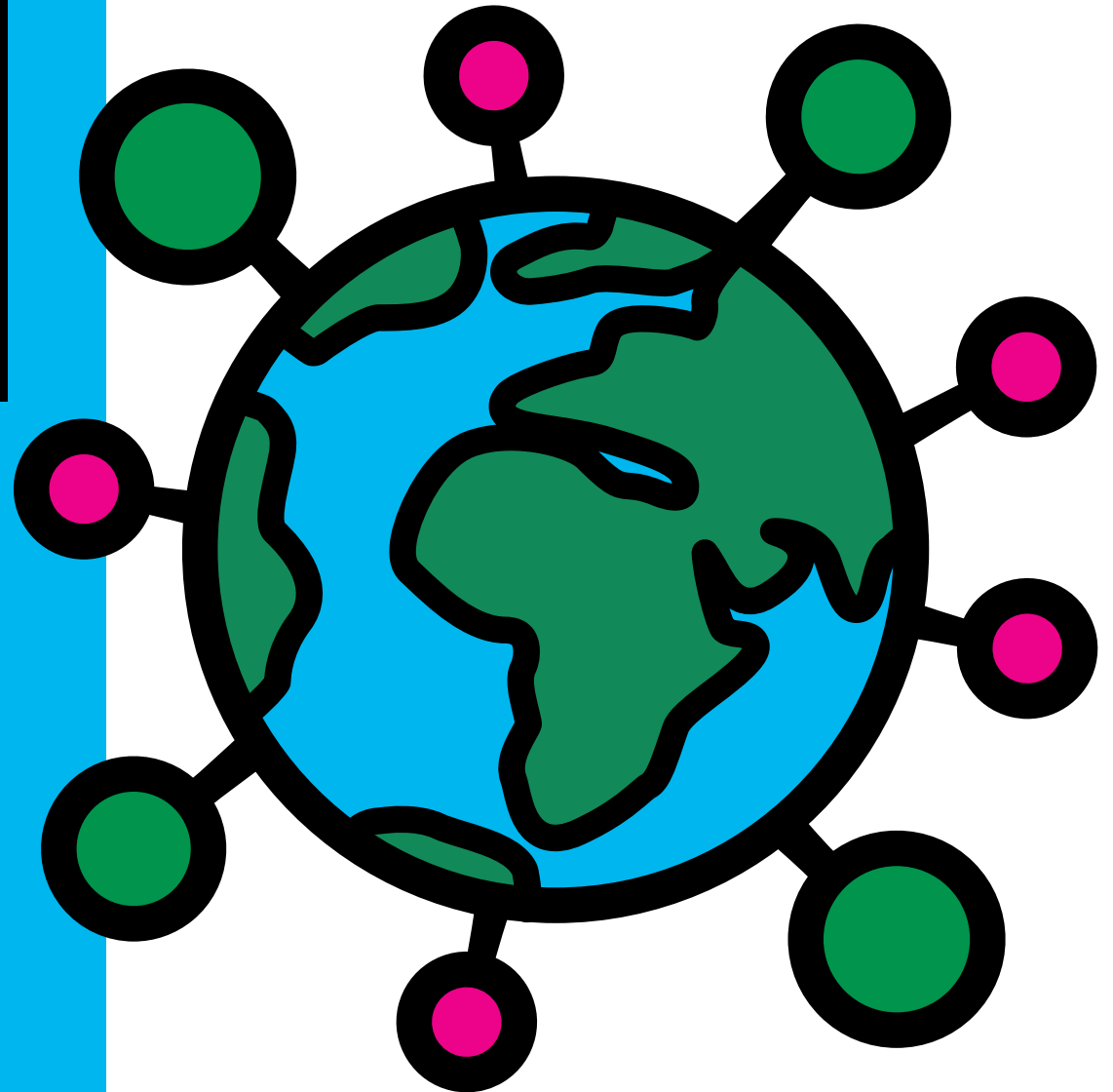


**DELIVERING
TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE IN
THE TIME OF**

COVID-19



ABOUT FRONTLINE AIDS

Frontline AIDS wants a future free from AIDS for everyone, everywhere. Around the world, millions of people are denied HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care simply because of who they are and where they live.

As a result, 1.7 million people were infected with HIV in 2019 and 690,000 died of AIDS-related illness.

Together with partners on the frontline, we work to break down the social, political and legal barriers that marginalised people face, and innovate to create a future free from AIDS.

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INTRODUCTION

Frontline AIDS is well known for providing capacity-building technical assistance to organisations that receive HIV, tuberculosis and malaria-related funding. We have proven expertise in working with government bodies, national health programmes and civil society organisations to build skills in organisational development, financial management, grant management, programming in human rights and gender, and in strengthening community systems.

