

## LEARNING MODALITIES IN MENA EVALUATING THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS INITIATIVE

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## Learning Modalities in MENA

### *Evaluating the Non-Governmental Organizations Initiative*

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### **Abstract**

With increasing reliance being placed on the civil society sector to respond to rising population needs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of workers in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to ensure localized, contextualized, and more effective responses. However, in the absence of systematic evaluation approaches to the capacity-building opportunities offered to NGO workers in the region, evidence on the most effective mode of delivery of these training opportunities remains scarce. We evaluated training courses implemented by the Non-Governmental Organizations Initiative at the American University of Beirut between July 2019 and November 2021 that aims to strengthen the internal capacities of NGOs in MENA, with a focus on comparing online synchronous versus in-person learning modalities. Through a mixed-methods approach, short-term and long-term data was collected from learners including knowledge assessments, course evaluations, and semi-structured interviews. A total of 383 learners participated in the training, 254 of which attended online and 129 attended in-person courses. While differences in knowledge and perceptions regarding the two modalities were relatively similar, in-person modality was preferred over online modality by virtue of it being perceived as being more engaging and more conducive for communication and networking. Details regarding the results covering strengths, challenges, and comparisons between both modalities are expanded on in the manuscript. This study highlights the overall preference of learners for in-person courses compared to online synchronous ones and high-

lights the need for research on identifying factors that could contribute to increased engagement in online synchronous learning along with strategies for adoption.

**Keywords:** *NGO, capacity building, education, Middle East, online, in-person*

## Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has witnessed constant instability and complex emergencies for decades (Cordesman, 2018). This is marked by continuous and protracted armed conflicts, sociopolitical upheavals, high rates of displacement, and breakdown of social protection systems, among others (Cordesman, 2018). In this tumultuous context, especially with inconsistencies in the provision of basic public and social services, there grew an urgent need for third parties to provide these responses given the scale of the humanitarian crises (Szalai, 2019). For this reason, the number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) significantly increased in the region in the past decade (Szalai, 2019). Not surprisingly, it is often the case that many NGOs are established after wars, disasters, or other emergencies.

As these organizations attempt to understand and respond to the needs of local communities, contextualized local responses and capacities are needed (Sumar & Gingerich, 2020). With international organizations struggling to keep up with the rapidly evolving needs of the region, there is a pressing need to localize responses through empowering and strengthening the organizational capacities of local NGOs and investing in local NGO workers (Sumar & Gingerich, 2020). This is because the Arab Region is characterized by a vibrant and dynamic civil society sector whereby NGOs assume primary responsibility to provide services in the absence of consistent governmental responses. As such, this fills multiple gaps by meeting the needs of millions of vulnerable individuals including humanitarian and development aid along with advocacy and needed activism initiatives. In this regard, localizing responses is considered to be more efficient and effective in addressing population needs for multiple reasons. For instance, local actors at times of crises have a more culturally sensitive understanding of the context, the area and the people, and are generally part and parcel of the communities they serve. This allows for a quicker tailored response, and better mobilization of resources (Sumar & Gingerich, 2020). In addition, local NGOs often have ties with the community and are able to have a deeper understanding of the culture, dynamics, and potential opportunities (Aall & Helsing, 2021). However, previous studies have shown that many of the local NGO workers within the MENA region remain unequipped with the adequate knowledge and skills and unable to provide an effective response to emergencies and crises, with local organizations often responding on ad hoc basis rather than in a systematic and continuous way (Jahre et al., 2016; Samad & Moschini, 2016). Moreover, workers in these organizations have limited opportunities to further develop adequate response capacities to meet the rising needs of the region. In a recent systematic review assessing 142 available humanitarian programs across the globe, it was concluded that most of the training opportunities are offered to only a limited

number of countries in the global north, while very few of those programs are available to populations impacted by humanitarian crises in the global south (Bahattab et al., 2022). Hence, there is a need to develop localized capacity-building programs and training to develop the knowledge and skills of NGO workers in the global south and the MENA region.

In response to the aforementioned challenges, the Non-Governmental Organizations Initiative (NGOi) at the Global Health Institute of the (GHI) of the American University of Beirut (AUB) was established. One of the main services offered is training and capacity-building, targeting NGO staff through courses offered through various learning modalities, including in-person and synchronous online learning.

This manuscript provides an overview on the use of in-person and online learning modalities for training and capacity-building within the context of humanitarian organizations. It describes the implementation and evaluation process adopted by GHI to develop and assess the in-person and online synchronous courses carried out by NGOi between July 2019 and November 2021. A comparative analysis of the effectiveness of each modality is presented, along with the strengths and challenges of each. Additionally, recommendations for future programs seeking to offer training courses for professionals in the NGO sector of the MENA region are provided.

