

To Sari Hanafi, President of the ISA,
To Izabela Barlinska, ISA General Secretary,
To the presidents and delegates of the ISA Research Committees, Working Groups and Thematic Groups,
To the members of the ISA Research Coordination Committee and Executive Committee,

2025 ISA Forum: On-site or online? Report on the deliberation and the vote by the ISA Research Council

After two weeks of fruitful exchanges of arguments and consultations of the RC/WG/TG members and boards, the ISA Research Council gathered on Saturday the 12th of June to decide if the next ISA Forum (2025) should be a virtual or a presential event.

51 votes were cast, resulting in the following vote:

- **For an on-site/in-person forum: 19 votes, 37%**
- **For a virtual/online forum: 18 votes, 35%**
- **Equal support for both options: 14 votes, 27,5%**

If we consider only the first two options, the split is 51% favouring an in-person Forum, 49% an online forum.

The vote is almost evenly split between the two options, with the tiniest majority favouring an on-site forum and a strong will by the RC/WG/TG to support the Forum process whatever format it takes. The Research Council decision is to send this result to the ISA Executive Committee and leave the final decision to the EC.

After being informed about the vote result, the Research Council assembly addressed the following messages to the ISA president and EC members:

- The vote was evenly split but not polarised. RC/WG/TG presidents and delegates express a strong support for both options. Several RCs were evenly split between the two options.
- The Research Council collected good arguments in favour of both options. After this deliberation process, our perspective was much better informed about the pros and cons of each option. We invite the members of the ISA Executive Committee to consider these arguments during their deliberation.

The main arguments for both options are listed below. The online version is a shared document to which the EC members may contribute with additional arguments.

<https://mensuel.framapad.org/p/2025-isa-forum-online-or-on-site-9nsa?lang=en>

- Whatever format the 2025 Forum will take, RC/WG/TG are keen to take an active part in its success and hope to be closely associated in its organisation and to beneficiate from some autonomy in setting up their program and schedule.

- The Research Council considers it essential to adapt the ISA Forum format to take better in consideration three crucial criteria: inclusiveness, environment (lowering our carbon footprint) and integrating online innovations (even for an on-site Forum).

Notes on the voting process:

- The Research Council assembly and the vote took place online. Votes were collected with the application "Doodle", with a possibility to vote 24 hours before the assembly and until the vote was declared closed during the assembly.
- As announced previously and in agreement with the RCC, the largest RCs (over 200 members) were given two votes. WG and TG (10) were allowed to cast one vote each.
- The result of the vote applying the ISA formal rules (1 vote by RC even for the largest ones, no vote for TG & WG) would have led to a very similar result: 14 for an on-site forum, 13 for a virtual forum, 13 supporting both options (43 votes cast in total).

The 14th of June 2021

Geoffrey Pleyers

ISA Vice-President for Research

ISA 2025 Forum: Online or on-site?

This open and collective document organises the arguments sent on the Research Council listserv in four sections:

1. Arguments for an on-site Forum,
2. Arguments for an online Forum,
3. Why a hybrid format is not an option proposed to the vote
4. Ideas to improve the Forum (online or offline)

The aim is to reach a better informed collective decision. RC/WG/TG delegates and ISA RCC members may contribute to the document by adding an argument or completing (or discussing) an argument that has been listed. <https://mensuel.framapad.org/p/2025-isa-forum-online-or-on-site-9nsa?lang=en>

Timetable for the Research Council deliberation:

The 24th of May – the 5th of June: Sharing opinions and arguments on this shared document and on the Research Council listserv.

This stage will allow us to gather arguments for a virtual or in-presence Forum. We will gather good practices and ideas for virtual encounters based on RC and ISA member experience that will be useful for the Forum or other RC conferences and meetings.

June 6-11: RC/WG/TG delegates will consult their board and/or members before the vote, based on the arguments and exchanges on the Research Council listserv and gathered in this document.

The 12th of June (12 pm-2 pm UCT): Research Council meeting for final deliberation and vote. (Zoom meeting)

1. Arguments for an on-site Forum

1. Meeting, networking, exchanging ideas

Presence participation "helps in building network and exchanging idea. In-presence participation incentivates membership, network building, the exchange of ideas and experiences and it develops the sense of belonging to a scientific community. I would not like to keep on weakening any of those if not strictly necessary for that is what scientific societies are for". (Arguments notably raised by Flamina Sacca (RC26), Jan Fritz (ISA EC), Liana Daher (RC48), Ilaria Riccioni (RC37).

- Debra Davidson (RC24, personal opinion): I do support moving much of our activities in the academic realm online in an effort to reduce our ecological impact on the planet, but I think meeting occasionally in-person is essential to provide the basis for the dialogues and social networking that are vital to scholarship (and social wellbeing).

2. Some sessions will be (partially) held online

Jan Fritz: An on-site Forum could have some sessions that are all or partially online but with an audience of those attending the meeting. Those sessions could be held in a few designated places so that not all session rooms would have to have internet connections. (In the current situation, this approach would be less costly for the ISA than having to have every meeting room wired and provide technical assistance.) This flexible approach would allow for participation by those who were unable (for a variety of reasons) to come to the meeting.

