



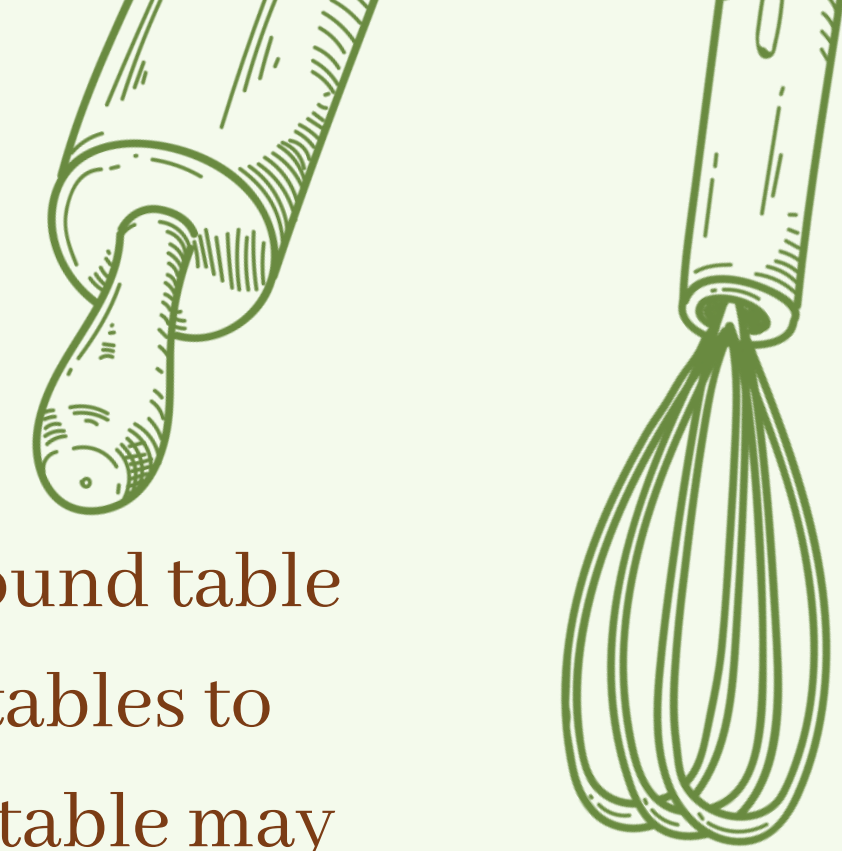
Going round the table

Virtual round table discussions

What is a virtual round table?

Legend has it that the term ‘roundtable’ comes from King Arthur’s legendary round table where knights congregated. Since then, we have moved from legendary round tables to roundtables at in- person meetings and from there to virtual roundtables. The table may no longer be round or may not exist, but the concept abides.

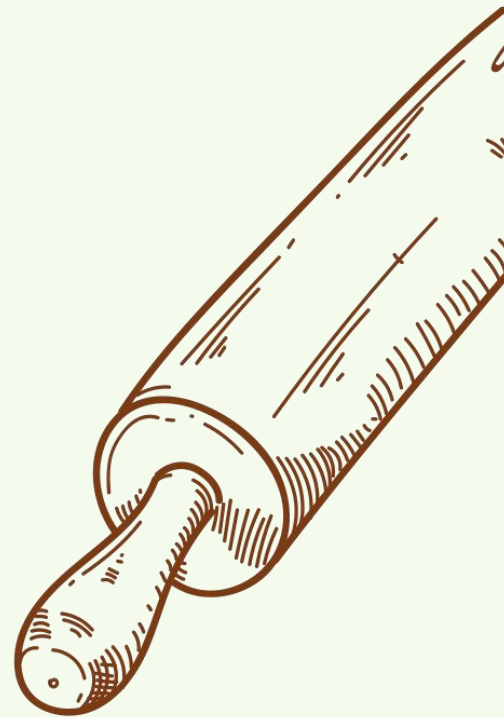
Virtual roundtable discussions are small-group, often closed, discussions or deliberations on a previously selected topic. A virtual roundtable may serve a number of purposes. It may be used to solicit feedback, to gather expert opinions on a topic, to arrive at conclusions and key messages on an issue, to identify different dimensions of an issue, to build consensus in a group, etc. Whatever the purpose, the key principle underpinning a roundtable is that all participants are on **equal footing**. The round shape of the historical table meant that no one person sat at the head, and everyone seated had equal standing.