## Background

The in-person learning model, commonly known as face-to-face, involves learners gathering physically at a scheduled time and location, for a specific duration of time. For decades, online learning, whether in asynchronous or synchronous formats, has served as an alternative to traditional in-person education. Online learning, also referred to as distance learning, e-learning, distance education, or distributed learning in the literature, is defined as the delivery of an online course at a physical location different from the site of teaching (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

It was suggested that humanitarian organizations based in the USA have adopted online learning as a platform for acquisition of knowledge, standardization of training, building of skills, and sharing of information (Bollettino & Bruderlein, 2008). Online learning has indeed become integral to such organizations primarily due to its effectiveness in reaching a higher number of staff, dispersed across various geographical locations, and its cost-effectiveness (de Rosa & Johnson, 2019). However, the use of online learning among humanitarian organizations is not well-documented or evaluated in the literature, highlighting a significant gap in understanding the application of online learning within this sector (Bollettino & Bruderlein, 2008). Moreover, there are limited studies addressing the potential of synchronous learning, with the majority focusing on asynchronous delivery formats (Istrate, 2017; MORA et al., 2023; Stöhr et al., 2020)

For instance, asynchronous learning has been criticized for the degree of interaction it offers between the learner and the educator. Synchronous learning, on the other hand, provides participants with real-time interaction and the possibility for peers to engage and communicate (Khan et al., 2022). In addition, some studies suggested that synchronous learning can overcome the challenges posed by traditional in-person learning by allowing for the exchange of information without the restrictions

of physical presence (Rubinger et al., 2020). Nonetheless, others highlighted that while synchronous learning can be an effective learning method, it is not as effective as in-person learning and cannot replace it (Gross et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

Some research have investigated the effectiveness of in-person and synchronous learning among school students and university students, but not among NGO workers (Gherheş et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2023; Lorenzo-Alvarez et al., 2019). Moreover, while studies have previously assessed the effectiveness of online training programs for humanitarian workers, those were specific to workers in countries of the Global North (de Rosa & Johnson, 2019; Evans et al., 2017). Little research has been conducted to compare between in-person and online training programs in the Global South (Naal et al., 2020; Saleh, Mansour et al., 2022). One previous study carried out by the Global Health Institute (GHI) reported an evaluation of an online synchronous and asynchronous training program directed toward NGO staff in the MENA region (Saleh, Brome, et al., 2022). In light of the above, the present study aims to compare the effectiveness of in-person versus online synchronous training programs for NGO staff in the region.

## Methods

### Design, Tools, and Procedures

This study is a mixed-methods exploratory study conducted as part of a process and outcome evaluation of the NGOi courses delivered at GHI-AUB. Short-term and long-term individual-level data was collected through qualitative and quantitative methods. The Kirkpatrick model for evaluating training programs was adopted, following the four levels of: (1) reaction, (2) learning, (3) behavior, and (4) results (Kirkpatrick, 2009). Learners were required to complete pre- and post-knowledge assessment tests at the beginning and end of every course along with course evaluations at the end of every course. Additionally, the research team contacted learners through email correspondence to invite them to complete a reflective commentary post-course completion consisting of a short essay reflecting on their experience with the course, and to participate in a semi-structured interview 3 months post-course completion. The researchers who collected the data were separate from the staff who coordinated the program. Participation was voluntary and was carried out only after obtaining learners' consent. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at AUB (IRB #: SBS-2019-0403).

### Course Overview and Delivery

SMEs were responsible for developing and delivering their respective courses. Courses were contextualized through the inclusion of case studies and practical examples that are tailored specifically to the region, and that are extracted from real-life examples. A total of five in-person courses and four online synchronous courses were developed. A variety of pedagogical approaches were implemented during the in-person and online synchronous sessions for each course, including: interactive lectures, group activities, individual activities, debates and discussions, case studies, simulation, demonstrations, and role plays. Assignments and evaluations were also carried out before, during, or after sessions. Group activities during the online synchronous courses were carried out using breakout rooms, a feature that is available on Zoom. The duration for each mode of instruction ranged between 15 to 120 minutes.

In-person courses were delivered between July 2019 and October 2020 at AUB in Lebanon. Each of the five courses consisted of four sessions that spanned over four non-consecutive days and over a total of 32 hours. The course material was delivered in English, while the explanation during the sessions was carried out in English and Arabic.

Online synchronous courses were delivered between February and November 2021. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the NGOi team was working on designing, developing, and delivering online courses for workers in the MENA region. The process was accelerated with the pandemic in order to keep up with the increasing needs for social distancing. Each course was hosted on Zoom and spanned over four non-consecutive days over 4 weeks, for a total of 24-32 hours, depending on the course material. Similar to in-person courses, online synchronous courses were delivered in English, and the explanation during the sessions was carried out in English and Arabic.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

Learners were recruited through a circulating call for applications on GHI's social media platforms and website. A more targeted recruitment strategy was adopted by sending out emails to NGOi's mailing list, which consisted of individuals working in NGOs, in addition to NGOi's member organizations. Applications were open to any professional working in the NGOs or any individual with an interest in this field of work. Participants enrolled in the modality that was available during the registration period and not based on preference, as participants did not have the option to choose. A total of 185 learners were registered for the five in-person courses, of which 129 attended, while 388 individuals registered for the five online synchronous courses, of which 254 attended.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The demographic characteristics of all participants are presented in . In general, participants attending in-person courses were older than those attending online synchronous courses. There were no noticeable differences between participants in either group regarding gender and educational level, whereby the majority of learners in both groups were females (61.62% and 69.57%, respectively) and most of them held bachelor's or master's degrees (90.91% and 94.45%, respectively). Only 7% of learners attending the in-person training and 5% of those attending the online synchronous training held a doctorate or a professional degree. The in-person and online courses were attended by learners from Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, Turkey, United Kingdom, among others. Participants worked in diverse fields within the NGO sector, including, health, child protection, development, education, and relief, mental health, and human rights among others.