We were delivering numerous technical assistance assignments when the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020. These projects mainly support Global Fund Principal Recipients (PRs) to implement the PR Dashboard or Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs) to strengthen their oversight of Global Fund grants. Consultants, who tend to be nationals of nearby countries, deliver much of this support. Normally, they do so by visiting the project country two or three times during a grant reporting cycle, providing remote coaching and mentoring between visits.

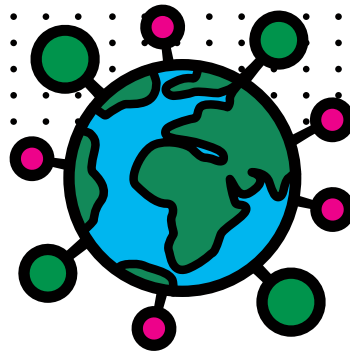
COVID-19 restrictions, particularly around travel, have seen us rapidly adapt the way we deliver technical assistance. As lockdowns proliferated, we acted swiftly to protect consultants from undue risk of infection and ensure they were able to return home before borders closed.

Since then we have been taking new and flexible approaches to ensure our technical assistance projects continue to deliver, allowing us to respond to emerging needs quickly and effectively.

This case study examines this adaptation and presents essential insight into how technical assistance can be effectively delivered in constrained operating environments. It is based on interviews with seven consultants engaged in Frontline AIDS' technical assignments during COVID-19 lockdowns. The Global Fund and GIZ BACKUP Health funded all projects under discussion.



NEW OPERATING ENVIRONMENT



Delivering technical assistance during lockdown met with the following challenges:

Availability

- Ministry of Health staff had to prioritise the COVID-19 response. This severely limited their availability to engage with other issues.
- Some grant recipients applied for additional funds from the Global Fund's COVID-19 Response Mechanism. Such funding requests tended to be prioritised over other types of work.

Home-based working

- In some countries, Principal Recipients and CCM members were required to work from home, but initially no systems were in place to support this. People struggled with home-based internet access and accessing key work documents.

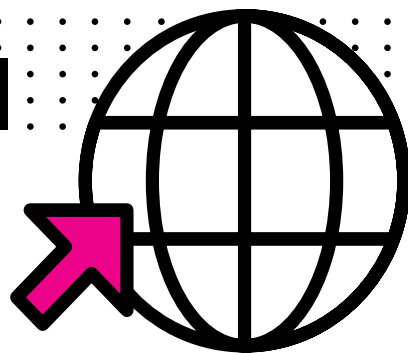
Limited exposure to online group communication platforms

- When restrictions began few CCM members and Principal Recipients had worked with Zoom, Blue Jeans or Microsoft Teams, let alone subscribed to packages that allowed for prolonged group interaction.

These factors delayed the delivery of technical assistance. This was especially noticeable where consultants needed country input or action to move the assignment forward (e.g. providing data, making decisions, arranging meetings). Many of the consultants interviewed described how only being able to interact with recipients virtually gave them limited leverage in the face of competing demands on recipients' time. Consultants referred to this "out of sight, out of mind" challenge frequently when stressing the comparative advantages of in-country support.



GOING VIRTUAL



“ The issue with virtual is you don't see people; even if they use video it's still a screen. You don't have people in front of you¹.

For technical assistance to successfully build capacity, the relationship between those providing support and those receiving it must be strong.

All consultants participating in this case study had visited recipients at least once before lockdown. Most described these visits as essential for establishing relationships, trust and mutual understanding, and gaining commitment to proposed changes in practices and/or systems from those in leadership positions. As one consultant put it:

“ You cannot do that via Skype, you need to build trust, to build confidence, to develop a relationship with the person.

Many felt that having been able to establish relationships and conduct groundwork for the assignment in person mitigated to some extent the impact of then having to deliver the remaining support virtually.

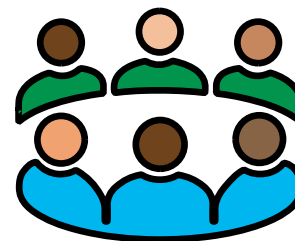
It is important to note that Frontline AIDS is already experienced in delivering virtual technical support. Ongoing remote coaching and mentoring of Oversight Officers and CCM Secretariat staff by consultants has long been an effective feature of the Oversight Strengthening technical assistance we provide.

Likewise, PR Dashboard consultants always offer online joint support sessions with PR focal points and CCM Secretariat staff. But until now, country visits have been a key ingredient in the gold standard of technical assistance we deliver. These enable us to hold face-to-face workshops and trainings, and meet key stakeholders in person, and the absence of these activities has been challenging.

1. All quotations are from the consultants interviewed for this case study.



When it comes to facilitating a capacity-building experience, our interviews with consultants indicate that holding meetings and trainings online is not a like-for-like substitution for face-to-face group interaction.