Who to invite to the table?

Getting the invitee list right is critical to the success of your virtual roundtable. We would like to remind you of the healthy choices plate in deciding on the invitee list. Invite people and organizations who will help you in meeting your objectives; reflect on diversity and inclusion, and think about the quality of interaction and outputs from the virtual roundtable.

For example, in deciding on the invitee list for the IDI-IBP-UN Women roundtable on She Leads: Role of SAIs in Gender Equal Leadership, we have considered regional balance, language balance, gender balance, mix of expert and leaders, mix of SAIs with diverse capacities, and ability to contribute. We recommend keeping the group limited to 15 to 20 participants.



Setting up the table

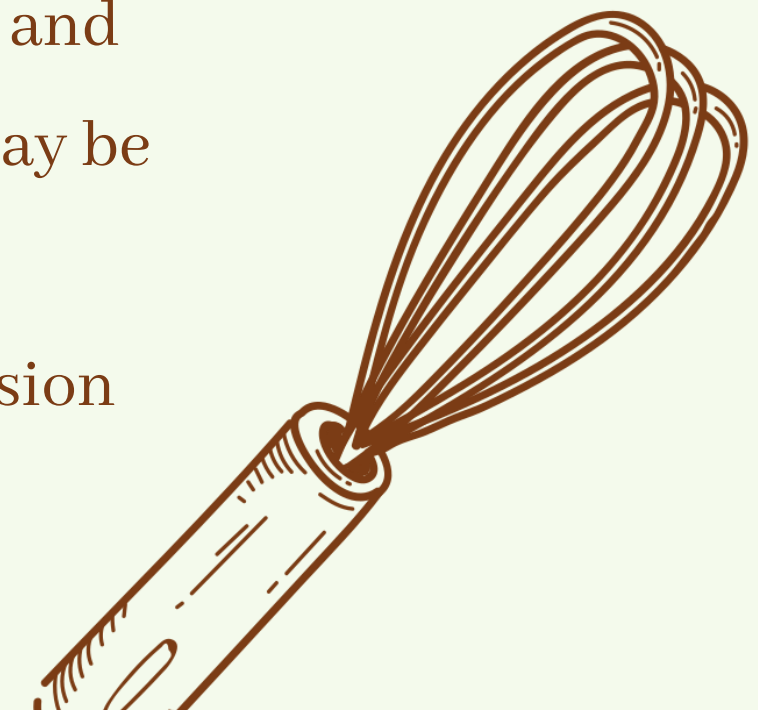
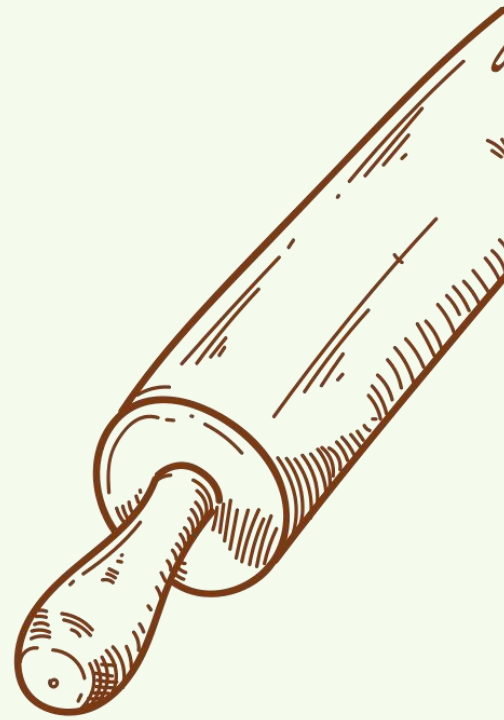
Virtual roundtables need adequate prep work. Here a list of things to do in setting up the table:

