of the workshops so this is an area worth investing in.

WHAT DID YOU LIKE THE MOST ABOUT CLIMATE:RED?

"Maybe the best online conference I've attended so far due to different plenary- and break-out sessions tools and the use of all the online interaction tools. I think it reached more people than a face-to-face conference. I learnt about new initiatives and perspectives."



3. Providing a virtual space for people to connect, not just a platform – Open Lab

When looking for the right technology, we didn't want to reinvent the wheel. We also wanted whatever technology we used to be a shared space that felt not only familiar, but easily accessible, and most importantly inclusive. Our initial approach was to understand the requirements of a virtual summit and the types of sessions that would be held. We could then take these requirements and explore which existing platforms provided such functionality and how we could utilise this.

climate:red had numerous similarities to a physical conference or summit, in which we would have large auditorium style talks or panel discussions followed by smaller side speeches and workshops that could be grouped into thematic areas or tracks. Sounds simple, right? With that in mind we started by looking at existing platforms on the market. It's here that we encountered two main problems: cost and language support. English is the universal language for coding, and when it comes to platforms, you'll find that the majority of tools often neglect to cater for languages that are formatted right-to-left (RTL) – such as Arabic. We spent many hours searching for video conferencing, question and answer tools, interactive polls that would be able to support all four languages of the IFRC. Even after finding a few we still weren't sure how we were going to support live interpretation of the sessions through these platforms. But more on this later!

The second problem to tackle was cost. So many packaged solutions are far beyond our reach as a humanitarian organisation and research lab. If we had asked for this sum of money up front we would have been rejected. We even approached one platform that had most of what we thought we needed except the interpretation function, which we offered to build for them for free in return for them letting us use the rest of their platform pro bono. They didn't agree to this.

We knew that whilst most of the individual sessions would be held in Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Webex, or others, we also needed a central platform through which the whole summit functioned and people could navigate through to the agenda. Fortunately at [Open Lab](#) we also wanted to advance our skills and expertise in hosting virtual meetings and we had the capability internally to build such a platform. The value of this can't be understated, the

climate:red summit could never have been staged on this scale and to this level without this contribution.

Platform requirements:

- Centralised location to be accessed globally
- Entire site available in 4 languages; English, Spanish, French and Arabic
- Content Management system (CMS) for session information
- Headline Plenary sessions to have Live interpretation
- Virtual networking
- Accessible on mobile or Desktop
- Scalability – of the servers

Organisation and planning

“For every minute spent organizing, an hour is earned.”

Benjamin Franklin

This was our first time developing a virtual conference platform, so we hit the ground running. Straight away we realized the need for a variety of organisation tools that would make life easier in the long run. We needed some sort of content management system but we didn't want to end up using something like Wordpress® as these sites can end up being slow and bloated. We opted for a relatively new approach via what's known as a “Headless CMS” with a technology called Netlify. This allowed us to edit content as a distributed team, but saved us from all the additional bolt ons you get from typical CMS's. The next bit of organisation came in the form of Ggoogle® sheets. As the summit grew, so did the amount of documents we had and very quickly things started to become unwieldy. We ended up making a series of reference documents, such as one giant Google® sheet document to curate all the accepted sessions. This included things like the time, the host, the track, title, abstract, language etc.. Another template managed the process to get text translated for example. The time we spent with the organisation at the start really paid off later in the project.

Designing a great User Experience

Designing a platform of this scale from scratch is a huge feat. Luckily, as a Lab we're quite well versed in international conferences which helped massively when it came to recreating that experience virtually. What it doesn't prepare you for, however, is that when it comes to online platforms, even small design decisions such as the location of a button, can have huge implications for usability. For example, we're all familiar with the printed conference map. You know the one, that large printed fold out piece of paper that shows all the talks and locations and requires approximately 3 people to hold it out expanded. Well how do you translate the ease of having all that information to hand in one view into an area the size of a mobile phone screen? On top of that, how do you allow users to not only watch the talk, but engage and interact in question and answer sessions whilst also reading the name of the panellist? These are some of the types of challenges we had to address whilst designing the interface for the platform.