Consultants said the following things had been lost or significantly reduced by moving things entirely online²:

- Supervised, task-based activities between small groups of workshop participants
- Learning and interaction between participants:

” Face to face would have generated more questions and more interaction.

- Large gatherings of people from different sectors to build a sense of collective purpose:

” Virtually, not as many people can interact with the technical support as [they] would if you were all in the room together.

- Coffee break conversations, which provide less active participants with the opportunity to ask the trainer questions that can later be addressed by the group

- Clear non-verbal cues from participants, such as body language and verbal expressions, which indicate whether they understand and/or agreed with a learning point³:

” You never know whether somebody has understood unless they speak or ask a question, online, and there's not always time for that.

- Opportunities to observe people conducting tasks or processes that they have been newly trained to do:

” It's definitely more difficult to do it in a virtual setting... because I don't have that personal contact with the participants.

². Although the online communication platforms mentioned can be used with webcams, most participants do not use this feature due to bandwidth constraints.

³. Some consultants said they could not be sure if the participants in a virtual training were even following the workshop. With webcams turned off participants could be logged in but not paying attention.



THE RISKS OF PROVIDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE REMOTELY LONG-TERM

- Visiting technical support recipients at the start of a project is crucial for relationship building, securing leadership buy-in, and creating momentum for the assignment.

If technical assistance needs to be provided entirely remotely consideration must be given to the following:

- How to build trusting relationships with primary technical assistance recipients in the absence of face-to-face interaction
- How to ensure that stakeholders at leadership level understand the need for the support and are committed to enabling change
- How to create a sense of common purpose around the objectives of the assistance among a diverse range of stakeholders
- How to keep technical assistance tasks on recipients' To Do lists in the absence of any scheduled mission pressure and maintain buy-in in the presence of competing demands on recipients' attention
- How to best structure and deliver online workshops and trainings

- Gatekeeping is potentially more complex if technical assistance is provided entirely remotely. An in-country visit typically provides extensive opportunity to meet with a wide range of stakeholders and understand their perspectives on the assignment's objectives. But when working remotely the consultant is more dependent on its primary contacts to facilitate inclusion.

This can raise complicated, potentially sensitive, questions about who should be involved in certain communications, and how to tactfully reach out to different stakeholders (such as development partners) for support with contacting those who are possibly being sidelined.

- Delays are likely to be more common when providing technical assistance entirely remotely. Delays may occur for a number of reasons, including competing (possibly COVID-related) demands on recipients' time, and the tendency for people to prioritise what is physically in front of them. This may lead to repeated extensions of the assignment's timeframe.

- An important finding is the extent to which physical workshop attendance is incentivised by per diem payments to participants. As these payments are not given for virtual participation it may affect both the number of people attending and the overall profile of participants. This could become an issue if it results in people not attending whose participation is vital to the overall change process.

- Flexibility is a key feature of effective remote support. Without the incentive of fixed, face-to-face interactions – for instance, a set time when everyone goes through a training process together in a physical workshop – consultants are likely to find themselves providing each stage of the support to smaller groups of stakeholders according to their availability. This will require more of the consultant's time, spread out over a longer period.



- There is a significant risk of consultants being pushed by time pressures into doing things *for* those receiving technical assistance, which they would have previously done *with* the recipient.

As one consultant commented:

” To get things moving you certainly are going to... do some of the tasks that you'd have wanted [the recipient] to be doing.

Another observed:

” With remote [support] it's taken so long to get information from them, you end up just doing the tasks, while they are following in a Zoom meeting.

Clearly, from a capacity-building and sustainability perspective, working with the recipient is preferable. Remote working makes it harder to keep the recipients on track with tasks and reporting back.

- Working remotely with groups is different from physically meeting with them. Most notably, groups will likely be smaller and (for the PR dashboard in particular) in organisational clusters. Online workshop/meeting sessions will likely be shorter⁴ than their physical equivalent. This requires training to be delivered over more sessions in shorter, more frequent bursts. This will be a particular challenge for Oversight Committee trainings, where participants are volunteers with no direct stake in the grants. Not overburdening people with unrealistic expectations on their time here will be vital.

- South-to-South capacity building is the cornerstone of Frontline AIDS' proven technical assistance approach. This is key to facilitating learning across country borders within a region. There is a risk of technical assistance becoming more insular if the use of national consultants becomes the primary way of overcoming current constraints on mission-based support.

- It will not be possible to carry out some Oversight Committee strengthening support remotely. Typically this involves visits to remote areas without internet, which means the technical assistance provider must be physically present to observe the committee members' interactions with grant implementers.