**Table 1***Participants' Demographics*

<b>Learning Modality</b>	<b>Total (n=383)</b>	<b>In-person (n=129)</b>	<b>Online synchronous (n=254)</b>
<b>Age</b>			
18-24	14 (3.66)	4 (3.10)	10 (3.98)
25-34	157 (40.00)	32 (24.81)	125 (49.80)
35-44	99 (25.85)	27 (20.93)	72 (28.69)
45 and above	76 (19.84)	32 (24.81)	44 (17.52)
Missing	34 (8.88)	34 (26.36)	0 (0)
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	237 (61.88)	61 (47.29)	176 (69.57)
Male	115 (30.03)	38 (29.46)	77 (30.43)
Missing	30 (7.83)	30 (23.26)	0 (0)
<b>Highest Degree</b>			
High school	2 (0.52)	2 (1.55)	0 (0)
Bachelor's degree	168 (43.86)	51 (39.53)	117 (46.43)
Master's degree	160 (41.78)	39 (30.23)	121 (48.02)
Doctorate degree	12 (3.13)	3 (2.33)	9 (3.57)
Professional degree	9 (2.34)	4 (3.10)	5 (1.98)
Missing	30 (7.83)	30 (23.26)	0 (0)

Data is presented as n (%).

**Data Collection***Knowledge Assessment*

Pre- and post-knowledge assessment tests were administered to gauge knowledge changes prior to and after the completion of each course. Tests were developed by the SME of each course and included multiple-choice questions, requiring 20 to 30 minutes to complete. One hundred and twenty-three (95.3%) participants completed the pre- and post-knowledge assessment evaluation for the in-person courses, while 180 (70.8%) learners completed them for the online synchronous courses.

*Course Evaluation*

At the end of each course, a self-reported course evaluation survey was administered to each participant. This survey included 16 quantitative questions on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree), in addition to 4 open-ended questions. This evaluation aimed to gauge participants' reaction and satisfaction with the course content, the role of instructors, and their opinions and suggestions regarding the courses. Course evaluations were completed by 106 (82.1%) participants for in-person courses, and by 155 (61%) participants for the online synchronous courses.

*Reflective Commentaries*

Following course completion, a reflective commentary was administered to participants, asking them to describe, through a 500-word narrative essay, their experience with the course. The commentary was shared via Lime Survey platform (LimeSurvey,

2023). Learners were asked to include a story/example/situation describing their experiences with NGOi courses, and how these courses affected their skills, attitudes, and practices. Sixteen reflective commentaries were completed by learners attending in-person courses, and 19 were completed by those attending online synchronous courses.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were carried out 3 months post-completion to assess the long-term impact of NGOi courses on participants. The guide can be found in the appendix. The interviews aimed to collect data on learners' knowledge, practices, and experiences in implementing any changes in the practices, policies, or strategic plans within their organization. Invitation emails were sent out to all participants. Interviews were administered in English, Arabic, or a mixture of both depending on the preferences of the interviewee. All interviews were conducted over Zoom, and recorded pending participant consent. Seven participants agreed to participate in the semi-structured interview among in-person learners, in contrast to 24 of those who attended online synchronous courses.

## **Statistical Analysis**

Analysis of quantitative data was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 25, and significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . Mean scores for pre- and post-knowledge assessments were computed for each course, and paired  $t$ -test analysis was performed to compare the differences between pre and post scores for each of the in-person and online synchronous courses. Course evaluations were presented as frequencies and percentages, and the differences between in-person and online respondents were tested by Pearson chi-square. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews was transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Two research assistants performed open coding and analyzed all qualitative data, including semi-structured interviews, reflective commentaries, and open-ended questions from course evaluations. Results from participants of in-person and online synchronous courses were analyzed separately and were then merged into one table that combined all emerging themes. The researchers agreed that data saturation was reached with the available data, and therefore no further data collection was carried out. The research team met regularly to discuss and review the output of qualitative data and the themes generated. All participants' names were presented as codes to ensure anonymity at all times.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative Data**

#### ***Knowledge Assessment***

Table 2 presents the pre- and post- knowledge assessment scores for in-person and online synchronous courses, respectively. Regarding in-person courses, results showed a significant increase in knowledge scores for courses 1, 3, and 4 ( $p < .001$ ). As for the online courses, a statistically significant increase was noted for all five courses ( $p < .001$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p = 0.044$ ). Overall, results showed that the increase in knowledge was significant for the online ( $p = 0.02$ ), and in-person modalities ( $p = 0.056$ ).