It was also really important to meet regularly with the core team and present design options. One important process we had was to ensure we had a representative from the tech designers team on the core working group and vice versa. As climate:red began to take shape, we constantly reassessed our design decisions and had to be agile and work flexibly to achieve a robust output. One of the great successes in the interface was the fixed sidebar navigation. By having a fixed point of truth that persisted throughout the site, users could quickly and easily access all areas of the site at any time from the Atrium, to the schedule, to “Coffee chat” (a custom made solution that imitates the breakout space at a conference where attendees have a coffee and network), to our help desk.

Going LIVE!

Nothing can prepare you for the day of Launch. If you're involved in technology, many of you will be familiar with the dread of a product launch. Ultimately something will go wrong, there will be typos, system errors and you'll be frantically working to resolve issues around cross-compatibility. Well it's fair to say climate:red didn't disappoint! Even after running multiple server load tests to ensure we would be able to cope, on the verge of the opening panel the disaster struck: the servers went down!

Unfortunately the problem wasn't obvious at first and the solution required a complete architecture rebuild. After some frantic phone calls and fuelled on coffee, Climate:red was back up and working after just 53 minutes. (A very quick time for a problem of this scale). The moral of the story.....test, test and be prepared to respond and react to crisis.

To conclude, the platform exceeded all our expectations. In addition to the basic functions we knew we needed, such as an easy and clear navigating through the agenda and extensive search function, easy access to individual sessions, live stream and embedded chat and other interactive functions for main stage events, we got much more. With its **coffee chats** and the possibility to exchange virtual business cards, saved carbon calculator and participant tracker, a Chat-bot help desk incorporating both artificial intelligence and human volunteers supporting both the session hosts and attendees, and live interpretation, **climate:red** was as close to a face to face event experience as we thought possible with our time and resources. It was not just a platform but truly a virtual space for people from all around the globe to meet, connect, discuss, debate and inspire each other.

WHAT DID YOU LIKE THE MOST ABOUT CLIMATE:RED?

"One thing that I like most about Climate:Red, is that it provides a suitable platform for leaders coming from different places around the world to gather (online), share their ideas and experiences, help us learn, and realize a lot of things especially concerning our climate. It was my first time attending an international conference at a young age, and it didn't cost a lot."

Insights and recommendations

So to wrap things up, here are a few insights and recommendations that we would advise should you ever choose to develop your own summit in the future:

Don't reinvent the wheel.

Fortunately there is already a tonne of great software and tech platforms out there. The global pandemic has done nothing but boost the development and progress into these virtual tools. There really is "an app for that" if you just begin

to look. Most importantly though, think about what your needs are and what you want to get out of your event / session/workshop.. Is it purely a speech from a famous guest or are you wanting to host more of an interactive session on platforms such as Mural or Miro. Ultimately for climate:red, we incorporated multiple tools including zoom, Youtube® live, Sli.do etc into one wrapper that was the website Once you find that software or tool, don't be afraid to sign up and begin messing about to really see if it fits.



Languages are hard.

One of the hardest challenges we had to overcome involved languages. Whether its translating everything into small chunks called "strings" to populate the website content or how you deal with live interpretation over video and panels on zoom. Make sure you allow for extra time to test and check. I cant emphasize how much we were stretched getting all the various bits translated! We did it and it all worked out great, but however long you think you need for translation... Well double it.

Plan a soft launch a week before the real launch.

What do i mean by this? In the world of tech we have the concept of a "soft launch". It's the idea that you can release something internally or to a select

team to view, find bugs or critique before things go live to the public. It just helps you to iron out all the kinks or spot something that just doesn't quite work as intended before larger groups that matter start looking and using your software.

WHAT DID YOU LIKE THE MOST ABOUT CLIMATE:RED?

"The proof-of-concept of a 2,600-participants (at the time I joined) engaging climate conference open to everyone with a good internet connection. This felt great, to be so connected. Due to time constraints, I was only able to participate in one workshop, that was a bit of a pity, because the workshop was great (EN-Roads)."