3. ISA Members need to meet in person more than once every four years

Jan Fritz: We used to have sociologists that only would come for the World Congress and not be members of the ISA for the next three years because we did not hold meetings. (A decision to only have an in-person meeting every four years could have membership implications for the ISA.) We put the Forum in place so that members could meet more frequently and this gave the opportunity for people to see the value of the ISA membership rather than just being a member of a division. The Forum also was put in place (as already was mentioned) to give the smaller divisions an easy way to hold their meetings but also to have participants meet with others.

-- Having the World Congress and Forum both be in person is more inclusive; it provides the opportunity to increase the geographical diversity of locations of major ISA conferences.

4. Improving on-site Forums

Whether online or on-site, this is an excellent opportunity to assess the organisation of the Forum and make changes that meet the wishes of the divisions (notably mentioned by Jan Fritz, Brad West and Steven Wolf). The Research Council will be invited to suggest ways to improve the Forum experience whether we choose to hold it online or on-site.

5. Combine an on-site Forum with "online" activities between congresses and forums.

"keep in mind the idea of "online" activities between congresses and forums" (Christiana Constantopoulou, RC14)

6. Arguments in favour of an online Forum often rely on a 'technological fix.'

An online truly global conference requires an enormous commitment of attendees to make time and space to be 'present'—to block off home or work obligations while living at home and to live in a separate time zone, again while living at home. In an in-person conference, this kind of commitment is easy and embedded in purchasing a ticket and a hotel room. In an online conference, this kind of commitment is particularly challenging for those with dependents or small living spaces or group working spaces. While there are novel technological and organisational solutions to attempt to increase the social aspects of conferences online, there is no technological substitute for bringing together thousands of colleagues into the same place and time zone for an extended period of time. The ISA thrives from such in-person meetings.

7. Is an online conference truly more inclusive for colleagues from the Global South?

A key argument for an online conference is the increasing participation of sociologists from the global South and by young sociologists. However, there seems to be little agreement on this assumption by colleagues based in the global South. In the ISA-wide member poll on the World Congress, only a minority were interested in an online Congress (26.6%) and this choice was only slightly more popular among the global South (29.9% from the South wanted an online Congress while 23.3% from the North wanted it). I think it is an open empirical question whether junior scholars are disproportionately in favor of an online conference—or whether they, too, prefer meeting colleagues face-to-face. On one hand, it is self-evident that junior scholars tend to have fewer resources and that online conferences are generally more affordable. On the other hand, notwithstanding optimism for a technological fix, in an online conference, it is far harder for less established scholars to meet and create relationships with senior scholars and scholars in distant regions.

2. Arguments for an online Forum

(Some of these arguments have been developed in the document "For a Forum 2.0".)

General argument: More than an "on-site Forum translated online /

A virtual Forum in 2025 would be a very different experience from the 2021 Forum. The latter was planned to be held on-site and then translated online.

- While on-site meetings that include some possibility to participate online offer the impression of greater inclusion because those sociologists who do not have the travel authorisations or monetary means to travel across the world, their participation is limited to presenting their own papers and listening to those sessions that fit into their time zone. The necessity of organising the networking, job fair, book fair and other social events on-site means that access to these benefits of the Forum are limited to "on site" participants.

- Melanie Heath (RC32): There are many advantages to holding the Forum online in 2025 (and beyond) that I believe outweigh the disadvantages. First, I agree with the idea that it is likely to increase the participation of young scholars from the global South. Second, I am in favour of seeking to reduce our carbon footprint. Third, networking opportunities can occur in different virtual and in-person contexts that will become institutionalised.

- Liana Daher (RC48): We must consider that the academic/scientific world is changing, and online chats and meetings are today a daily occurrence.

1. A more inclusive Forum / Accessibility – Increasing participation of sociologists from the global South and by young sociologists

Fostering a global dialogue among researchers from different continents is a fundamental role of the ISA. While some inequalities are reproduced in a virtual forum (e.g., the digital divide), a virtual forum still allows for much greater participation of researchers from the global South as well as researchers and students with limited travel budgets, difficulties getting visas and potentially inequitable access to vaccines.

- Michelle Ford (RC44) An online forum and an in-person congress would help strike a balance between accessibility and the opportunity to meet in person.

- Liana Daher (RC48): Young people and people who cannot afford very high travel costs could be encouraged by online/hybrid format to participate and become, or renew, their ISA membership.

- our 2019 survey of participants from B&C countries found that one of the most significant barriers to participating in the World Congress and Forum were not necessarily the registration fees - but the travel expenses (exorbitant hotel room rates at the conference centres), the difficulties of obtaining visas and other travel restrictions. The qualitative explanations of these challenges demonstrated that many colleagues could not afford to stay for the entire week and thus usually come just for the day or two surrounding their sessions. A carefully designed virtual format would accommodate these colleagues and enable them to participate in the Forum when otherwise they probably would not and would just wait for the World Congress.