- Facilitating political processes is one of the most difficult tasks to manage remotely. This is especially so for assignments that support structures representing different sets of stakeholders such as CCMs. Addressing dynamics and resolving tensions often requires sensitive facilitation, based on a certain level of familiarity with key players. Nationally-based consultants could help resolve this problem but only if that local provider is seen as completely neutral. Neutrality is especially critical in relation to the government/community divide and ensuring that disempowered stakeholders and affected communities have a voice in grant governance processes.

- There is a real risk that virtual technical assistance will become more focused on outputs than outcomes. There is a distinct possibility that technical assistance could become more about consultants delivering technical products (e.g. tools, manuals, proposals, plans, guidelines, reports) and less about building the skills of people and systems to work more effectively. This can put pressure on the relationship between the consultant and the country focal points if the consultant is perceived to be repeatedly chasing inputs, decisions and responses.

4. One to two hours was given as an example.



RECOMMENDATIONS



→ COMBINE REMOTE SUPPORT WITH IN-COUNTRY PRESENCE

There is a need to combine in-country expertise with international (remote) expertise to capitalise on the advantages (and mitigate the disadvantages) of both. On new assignments, when a technical assistance team is not situated in the country it is supporting, it is worth asking someone in-country to join the support team. This team member would be responsible for conducting physical meetings to mobilise support for the assignment, getting leadership buy in, keeping the momentum going, and ensuring tasks are completed. (This will only be possible if there are no restrictions on physical meetings in-country.)

→ SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY WITH SECURE ONLINE ACCESS

When providing civil society with technical assistance, particular consideration should be given to two things.

The first is the cost of internet access in a country. To address this, technical assistance funders should consider budgeting for data packages in some assignments (however, this would be pointless if there is a significant internet connectivity issue in the country).

The other critical issue is the risk criminalised populations engaged in sensitive work may face when communicating online. For example, community-based monitoring in countries where there is a police crackdown on criminalised populations could put those engaged in this work in danger. Here, the use of appropriately encrypted communication platforms should be adopted. It is essential for communities to know that participating in technical assistance poses no risk to personal safety.

→ CREATE A SAFE SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPANTS

Depending on the context, and the assignment's objectives, consideration could be given to civil society-only virtual meetings as a way to safely gather inputs before a larger virtual meeting. It should be noted, however, that the need for such a step is highly country-specific. Consultants interviewed for this case study observed that in some of the countries they work in community voices are very strong.

→ ADJUST TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE WORKPLANS

Technical assistance workplans (typically the work schedules included in a consultant's TOR) need to be adjusted to take account of the following:

- Increased task repetition due to group work being conducted with smaller groups (e.g. one PR at a time, one constituency at a time)
- Increased task duration caused by the need to divide learning sessions into smaller chunks to fit with people's online attentions spans
- Increased assignment durations due to response lags
- Greater focus on coaching and mentoring
- Consultant workloads being diffused over the duration of the assignment, rather than being clumped around more intense mission-focused schedules

Related to this, consideration needs to be given to the end of an assignment. One interview noted that, with mission-based support, "they see you leave on a Friday". With virtual support there is a risk that the consultant will continue to get requests for support after the assignment has technically finished.



TRAIN CONSULTANTS IN ONLINE FACILITATION

As one consultant remarked: "it is far more difficult to provide remote technical assistance and it requires certain skills." There is a critical need to invest in training consultants to work effectively online. Such training should include:

- The best group size and duration for online training sessions
- How to maximise interactivity (between trainer and trainees and between trainees)
- How to check participants understand and are engaged when visual cues are absent
- How to design the training and what to prepare
- How to get the most out of platform functionality



NEW APPROACH TO WORKSHOP PREPARATION, DESIGN AND DELIVERY

There needs to be a new approach to workshop preparation, design and delivery. This should focus on shorter trainings for smaller groups and consider setting tasks between sessions where appropriate.

The exact approach will be highly dependent on the nature of the assignment but it could be informed by the above-mentioned training, if such training is made available. It could also be facilitated by consultants sharing their experiences with one another and by learning on the job.



RE-THINK OVERSIGHT STRENGTHENING SUPPORT

Oversight strengthening support needs re-thinking. Oversight committee members are typically volunteers who are not directly involved in grant implementation. There needs to be a realistic appraisal of how available and motivated they will be to participate in multiple, short-burst, online training sessions in addition to their commitment to attending committee meetings. It might be better to use a local trainer for these trainings (from the CCM Secretariat or a national consultant). The training could then be conducted in its usual one to two day physical format, with remote support provided to technically guide and inform the training's structure and content. Of course, Frontline AIDS has a long history of pairing national and international consultants. The change will be more around task-shifting and the fact that the international consultant is only available remotely.



REINTRODUCE IN-COUNTRY SUPPORT

In the interest of effective capacity building and south-south learning, in-country support should be gradually reintroduced as a key component of TA once travel restrictions are eased and there are effective measures in place to protect the health of TA providers and the people they are working with.



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