**Table 2***Pre- and Post-Knowledge Assessment for In-Person and Online Courses*

<b>In-Person Courses</b>								
<b>Courses</b>		<b>Pre-test</b>		<b>Post-test</b>		<b>Paired t-test</b>		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Course 1 ( <i>n</i> =25)		61.28	12.08	87.67	6.86	10.73	24	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Course 2 ( <i>n</i> =16)		72.73	15.92	71.00	11.36	-.584	15	.568
Course 3 ( <i>n</i> =28)		29.47	11.82	63.75	12.54	10.471	27	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Course 4 ( <i>n</i> =12)		54.76	10.70	76.67	9.21	4.871	11	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Course 5 ( <i>n</i> =12)		47.69	10.92	54.62	13.91	1.168	11	0.267
<b>Overall</b>		53.19	16.14	70.74	12.56	2.675	4	0.056
<b>Online Courses</b>								
Course 1 ( <i>n</i> =84)		29.30	14.77	71.44	19.31	19.326	83	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Course 2 ( <i>n</i> =19)		35.94	16.95	55.45	17.15	3.458	18	<b>.003</b>
Course 3 ( <i>n</i> =17)		69.70	12.74	84.53	15.52	3.947	16	<b>.001</b>
Course 4 ( <i>n</i> = 16)		63.50	12.86	75.94	8.41	4.858	15	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Course 5 ( <i>n</i> =7)		72.23	12.35	83.23	5.09	2.548	6	<b>0.044</b>
<b>Overall</b>		54.13	20.03	74.12	11.73	3.491	4	<b>0.025</b>

*Bolded items indicate significance at the 0.05 level.*

### **Course Evaluations**

Overall, the results indicated high satisfaction with NGOi's in-person and online synchronous courses as shown in Table 3. However, significant differences were found on only two items, namely that participants attending in-person courses agreed more that the content of the courses was relevant to their needs ( $p=0.041$ ), and that they would take another course through this method of delivery ( $p=0.041$ ) when compared to those attending online synchronous courses. As for the learning modality, participants reported significantly higher satisfaction with the in-person courses (82.08% v/s

70.97%;  $p=.041$ ). Course evaluations related to the course content did not yield any significant differences between in-person and online synchronous learning modalities. As for the instructors' performance, results did not show any significant differences between in-person and online learning modalities either.

**Table 3***Results of Course Evaluations*

	Total (n=261)	In-person (n=106)	Online (n=155)	Sig
<b>Course Delivery Method (n, %)</b>				
1. Course objectives were clearly stated or presented	226 (86.59)	96 (90.57)	130 (83.87)	.119
2. Content was relevant to their needs	197 (75.48)	87 (82.07)	110 (70.97)	<b>.041</b>
3. Course objectives were fulfilled	214 (82.0)	91 (85.85)	123 (79.35)	.256
4. I would take another course via this delivery method	197 (75.48)	87 (82.08)	110 (70.97)	<b>.041</b>
5. The allocated time for the course was appropriate	152 (58.24)	69 (65.09)	83 (53.55)	.063
6. The pace of the course was appropriate	177 (67.82)	75 (70.75)	102 (65.81)	.401
<b>Course Content (n, %)</b>				
7. The course content was organized and easy to follow	220 (84.29)	92 (86.79)	128 (82.58)	.358
8. The participant's knowledge and competence in this subject matter increased	200 (76.63)	75 (70.75)	125 (80.65)	.064
9. The participants have gained useful competencies from this course	201 (77.01)	79 (74.53)	122 (78.71)	.430
10. The participants were satisfied with the overall quality of the course	193 (73.95)	74 (69.81)	119 (76.77)	.401
11. The participants would recommend this course to others	195 (74.71)	76 (71.70)	119 (76.77)	.354

Bolded items indicate significance at the 0.05 level.

Data is presented as n (%) for participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the above statements.

## Qualitative Data

In total, 31 (8%) of all invited participants agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews, 7 (22.5%) of which were participants from the in-person courses, and 24 (77.4%) from the online courses. Open-ended questions from course evaluations were filled out by 261 participants; 106 (40.6%) from the in-person training, and 155 (59.3%) participants from the online training. Reflective commentaries were completed by 33 participants; of which 16 (48.4%) and 17 (51.5%) learners attended the in-person and online training, respectively.

Data obtained from semi-structured interviews was triangulated with qualitative data from reflective commentaries and open-ended questions from course evaluations. The themes obtained from qualitative content analysis are based on the following three categories: (1) Strengths, (2) Barriers and Challenges, and (3) Learning Modality. Initially, qualitative results from participants of in-person and online courses were analyzed separately. Considering that most of the themes and codes that emerged were very similar among both groups of participants, they were merged to avoid redundancy, and were presented under the same categories of “Strengths” and “Barriers and Challenges”. Codes that provided a direct comparison between the in-person and online modality were presented under the category “Learning Modality.” A table detailing the emerging themes and codes can be found in the appendix.

### *Category 1: Strengths*

Six similar themes emerged from the analysis of in-person and online data under the strengths category; which are: (1) Learning Experience, (2) Course Content, (3) Knowledge and Skill Acquisition, (4) Translation of Learning into Performance, (5) Personal Development, (6) Networking and Knowledge Sharing. The following themes were conveyed by learners from both modalities.

**Theme 1: Learning Experience.** Almost all learners agreed that the training, whether through the in-person or online synchronous modality, was a beneficial and valuable learning experience that provided them with adequate information. Learners attending either learning modality described the training as organized, and well-structured.

**P9:** Okay so the training was really interesting and first of all refreshing all the basics concepts within [Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning] (MEAL) and introducing us to more advanced concepts and analyzing data whether quantitatively or qualitatively and introducing more frameworks or plans that could be used within our projects within the NGO sector. So for me it was really interesting; I had this refresher on the very basics, and I also got introduced to these advanced concepts which I need to get to know more and to be able to use within my line of work.