People make a platform

Again you could be confused by what appears to be me talking in riddles but I think this sums up the core foundation behind projects like this, which is people. Who are you making the platform for? People. Who's collaborating as a team to build and develop your platform? People. Who is going to be on hand to help when things go wrong or someone needs help and you need to fix things? You can probably guess this by now, people. Design is human centred and the outputs of all your hard work organising a summit or event are for people who you want to connect. Think about all the stakeholders who are involved from the start of your journey, to the very end. You need to foster strong relationships and work as a team to pull a successful event. Find people's specialisms and use that strength to drive your event forwards because without a team and people around you, its very hard to achieve your goals.

Fail quickly and often.

Designing systems and platforms like Climate:red isn't always going to be smooth sailing(trust me!). Be prepared to have awkward conversations and demo tests about your latest design, new feature, or mock-up criticised for not working or being awkward or broken. It's absolutely fine to get things wrong! But it's what you do next that's important. It's best to fail quickly and fast so that you can learn from those mistakes and drive the software to become something truly great! Be your own worst critic and use techniques like workshops,

AB Testing or customer user journeys to test if your latest concept works. The quicker you do this, the better the designs and concepts you produce will be.

4. Digital production of the high-level panels and live event

During the 31 hours of climate:red virtual summit, our teams managed the high level panels and the climate:red platform, supported and coordinated the over 200 sessions hosted by others (helping with technology, checking in on them/ joining in), adjusted program content, answered questions, fixed technology, and managed all the moving parts. We also attempted to resolve any issues in the background at a dizzy pace, pivoting on the spot to meet the needs and the timing. Our main focus was to help all the participants, session hosts and speakers have a great series of conversations and activities.

During the event, our staff and volunteer team surged to over 70 people for digital production of the high-level panels. There were 40 volunteers from across National Societies and IFRC who helped on event production, moderation and simply being supporting allies for anything the event needed. We defined four different roles for these volunteers/staff: event technology, moderation, interpretation, and production coordination. We made a conscious choice to have youth volunteers lead and support technology for high level panels.

Roles

We've explored what it takes to run professional and engaging [virtual meetings](#). Using our best skills is key for events, we ramped up our team of staff and volunteers to support the 17 high level panels across technology, moderation, interpretation and production coordination. We found that a mix of technical savvy, community managers, translators/interpretation and production coordination ensures a strong event.

Production coordination

Producing an online event requires coordination between the teams, speakers and hosts. During the live event, we had slack and WhatsApp® channels for our communications. We had calls to troubleshoot any event needs. As we on-boarded help, we expanded this circle. All staff and volunteers were recruited, then trained by the production lead. Alternative Production Leads were also recruited and cross-trained for all the team roles. These production team leaders coordinate with the business owner on content, assists with session design/delivery and supports the speakers. The production lead weaves together the technology, communications, and interpretation roles of an event to look seamless to the participants and speakers. They lead the testing and rehearsals while coaching all the teams to flow in a professional way. They also manage the timing of the event to keep the overall program flowing. This type of coordination often requires negotiation, clarification, and diplomacy while managing the expectations, especially if people are adding changes to the content, speakers and timings. Each panel had WhatsApp® channels for the core team, interpretation and moderation.

Technical hosts and support

Technical hosts and support manage the technology tool set (e.g. Zoom®, sli.do®, Youtube®, videos, slides and photos). For a high level panel, we had a minimum of two or three technical people assisting. This team manages the recording, the sound, the live streaming, video, and coordinates on sound checks, content sharing, and any technical issues related to quality delivery for participants and speakers. The main host was engaged in the design and rehearsals for those panels. We added more technical support for the live event to manage video spotlights, security (waiting room) and any other content needs. There was never a shortage of people to help, but we very much planned for extra hands just in case. This came in handy when we reallocated staff between sessions or had changes.

A special note to say that the National Society volunteers really helped make this possible. While sometimes there were just small technology roles, having a dedicated person for each task made sure that we could juggle and cross-train others. During the panels, we assigned sound checks to different people to free up the other technical staff to prepare other items before going live. Each of the

technical hosts would work approximately 3 to 7 hours on the high level panels from design to testing to preparation to delivery.