Decide on the topic and purpose of discussion – The starting point for setting the table is to decide on the topic and overall objective of the discussion. Think of sub-objectives or different discussion threads. For example, the She Leads roundtable was further divided into two discussion threads: strengthening women's leadership and equal representation in SAIs, and strengthening the role and contribution of SAIs to gender-equal representation. While keeping the topic and discussion threads specific, it is also important to keep them wide enough to allow for a good discussion.

- **Visualise the interaction** – We recommend that the facilitator document her/his visualisation of the interaction and the process flow. Discussing this with other colleagues will help the facilitator in getting good feedback to improve the process.
- **Provide for equal footing** – In designing the process flow, it is crucial for the facilitator to ensure that the process will provide equal opportunity for every participant to express themselves. Going round the table in a plenary discussion or providing breakout room discussions, and using trained facilitators for breakout discussions, can in help in providing equal footing.



- **Agree on roles and responsibilities** – Different roles can be played out in a virtual roundtable. We recommend using trained facilitators. The ability to lead a discussion through questioning, active listening, paraphrasing, summarising, reflecting questions, etc. is key. As this is a virtual roundtable, it is important to have technical staff who can manage the selected virtual platform. Agree on the roles and responsibilities with the facilitators, notetakers, technical staff and participants.
- **Choose a virtual platform that provides for discussion** – Several virtual platforms are available for conducting virtual roundtable discussions. As in-depth conversation on equal footing is a key feature of a virtual roundtable format, we recommend that the online facilitator select a platform that provides for interaction and breakout group discussions. The features of the platform need to be tested and tried in advance. The facilitator also needs to ensure that every member of the roundtable is familiar with and can use the different features of the platform. The platform also needs to be accessible to all participants.
- **Provide enough time** – If the time provided is too short, participants will not be able to explore and discuss different dimensions of the issue. Critical issues may be left out and the participants may be frustrated. At the same time, it may not be possible for participants to spend much time at the roundtable. Allotting too much time may result in key participants dropping out and in discussion fatigue. We recommend allotting about 90 to 120 minutes for the roundtable.



Going around the table

Being prepared will give you a great starting point for the discussion. Here are a few things you could do during the discussions:

- **Facilitate the process to ensure equal footing.** During the roundtable it is important to ensure that every participant has an equal opportunity to speak and be heard. Establish a set of ground rules at the beginning of the discussion. Encourage the quieter ones to speak and the talkative ones to give others an opportunity. Ensure that everyone is heard and that there are no interruptions. Create a comfortable space for people to share diverse views in a constructive manner.
- **Adapt to emerging needs.** The process may not always go as planned. It is important for the facilitator to be flexible and agile to adapt to the process flow in case of any emerging needs.
- **Keep the group on track to achieve the stated objective.** One of the key roles of the online facilitator is to ensure that the group together achieves the stated objective of the virtual roundtable discussion within the given time. The facilitator needs to ensure that discussions stay on track.



- **Agree on ways of documenting outputs and way forward.** Agree with the group on how the results of the discussions will be recorded and by whom. In the way forward conversation, inform the group about the next steps and the way the outputs of the roundtable will be used.

After dinner conversations

- **Communicate the results and future developments with participants** – Keep the participants of the virtual round table informed about future developments regarding the outputs of the round table.
- **Seek feedback and reflect on lessons learned** – Seek feedback from the participants on what went well and what could be done better. Reflect on these lessons for future virtual round table discussions.





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