**Theme 2: Course Content.** In general, the course content in both modalities was positively perceived, and objectives were reportedly clearly presented at the beginning of each course. The course material included advanced, relevant, and valuable information as suggested by some learners. The combination of theoretical and practical parts was positively perceived by learners. Among the in-person participants, one learner

noted that the learning technique was student-centered and this allowed for a higher level of participation.

**P3:** First, it is important that I have access to the material because usually they don't give you access to the material, so you just need to go back and rely on your notes. I like everything that is visual, so it is very easy for me to remember what I learned by looking at the slides. The material is very rich, everything that was explained was on the slide, and you know it is not wordy, it is not long, you just get the idea by reading one slide, and that is why I keep going back to it. There are even sections of the examples and the exercises that we did, so it is also like you can remember what the exercise that was done is; so you know how to apply it and adapt it to your work.

Instructors in both in-person and online synchronous courses were regarded as main strengths of this program as they were considered to be knowledgeable, competent, and experienced by virtue of their contextualized expertise and cultural fluency. Instructors were also described as being supportive during breakout room activities and provided proper guidance. Learners provided positive feedback on the facilitators as well, mentioning how they enhanced engagement and were well prepared to mitigate any technical difficulties that might arise from online synchronous learning modality.

**Theme 3: Knowledge and Skill Acquisition.** Several learners noted a significant attainment of knowledge and skills related to the NGO sector. Some mentioned that they gained a comprehensive and holistic understanding on certain NGO concepts, and that their understanding on certain terminologies related to this field increased. Learners also noted acquiring a deeper understanding of the operation and function of NGOs at the national level, whereby it became clearer how coordination between NGO staff and local authorities takes place. Others also reported that the systematic and structured approach of training enhanced the attainment of skills and allowed them to think in a more strategic and analytical way. In addition, several of them stated that various skills within their field of work improved including; planning, coordination, negotiation, communication, research, presentation, and writing skills.

**P5:** What the course did is that it efficiently oriented us as proposal writers to know what to write not how much to write, but know what to write and how to write the proposal. Also, to be able to report it to the donor and be transparent with the donor, so it made my work if I can say smart specific, measurable, you know it's a smart way of thinking or approach; it made it oriented toward a smart approach to propose a writing and then report it.

**Theme 4: Translation of Learning into Performance.** Several sub themes emerged under the theme of "translation of learning into performance." For instance, regarding learners' work performance, many reported an increase in work-capacity and job responsibilities. Learners attending in-person and online synchronous modality mentioned that their approach towards work became more systematic and scientific-oriented. Some noted that work-related tasks were perceived to be easier and

were completed in a more efficient manner upon completion of the training. They also became more involved within their organizations, and were able to contribute more to the team. An improvement in satisfaction with work performance was also noted by few learners.

**P3:** We had a campaign at the end of the year, it was about child labor and I actually referred to the course material to make sure that we are actually capitalizing all of our resources you know to use it in our campaign to reach a bigger impact. So you know, the material, you know I have never taken a course where I refer to the material as much as I do with this course, as much as I am doing with this training.

Another sub theme that emerged was related to the implementation of organizational strategies and plans, whereby several learners were reportedly able to improve, develop, or implement practices, plans strategies for their organizations. For instance, it was reported that there was an initiation of changes in practices related to communication, data collection, follow-up, report writing, approaching donors, and setting of indicators. Moreover, the training allowed learners to coordinate with other departments, initiate discussions, and provide suggestions on how to improve the organization's projects and strategies. In addition, some learners gained a better understanding of the roles of coworkers working in different departments and of NGO's structural and operational dynamics. This reportedly improved communication with colleagues and allowed for a better assignment of job duties. Improvements in learners' performance were also noted by their colleagues, with one learner highlighting the positive feedback she received from a partner organization who welcomed her suggestion to collaborate with her organization to introduce a new project.

**P9:** We are now working for the new project on an advanced M&E system in terms of tracking and monitoring these activities of the project, and advancing more in the practice rather than just sticking by the basic tools. So I would consider that a main change a major change within the practices and this is a big part of it is relied on and supported by the material that I have taken and the skills that I have gained from my experience and from the course as well.

**Theme 5: Personal Development.** A common theme that emerged from participants who attended the in-person and online synchronous course was personal development. For instance, one fresh graduate working in the healthcare field noted that this course would give him an edge over others when seeking future employment prospects in the NGO sector. Other learners also mentioned that this training encouraged them to take on different career paths and seek new job opportunities in the NGO field, or to seek new educational opportunities. Several participants reportedly gained confidence in their ability to carry out daily work tasks as well.

**P6:** The course provided me with the resources and skills that played a role in changing my life and initiating a new career. After attending the course I experienced career empowerment and gained the tools and perspectives needed to work in a nonprofit organization. The course broadened my horizon to a whole new sector and domain.

**Theme 6: Networking and Knowledge Sharing.** Networking and knowledge sharing was one of the common themes that was also discussed by in-person and on-line learners. Being introduced to new workers and NGOs in the NGO sector was of added value. It was reported that mutual learning occurred due to the interaction and exchange of knowledge that took place between people with different experiences. Some noted that having diversified learners enhanced the learning experience and allowed for sharing of expertise. The training also allowed some learners to connect and form networks with well-established NGOs, which reportedly bridged the gap between different NGOs and improved networking. One learner also mentioned that being exposed to NGOs working in a different context allowed her to widen her perspective. Some also noted that they were able to form connections with their instructors and were able to maintain this relationship.