Moderation/Engagement

In keeping with the design of the event, we aimed to be as human-focused as possible. Each panel had 2 or 3 types of moderation/engagement types. It can be complex to be interactive in a large event with multiple moving parts. Moderation staff inside the zoom platform coordinated with the production lead and hosts to assist on questions from the audience and polls as well as act as digital security – verifying all the participants in the panel and coordinating that all content streamed was approved. They manage the zoom chat and the WhatsApp® communication channel. The moderation team also collaborates with the audience participants – answering questions, sharing questions with hosts, and even doing live translation of content for the hosts.

Each of the high level panels had ‘content leads.’ Our teams distilled the content and gave it to them to decide what needs to be said by the facilitator of the panel – everything from sound issues to questions. Our communication channels aimed to make audience participation seem seamless whilst the team collaborated into the background to identify questions and share in a high speed mode. Many of our colleagues were not familiar with the volume of communication and multitasking that happens across the moderation teams. Thus, we often had 1 to 3 tiers of communications to determine what is needed and to summarize from the content teams to the panellists/facilitators/session hosts.

Interpretation Lead

Having an inclusive event with 4 official languages requires a multi-skilled team. We have a few multilingual staff members, but it is essential that the Interpreter Lead be multilingual, technical and a problem-solver. Interpretation is a specialized skill to weave into an online event. This team includes all the interpretation leads as well as the interpreters. The interpreter lead must be involved in the whole design and coordination of the event. This way the focal points can assist with all the interpreter needs. From testing, technical support to communication, having a great virtual experience means really understanding the user experience. The interpretation lead ensures that all languages are flowing and heard. They collaborate with the production lead and moderation team to en-

sure people are talking slow enough for live interpretation and that all content can be easily understood.

During the live event 17 panels were interpreted into 4 panels across multiple formats and using many tools. There was a WhatsApp® channel for every panel for the interpretation team.

The Interpretation Lead managed and supported a team of 14 interpreters with technical advice, wrote guidance on how to interpret during climate:red, troubleshooted the bespoke interpretation module with them and the developers and, liaised with the production team.

The interpreter's job is shaken up by digitalization. Successfully managing interpreters requires being a supporter. Keep in mind that the failure of one of them is the failure of the whole interpreters team and of the event's organizing team. Concretely you'll need to:

- 1 **Build trust:** Continuously support, be humble and use humour to relieve pressure and create a sense of belonging. In the preparation phase as well as during the event, make sure you create space for them to raise concerns and get answers.
- 2 **Make sure no one is left behind and customize your support:** Assess their proficiency in the use of digital interpretation tools, help them overcome their fear and build their digital skills. Always keeping in mind that interpreters have different backgrounds (culture, digital literacy) and are familiar with different devices. Identify the most proficient ones and incentivize to support their colleagues.
- 3 **Constantly be clear on responsibilities:** interpreters are responsible for their devices, equipment and interpreting, not for the technology itself. Take the blame when technology fails, troubleshoot and fix it as soon as possible.
- 4 **Create a main communication channel for the interpretation teams and dedicated channels for each session requiring interpretation.** Include a coordination helper that can take over/fill the gaps.

- 5 **For such a long event, be prepared to not sleep much but do not neglect rest times.** Adrenaline helps but one can be easily burnt. Having created a sense of belonging, established a low-key relationship, clear communication channels and designated a helper pays a lot to alleviate the managers' burden as interpreters will help each other.

(read more about our experience and lessons learnt on live interpretation in this dedicated [blog post](#))

WHAT DID YOU LIKE THE MOST ABOUT CLIMATE:RED?

The interactive sessions which we engaged in during break away groups. They were quite helpful due to information sharing and learning how other societies and nations are integrating climate change in their programs

Teamwork

We wanted everyone to be aware of all the four parts that make up a high level panel – the technology, the participation moderation, the interpretation and the production coordination. We didn't just want people to simply push buttons, but to be part of something larger, and to understand that the success of all the panels was because of their collective input.

