

Facilitate to Innovate: Lessons Learned from Virtual Strategy Workshops for Asian Elephants

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Background

Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) are endangered, with many populations facing various degrees of threats throughout their range. In Southeast Asia, their situation is even more dire, with population declines threatening local extinctions in some range countries. To reverse the trajectory for this species, moving beyond 'business as usual' is essential. Although there have been wide-ranging efforts to protect Asian elephants, much more is needed to reverse their current decline, particularly in Southeast Asia. Over the past several months, WWF has been driving a collaborative effort among WWF offices and partners across the elephant's Southeast Asian range to develop a strategy that aims to do just that.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, WWF would typically gather range-country and broader WWF Network teams together for an in-person workshop to develop a regional strategy for the species. But organising in-person gatherings has become more complex. To navigate this, WWF partnered with Impact by Design to conduct this complex process virtually. Our task was to lay the groundwork for a regional strategic plan for Asian elephants, focusing on Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, China, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The process began with deep assessment: we engaged key individuals and groups via detailed interviews to inform our approach. Subject-matter experts who participated in the assessment provided us with baseline knowledge of what's currently being done to conserve Asian elephants in the region, stressing the inadequate nature of current actions, as well as a lack of re-

sources to address conservation needs. Improved cooperation across national boundaries to allow for elephant movement, and meaningful engagement of communities and other stakeholders in the management of human-elephant conflict were just some of the needs mentioned. Assessment participants identified an aspirational 'guiding star' in their description of what success looks like, and they surfaced key questions that should be brought into the participatory workshop space. What actions can still be taken to reverse the declining trajectory of the species? What solutions to the problem have you thought about, but perhaps have been too hesitant to share?

The assessment revealed that 'business as usual' is not satisfactory for the future viability of Asian elephants in Southeast Asia. In other words, innovation was key.

The innovation conundrum

Early in our work, we recognised that 'innovation' is a tricky term. Too often, people automatically think of technological innovation as opposed to other types of creative solutions. Of course, that type of thinking wasn't off the table, but game-changing innovation was going to come from a new set of ideas, actions and risk-taking and the creative use of existing resources, and not necessarily a new piece of technology.

Even more importantly, the vast majority of our virtual workshop attendees spoke English as a second language. While we could have spent workshop time aligning on a shared definition of words, we feared doing so would put too many parameters on attendees' creative think-

ing. We tasked ourselves with spurring innovative thinking without relying on the word ‘innovation’ itself. We knew participants had all of the innovative solutions they needed locked away in their brains; we had to find the most effective way of unpacking and making sense of it in a virtual setting.

The facilitator guides the innovators

While planning for the workshop series, we kept circling back to the same question as we debated how to set the stage for innovation - What is the role of a facilitator? While there are many descriptions of this role, the authors of this article think of a facilitator as a guide that helps people do their best thinking while working in groups. So as facilitators, we focused on providing participants with the right tools and conditions to unlock and share ideas in a productive way.

Over the course of seven sessions, we gathered over 80 professionals from WWF and beyond, providing them with specific prompts and workspaces to guide their discussions toward our set objectives that emerged from the assessment. Some approaches and practices included:

- **Adaptive management.** While it was important to give participants a clear roadmap and agenda of what to expect from the workshops, we highlighted the likelihood that the process was open to adaptation in response to their needs. Indeed, there were opportunities for participants to check in with the workshop planning team to provide feedback, and while certain conversations took longer than expected at times, these conversations gave us the opportunity to ensure the process reflected shifting needs and expectations. While this meant that certain discussions had much less time dedicated to them, the adaptations allowed room for innovative thinking. All of these changes were clearly communicated to those participating.

- **Norm to perform.** Innovative thinking meant stepping outside of comfort zones, so we suggested group norms to help create a safe space for participants, and referred back to them when needed. At the start of the workshop series, we

demonstrated what it meant to encourage bold thinking and foster creativity by enabling those attending to use multiple modes of communication (raising hand, virtual sticky wall, chat box) to express their thoughts, all within a respectful setting where there was no ‘wrong’ idea. Through these and other norms, participants understood that if an idea seemed unrealistic, the group asked clarifying questions instead of shooting it down.