**P5:** The strengths I believe as I've said is that the course supplied or provided us with a new set of skills and we've connected with new people in the Lebanese Community especially within the same sector. We've benefited from the facilitators experiences; it was benefit-able.

#### *Category 2: Barriers and Challenges*

Five similar themes emerged under the category of Challenges and Barriers from the analysis of in-person and online data, which are: (1) Barriers to Applying Changes in Behavior and Performance, (2) Participants' Diverse Backgrounds, (3) Engagement and Interaction, (4) Course Content, (5) Accessibility and Schedule

**Theme 1: Barriers to Applying Changes in Behavior and Performance.** Despite the fact that some learners were able to translate the knowledge acquired in the training into behavioral changes within their organization, especially those in more senior roles, other learners were not able to implement such changes due to external factors that limited their work involvement such the COVID-19 pandemic, Beirut port explosion, the October revolution, and the economic situation. Others noted that such changes were not within their scope of work, or that they required more experience to be implemented. Others noted that these changes require the effort of all the organization, rather than just individual efforts, or that the organization's policies and strategies are already well-established.

**P14:** yes I think so, but on a very basic level so for example, when we are looking at conducting a DRR workshop within our organization, but no I don't feel I have enough tools to do that myself. You know what I mean, I feel like I still need much more, knowledge training etcetera to be able to apply it or train people on it.

**Theme 2: Participants' Diverse Backgrounds.** Having participants with diverse backgrounds was problematic for some learners, especially for those who have more experience in the NGO field, who reportedly perceived that others with less experience slowed down the pace of training. Others mentioned that having a large number of participants with different backgrounds may compromise tailoring the information to the target audience. Moreover, some learners expressed concerns regarding the differ-

ent levels of experience as this led for those more experienced to dominate the discussion during group activities, creating some tension between them.

**P11:** In fact, it was a good learning experience, however, the thing that annoyed me was the different level of participants in terms of background knowledge. Some participants had extensive experience regarding NGOs and how to work during disasters, while others were brand-new to the area, so we were not on the same level of understanding.

**Theme 3: Engagement and Interaction.** Few participants reported that the level of engagement and interaction could have been improved, especially for courses with a large number of participants. For instance, one learner remarked that some of his questions were not completely addressed due to the limitations set by the large classroom size. Another learner mentioned that the training was presented in a lecture format, rather than a workshop format, and this limited overall interaction between the participants and the instructor.

**P9:** Perhaps, carrying out the activities in-person could have resulted in a more effective participation and would have enhanced engagement.

**Theme 4: Course Content.** Despite the overall positive feedback received regarding the course content, some learners perceived the training to be overwhelming, which hindered the understanding of new concepts. It was reported that some elaboration or detailed explanation on certain advanced concepts was needed. Some learners suggested allocating more time for activities and exercises so that skill application would be done in a more detailed and comprehensive way. On the other hand, few learners with higher experience considered that the training could have been more detailed. Others also reported that the training was mostly theoretical and could have benefited from having practical exercises related to NGO work.

**P13:** I perceived the training to be very theoretical. The practical part was absent. There were no case studies and scenarios for us to work on. Also, it was mostly narrative and there was not much space for engagement and application of the learnt ideas.

**Theme 5: Accessibility and Schedule.** Some critique was received regarding the training's schedule. For example, the 4-day course was inconvenient to some learners who had other responsibilities to attend to. Some sessions were considered lengthy which made it harder to focus. Several learners suggested extending the duration of the training over more than four days, with each day having less hours. There were some learners who also mentioned that the material covered during the training required additional time to complete.

### **Category 3: Learning Modality**

Almost all participants attending the in-person training mentioned that this modality affected the learning experience positively and was preferred over online synchronous learning. Few online learners also voiced similar opinions, as they believed

the in-person training to be more beneficial as it allows for better exchange of information. Indeed, some online learners mentioned that the technical difficulties faced in online synchronous modalities could hinder engagement and interaction, leading to loss of information. Nonetheless, most online learners mentioned that no major differences were perceived between the effectiveness of online synchronous and in-person modality. In addition, several online learners reported that all objectives and expectations of training were met regardless of modality.

**P1:** Of course, it is better, of course of course—it allows us to learn more and connect with other NGOs and other participants. This was an added value for the course, allowing you to gain knowledge while also getting to know other participants, networking with different NGOs and seeing how they operate, etc. This exposes you to new experiences in this field. So, sure, live sessions were definitely better.

Yet, online learners also mentioned that this modality allowed them to engage with people from different countries. Moreover, in-person learners reported that online synchronous learning cannot compensate for the lack of physical presence and can lead to loss of certain communication cues; such as eye contact and facial expressions. It was communicated that these communication cues facilitate the transmission of information. Nonetheless, online learners did not find this to be concerning as they considered the features that were specific to the Zoom platform such as voice recognition, raising hand, requesting support, chat box, to be very helpful and contributing to some level of engagement. Other online learners also found the online synchronous modality to be interactive as it allowed for questions to be asked. In addition, the online synchronous modality reportedly allowed for easier access to course material and was considered more convenient for the delivery of theoretical information. Other learners also highlighted the importance of the online modality in giving learners more flexibility and allowing them to engage with people from different countries. In addition, the breakout-rooms feature was considered well-structured and rendered the training more engaging by allowing direct implementation of practical exercises. Moreover, the exchange of information and feedback among learners from different NGOs during breakout rooms was positively perceived.