We had frequent volunteer engagement meetings and communications to have them all meet each other, and for also helping us learn how to do the event with them. We joked about this approach being an 'event teaching hospital'. We did this because the long term goal is to have everyone in the team able help others run successful online events. Alongside everyone learned new and various skills. Often, we asked for last minute help for various things and people assigned to do something else graciously stepped up. This kind of community and team engagement is absolutely critical for live events, especially in a volunteer organisation. We've never claimed to be a formal event production team, which makes this all the better because each of us learned new skills and stretched ourselves so that we could deliver the event with and for RCRC.

If we would do it again, we would conduct a full 'dress rehearsal' with just the production team to go through everything. This would help us to make sure that

every element of the summit was working properly ahead of time – and save us some headaches and heartaches. Even though we had planned to, we didn't have the time or opportunity, because we were training others to run their sessions, elements of the tech were being deployed at the last moment and parts of the high-level session were still changing until the event went live.

Collaborating across people, languages, time zones, various complex processes and skills can be difficult for any existing team. When it's a new team engaged in something happening for the first time ever, and especially to this volume, hang onto your hat and pick up the phone – or WhatsApp®, Skype®, Slack®, emails, diagrams and other channels the team is using for communications. We consistently worked on how to reach each other and find our way to teamwork. Every team is a work in progress, but when you condense a year's work into 31 hours of delivery, expect some room for improvement, thanks, apologies, and humility.

Insights and Recommendations:

- Design your event to include volunteers in all types of roles. Involve them as early as possible. There is ample room for people to learn and lead.
- Be transparent and inclusive in all your event steps.
- Ask for help. Pick up the phone
- Clarify, restate, check in
- Prepare to have miscommunication and find a way back to teamwork

Production planning and Testing

When the COVID-19 response started in the spring 2020, the Solferino team started to design, test and refine our digital production processes. Our spreadsheets and documents beget more spreadsheets and documents. We did frequent run-through of the events as we prepared for the 2-hour live schedules. Now, for every 2-hour event with 4 languages, digital production, technology testing and content development, we consider upwards of 30 hours preparation and testing. You can read more about our work [here](#) and [here](#).

For climate:red, we delivered 17 different high level virtual panels with diverse session plans. As we had spent many months developing our processes and

some standards for our smaller virtual events, we were able to better prepare for this much bigger one too. We also modified our production templates frequently. We were also very fortunate to have a project manager in Amy Gibson Events to add more layers of coordination across the multiple tools and communication styles for ever changing event landscape.

Insights and recommendations:

- **Test, test, test** – for every virtual session there should be minimum 2 – 3 full 'dress rehearsal tests.' This means including all the four types of production roles plus the content experts/session hosts. There may not be a need to have all the speakers join the test, but for a standard panel this is "ok". We encouraged speakers to join the event preparation on the day to do any necessary technology and design checks.
- **Training** – you can never train and cross-train enough. For all our production and testing meetings, we also used it as an opportunity to cross-train each other. We would invite volunteers and staff alike to learn more about the other roles within event production. This type of job shadowing became super handy when live production started.
- **Scheduling and production charts** – We have learned to juggle and to double, even, triple check on who is doing what for the live production. This is invaluable during the live event because people could just pick up if one of the team members was helping another concurrent event.

Live Production

As mentioned above, for the high-level panels, the Solferino team engaged volunteers into each part of our team. There were youth volunteers leading technology, doing moderation, and translating content into English, French, Spanish and Arabic.

In addition to the volunteers helping with high-level panels, during the live event we also had a team of volunteers working in the background and helping us run the show as smoothly as possible. They had long shifts online replying to questions from both hosts and attendees through emails and our help desk,

and doing last-minute / on the spot edits and translations to session content as well as updating the agenda online.

There was a massive volume of questions and support requests arriving through the Chatbot and emails, (we had over 200 queries through our virtual help desk alone during the live event). The vast majority of people asking for help found their answers from our artificial intelligence chatbot, for which we had tried to come up with all possible problem situations and questions – and their answers, too. Considering the volume of individual sessions during the event and amount of people attending, we found this kind of automated help desk to be crucial. However, we did also have human volunteers on standby at all times to reply to more difficult enquiries and requests that the chatbot could not help with.