- **Leverage a single, powerful tool for collaboration.** These days, there are endless online tools and platforms for groups to collaborate - and using too many can detract from effective engagement. While video conferencing software was used as our primary gathering place, we developed a highly organised virtual sticky wall to focus our discussions and capture the outcomes of our decision making. The virtual sticky wall had clearly articulated instructions and questions to guide group discussion. A core organising team, representing various perspectives present in the process, reviewed and provided feedback on the format of questions and how they were organised in the virtual space to most effectively spur discussion.

- **Asking the right questions the right way.** Providing quiet thinking time after asking a question is a staple approach to effective engagement that was so important to our process. After posing a prompt or question, we never dove directly into open discussion. Instead, participants were able to both hear and see prompt questions and given time to think before going into group discussions. This allowed everyone to gather their thoughts and gain confidence in proposing ‘out of the box’ ideas. In many cases, these prompts were sent via email before workshop sessions to give everyone extra thinking time. In the workshop itself, the way in which questions were asked were meant to evoke innovative thinking. Questions were not leading in nature, but rather encouraged participants to deeply reflect on their personal experiences and feelings. For example, instead of asking, "what challenges does your country team expect to face when implementing the plan?" we asked, "What aspects of the plan would your country team like to support but may not have the cur-

rent resources to do so?" We then followed up with, "What resources would be needed to ensure your country team's support?"

- **The right activities for the objectives.** Choosing specific activities and exercises in facilitated spaces isn't a random process – it's guided by objectives and the needs of participants. We selected specific approaches, such as modifications to a 'World Cafe' conversation and different versions of How/Now/Wow matrices to both evoke innovative ideas and prioritise them for decision making.

The outcome and pathway forward

The hours participants spent in the facilitated space helped to build camaraderie and a sense of being part of a coordinated group driving positive change for elephants across the region - something critical for actualising the plan itself. And although participants expressed an appetite to let 'innovative' ideas emerge, we found that spoon-feeding the concept of innovation was not necessary. The nature and structure of the discussions themselves were more than enough. Implementing teams from range country offices had the opportunity to engage directly with WWF team members with expertise in resource allocation, messaging, and fundrais-

ing. Together, they discovered overlaps in their needs and challenged each other to ensure solutions were holistic in nature.

What was the result? The overall framework of the strategic plan emerged as a two-pronged approach: A set of programmatic strategies aimed at on-the-ground actions that will lead to direct impact for Asian elephants in Southeast Asia, and supporting strategies aimed at providing the enabling conditions for success. These efforts were designed to push the region toward a guiding vision of success for 2030. Table 1 provides deeper details.

Through well-structured discussions, it became apparent that regional coordination, capacity, and funding had waned since WWF's AREAS (Asian Rhino and Elephant Action Strategy) Programme concluded in 2016. As such, solutions did not solely focus on key aspects such as habitat conservation and reducing human-elephant conflict – but on tapping into the power and potential of collaborating with people living in the region: Promoting partnerships and shared learning experiences to improve regional cooperation among teams; scale conservation actions beyond small, project-based approaches; co-design management actions with various stakeholders; and draw connections to

Envision your country teams carrying out the efforts of the regional strategic plan...