**P12:** I liked the, let's say, the break out rooms. The group divides all the stuff. I liked it so much because it was easier when you worked in a smaller group so we could participate and we could add our inputs and all the information that we had.

## Discussion

Finding sustainable solutions to the MENA region's ongoing and complex humanitarian crises, which is among the most volatile globally, requires the participation and engagement of national actors. There is an urgent need to mobilize localization of responses by strengthening the capacity of local actors and NGOs in the region (Cancedda et al., 2015). Considering the limited contextualized educational opportunities in the MENA region, the NGO Initiative (NGOi) at AUB attempted to respond



to the aforementioned challenges by developing in-person and online synchronous courses to NGO workers. While some research indicated that synchronous learning can address the challenges of traditional in-person learning, others suggested that it cannot serve as a substitute. This study aimed to evaluate the in-person and online synchronous training programs delivered by NGOi and compare their effectiveness.

Overall, respondents attending in-person and online synchronous courses were satisfied with the quality of the courses offered. Similar to results previously reported by Saleh et al. (2022), this training provided a beneficial and valuable learning experience for NGO staff (Saleh, Brome et al., 2022). Learners were able to capitalize on the knowledge and skills obtained to enhance their work performance. For instance, several learners reported that their work capacity and job responsibilities increased following the training, and they were able to implement new strategies and plans within their organization. Indeed, the need for a competent and well-equipped NGO workforce has been increasing, especially with the rising dependence on NGOs to respond to emergencies in conflict and low-resource settings such as Lebanon (OCHA, 2021). Despite multiple factors being at play, learners who were not able to translate their knowledge into performance at the time of data collection, attributed this to external factors, such as time constraints, the COVID-19 pandemic, or that learned material not being within the learners' job description. Nevertheless, those learners repeatedly mentioned that even if they were not able to directly influence organizational changes, they developed the confidence and self-efficacy to be able to do so in the future. Interestingly, promoting self-efficacy among workers in humanitarian context has indeed been shown to increase their willingness to respond to disasters (Kang et al., 2023). Moreover, increased confidence in abilities and enthusiasm to seek new educational opportunities in the NGO sector were common themes that emerged from the interviews. This is well-suited for people working in NGOs, whereby continuously improving their skills and knowledge is essential to meet the rapidly evolving challenges in ever-changing environments (de Rosa & Johnson, 2019; OCHA, 2021).

Our results highlighted some challenges that were common across both modalities, and others that were modality specific. Generally speaking, a clear preference for in-person learning was found among learners, largely due to the fact that they perceived online synchronous courses as less engaging than in-person courses in terms of learning, networking, and communication, and as presenting potentially more technical complications. For instance, quantitative data from the course evaluations showed significant differences of learners preferring in-person over online synchronous courses. Indeed, data from semi-structured interviews confirm this as several participants from the in-person training reported that they prefer in-person over online learning. These findings are congruent with the results reported by Gherhes et al., 2021 which also highlighted the preference of learners to in-person over online learning modalities. Despite this preference communicated by learners in this study, most did not face major problems with the online synchronous modality, as program facilitators were well prepared to respond to any technical difficulties should the need arise and perceived it to be as effective as the in-person modality for knowledge gains. In fact, quantitative data indicated that knowledge significantly increased equally among participants attending in-person and online courses, and this was corroborated with qualitative data, suggesting that modalities played no role to influence knowledge changes.

These findings are consistent with several other studies comparing knowledge attainment between in-person and online training, whereby an increase in knowledge was observed regardless of modality (Berland et al., 2019; Kivlehan, Rybarczyk et al., 2022; Mallonee et al., 2018). This means that despite the effectiveness of online synchronous modalities, participants may opt for in-person courses should they be given the option to choose. Understandably so, conflict and low-resource settings may necessitate having online learning available therefore instead of mainstreaming or advocating for only in-person courses.

Online learning should be designed with the intention of being more immersive and engaging by virtue of its potential to overcome traditional barriers to accessing education. Some of these barriers include cross-national travel, within-country transportation, opportunity cost, increasing costs, to state a few (Mukhtar et al., 2020). As such, it allows additional flexibility and ease of accessibility, which is especially advantageous for NGO staff. It is well-known that professionals working in this field are often bound by geographical constraints, and mostly operate in remote and low-resource settings, where access to training programs is not often available (Bahattab et al., 2022). It is important to note as well that in times of a pandemic, when movement restrictions are imposed and there is an urgent need for such training, the online synchronous modality remains the most suitable modality that can overcome these barriers to reach its targeted population (Cranfield et al., 2021). In addition, NGO staff in MENA region are likely to be preoccupied with work commitments, whereby synchronous learning have strong potential to reduce time spent commuting to and from training venues, and thereby improve their time management.