It was of course challenging trying to provide support in all four event languages through 31 consecutive hours of a virtual event, where individual sessions were hosted on multiple different platforms by hundreds of people to thousands of people. This we could not have done without our amazing group of volunteers from around the globe. They did a great job with it.

WHAT DID YOU LIKE THE MOST ABOUT CLIMATE:RED?

There are various aspects that I found very worthwhile. On the one hand, the format and structure of the event were very well handled and the moderator's approach was excellent. I, too, believe that the intersection between development and 'humanitarian' was very interesting, and the theme of 'global but local' offered a very important perspective.

Insights and recommendations

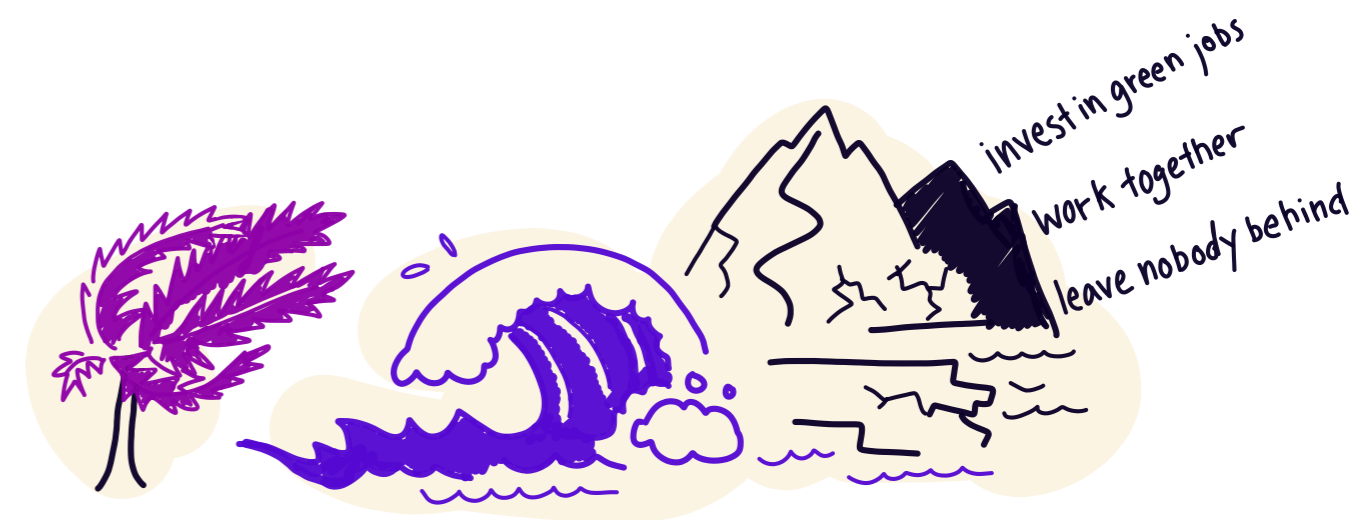
- **Change will happen, be ready:** Triple confirm any changes and be ready to shift with last minute requests/adjustments. We sometimes had to scramble to solve items in real-time. This really highlights how a well-trained and communicating team is the key to any divergences.
- **Technology is not human:** Simply put, technology will break and mistakes will happen, but the real power is the space between us as a team

and with participants – we all shared the mission that climate:red was important and we made a space for beautiful humans to meet, connect, learn and share.

- **Communication flows, breaks and saves you:** Whatsapp channels were invaluable at times but often we had to pick up the phone between teams because all the moving parts were going at high speed.
- **Training and practice pays off:** Volunteers are key to your RCRC digital events. Cross-train as much as possible so that your team can help each other throughout the event. This approach really helped many of us during the hectic changes. We learned much about the training and process design. The Solferino expertise plus that within the movement was very exciting. We can't wait to see the new events and how people continue to evolve these practices. We have plans too!

To finish

We are very thankful for all the support of our sponsors, partners, staff and volunteers who made this possible. It takes a team! We'll be sharing more details about each of the parts of a large event as many colleagues have been reaching out for further details, insights and support to deliver their tailored digital events.





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