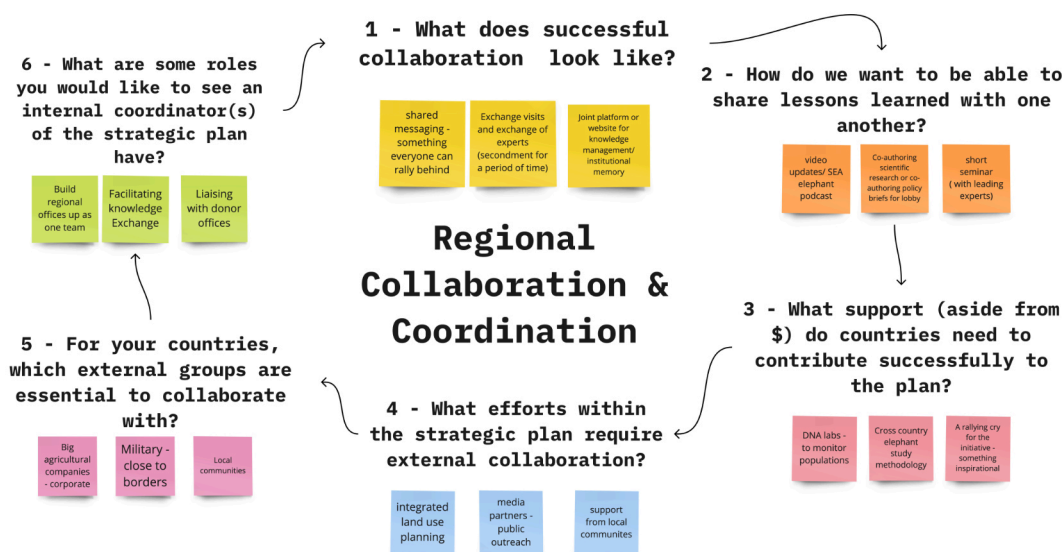


Figure 1. A sample screenshot from the Miro platform demonstrates outcomes from a facilitated, strategic discussion. The post-it notes included are meant to demonstrate examples of workshop outcomes and are not exhaustive.

Table 1. Southeast Asian elephant strategy priorities.

Guiding Star for 2030 <i>A vision of success for the region, meant to describe the end-result of the strategic plan</i>	Asian elephant populations in key Southeast Asian habitats are thriving, with reductions in habitat loss and fragmentation, incidents of human-elephant conflict, and other significant threats.		
Programmatic Strategies <i>On-the-ground actions leading to direct impact for Asian elephants</i>	Securing Elephant Habitats <i>Priority landscapes are secured, restored, and protected</i>	Living with Elephants <i>Co-existence is promoted through integrated and holistic human-wildlife conflict management</i>	Restoring Elephant Populations <i>Elephant populations in range countries are stable through improved research, protection, and management</i>
Support Strategies <i>Lines of work that provide enabling conditions for success</i>	Voices for the Herd <i>Asian elephants and their conservation needs are elevated and more visible through organized and coordinated communication efforts</i>	Partnership for Impact <i>Conservation efforts are strengthened via collaboration between key partners</i>	Sustaining the Plan <i>Implementation of the plan is successful at scale due to increased and broader funding opportunities</i>

messaging and themes to elevate the profile of the Asian elephant that would culturally resonate with broad audiences and bring in sustaining funds.

It is important to keep in mind that this regional strategic plan was designed to not be prescriptive, but rather to give participating country teams the flexibility to move actions forward in ways that reflect their national priorities. While regional-level interventions bind the countries together, country-level interventions reflect the uniqueness of each country and, indeed, the elephant populations that reside in them. This ‘no one size fits all’ approach felt critical in ensuring buy-in among participating countries.

At their core, the virtual workshop sessions were opportunities to convene unique perspectives that could tackle key questions from different angles. They did not result in a perfectly polished strategic plan – but they served as a staging ground to align around what mattered most to participating countries and the wider WWF Network. Since the workshops, we have been working on fleshing out the finer details of strategy implementation and ensuring it is ready for launch, which is slated for mid-2023.

The call to action: Invest in facilitation

In a world seemingly filled with insurmountable, wicked environmental problems – like the reality of Asian elephants in Southeast Asia – facilitation is timelier than ever. These issues require intensely debated, collaborative solutions that only emerge from well-structured conversations where tough questions are tackled by diverse groups. The past couple of years have taught teams around the world that these solutions can be achieved without sitting in a room together. Indeed, we strongly believe virtual meetings and workshops aren’t going anywhere.

Nature is bombarding us with signals that there is no time to spare, so as professionals we have a shared responsibility to make every convening count. Remember: good meetings and workshops don’t just happen – you need to facilitate to innovate. Effective facilitation takes practice, but it is a skill that can be learned and even shared with like-minded colleagues. Whether convening in person or virtually, teams and organisations around the world can benefit from investing in this skillset, which has the capacity to open pathways to better, more innovative solutions to challenges of all shapes and sizes.