Common perceptions shared among learners is that the lack of physical presence in online learning can lead to loss of communication cues and increased disengagement, and therefore can hinder the delivery of information. Nonetheless, interviewed participants attending online synchronous courses considered this modality to be somewhat interactive, especially when features such as voice recognition and live transcription, hand-raising, and chat box were utilized to enhance engagement. Moreover, challenges related to engagement that the online modality presents can be partially overcome through the use of ice-breaking sessions and breakout room activities (Kivlehan, Rybarczyk et al., 2022). Indeed, breakout rooms were reportedly able to overcome some of the shortcomings associated with online learning, and to render the sessions more interactive. In addition, breakout rooms allowed for direct implementation of practical group exercises, with the exchange of information and feedback among learners from different NGOs being positively perceived. These reports are concurrent with findings from other studies which also highlighted the effectiveness of breakout rooms in enhancing group discussions and application of acquired skills (Kivlehan, Rybarczyk, et al., 2022; Kivlehan, Tenney, et al., 2022). With that said, online synchronous modalities may require additional careful planning in their design and delivery to achieve comparable or potentially superior engagement levels with participants, especially that baseline appetite seems to be low.

Another opinion shared by in-person learners was that the in-person modality allows for better networking than can the online modality. Notwithstanding the above, “networking and knowledge sharing” was a common theme that emerged from learners in both groups. While learners attending in-person courses believed that this

networking is only achievable through the in-person modality, online learners also stated that they were introduced to new people in NGOs and were able to interact and exchange knowledge with learners from different countries. Indeed, cultivating a culture of knowledge sharing can strategically bring local actors together and prompt exchange of information. Rightfully so, building networks and connections with other professionals in the field can create trust between NGO staff, and that is the first step towards successful coordination across organizations (Creelman et al., 2017; Saab et al., 2013). In turn, improved coordination and planning between local organizations has the potential to enhance response to emergencies and boost sustainable recovery from disasters.

Despite the overall positive experience that was reported by in-person and online learners, some challenges were faced among both groups. For instance, the diversity in learners' backgrounds was not always positively perceived, with some of them commonly suggesting structuring the training based on learners' level of experience and expectations. Indeed, while some learners considered the course content to be advanced and required more time to cover, others considered it to be basic and not detailed enough. Some also recommended the inclusion of more practical exercises, as they perceived the training, regardless of modality, to be mostly theoretical in nature.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study should be cautiously interpreted considering its many limitations. First, this study included a heterogeneous sample of participants, as no exclusion criteria was applied, which resulted in a diverse pool of participants with different professional backgrounds and demographic characteristics. The courses that were delivered were different as well between the in-person and online synchronous training. This could have impacted the perceptions of learners toward the training and lead to variations. In addition, short-term and long-term data collection for in-person training was done prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, participants in this modality might have had different perceptions towards online learning, considering that they were not accustomed to the idea of it. Although our data is mostly qualitative and relied on limited quantifiable data, the mixed-method approach adopted, which incorporated short- and long-term assessment, is considered a strength as it allowed us to gain in-depth insight on the learners' experiences with the different learning modalities. Moreover, the qualitative data collected indicated that data saturation was reached.

### **Recommendations**

Our synthesized findings funnel into the following recommendations for future programs and researchers interested in offering training courses for NGO workers in the MENA region. Most apply to both modalities; however, some have an especially pronounced impact on online synchronous learning.

- Ensuring the selection of subject matter experts who have contextualized knowledge and cultural affluence, along with program facilitators to provide on-demand support for online learners in case of technical challenges.

- Adopting focused, tailored, and intentional screening of applicants to ensure that learners be matched with courses that are appropriate to their years of experience and expectations. This is necessary to avoid large discrepancies in knowledge and skills among learners and to foster synergy in the pace of the sessions.
- Adopting pedagogical approaches that capitalize on active learning, and minimize lecture-based sessions in order to build tangible skills and knowledge that can be more easily transferred into learners' organizations upon completion of each course.
- Accounting for workers' busy schedules by stretching out sessions across multiple days with less session-hours as opposed to being condensed.
- Improving engagement for online learners by provisioning access to platforms that encourage communication and networking among learners.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study showed similar effectiveness in terms of knowledge acquisition, retention, and challenges in transfer of knowledge between in-person and online synchronous learning modalities. As such, the present study provided evidence that adopting online synchronous learning modalities to deliver capacity-building initiatives can in fact overcome several of the challenges faced by NGO staff operating in fragile and low-resource settings within the MENA region without compromising knowledge acquisition. Adoption of online learning can increase accessibility for NGO staff and reach a wider population, especially those in dispersed or remote geographical locations in a manner that in-person offerings alone cannot. This in turn can contribute towards strengthening capacities of NGO workers and being reflected in their operations. Considering the scarcity of research on evaluating capacity-building initiatives in conflict settings in the MENA region, this study reports important findings to guide similar programs aiming to strengthen the capacity of NGO staff, and aspects to consider when choosing which modality to adopt. Preference for in-person learning is articulated by our sample, largely due to potential engagement and technical difficulties. Nonetheless, online synchronous modalities hold a strong potential to address educational barriers and may prove to be a suitable alternative for traditional learning modalities if techniques to improve engagement are employed. Hence, future research should place more effort to understand what factors improve online engagement, and how these can be integrated in online programs.

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