2. Reduction of our carbon footprint

An increasing number of social science scholars are committed to reducing their travels, or avoiding air travel completely. A virtual Forum would fully include them and considerably reduce the ISA carbon footprint, thus increasing considerably our advancement on the Greener ISA plan. Reducing carbon footprint was a major reason in RC24 (environment) survey.

3. Reduction of the costs

Registration fees to a virtual Forum would be substantially lower (limited to membership fees and a nominal fee for contributions to the digital platform costs). Moreover, there would be no travel cost, which was consistently reported as a barrier to inclusion by the RCs. As budget reductions are anticipated in many universities, it is essential to make the Forum more accessible.

4. An increase of the visibility of sociology beyond ISA members

A virtual Forum allows the ISA to extend its reach beyond its members and participants. A virtual ISA Forum will allow free access to hundreds of panels for scholars and students in social sciences from all over the world. For example, the latter could integrate specific sessions into their teaching plans or local seminar series and seek to engage in discussion with the featured sociologist. This type of approach will contribute to visibilising sociology beyond the ISA members that take part an "on-site" Forum.

- Michelle Ford (RC44): An online Forum may well lead to an increase in the popularity of the Forum as well.

5. Innovative virtual platforms offer better virtual experience and easy interactions

Innovative and easy to use virtual platforms have emerged during the pandemic. In addition to avoiding the "Zoom fatigue", they provide a very different online experience. In some platforms, each participant has an avatar (based on a photo) and moves in a 3-D congress environment, with easy access to face-to-face dialogue or small group conversation. Have a look at this short demo/tutorial (4 mins). It may be a good tool for the Forum or for one of your RC meetings or conferences.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJnTnFXkgfU&t=71s>

Indeed, the platforms themselves are improving, and by 2023, and even more so by 2025, there should be more democratic, transparent and interactive options that will make a virtual forum in 2025 an exciting and interactive event.

6. Reinforcing the importance and attendance at the "on-site" World Congress

By organising the Forum as an online event and maintaining the World Congress on-site, the ISA will combine the advantages of both forms of meeting. The Online Forum will complement the ISA congresses and will allow both the scholars and ISA to dedicate larger amounts of funds to support those colleagues from all continents who need it to attend the Congress every four years.

7. More flexibility and autonomy for the RC/WG/TG

Steven Wolf (RC40): If the Forum goes virtual, individual RCs will be able to specify their own plans for how to organise activities that create excitement/engagement/value during the meeting. Nonetheless, there is value in ISA or the Forum organisers developing an answer to this vital question. While perhaps it is only a technical issue, if the Forum goes virtual, I can suggest that it will be valuable to introduce more flexibility into the way conference elements are structured and scheduled. The traditional format of 75-minute sessions is limiting.

If we design a virtual event, we will not be constricted by the physical constraints of the number of rooms available. We can lengthen the session times, we can also prerecorded videos, we can spread out the events across a longer period of time to avoid making people present in the middle of the night. The options are endless about how we can adapt to the virtual format to meet the scientific and social needs of the RC/WG/TGs.

8. Learning to be digital

Sociologists have learned how to use online platforms and an increasing number of tools have been set up to improve the "online experience". All indications suggest that this mode of interaction will continue to rise over the coming years. Alongside this increased demand for online presence, we as people should also be learning how to better manage our work-life balance in a digital society and hopefully will be able to make time to be "present" in a virtual meeting in 2024.

It is very important for participants to dedicate their own time to 'attending' a virtual conference. The COVID experience has shown that too often we do not detach from our daily life and we see virtual meetings as something that we have to do on top of everything else we are doing. We should treat the Virtual event as an event that requires our attention. Universities will have to adapt and begin to find ways to enable conference participants to take the time off from their daily work in order to participate in virtual conferences, even if they physically do not leave the office. The mindfulness of fully participating in a designed virtual event is fundamental to making it work.

9. Building in social events

The 2020 Forum did not fully exploit the options for socialising during the Forum. We know that we can do better. We envision creative elements - like the documentary screenings that are already in the program, but also virtual cafés, open bars, virtual tourism excursions (there are some virtual reality tools that can already be integrated online for this), game rooms, etc. Here as well - we can leave the RC/WG/TGs to be creative, but at the level of the ISA we can also ensure that there are ISA wide social events and fun virtual experiences.

10. Think global, act local

Local meet-ups could be created. Meeting up with colleagues who are also attending the Forum locally can offer a way to be with some people who you may not usually meet.

11. Experimentation

There is a trend in policy studies to try true-life experiments. That is, taking innovative action and testing it out, then evaluating it. In order for us to really know whether or not it works we need to at least try it once (the Porto Alegre Forum does not count in my opinion, as it was not designed to be virtual). If we organise 2025 to be virtual, we can evaluate it after the fact and then know whether or not we want to continue with this design for the Forum or not.

12. Mid-term Meetings Conflicts

In RC40, we traditionally did not participate in the Forum because the tradition of our RC has been (since its founding) to hold our mid-term meeting at the International Rural Sociological Association meetings. Under my presidency (2014-2018) we had decided to take part in the Forum in Vienna for the first time - but this caused a lot of conflict within our RC because the dates of the IRSA and ISA meetings were very close - but on two different continents. This was the same issue for the 2020 meetings (which luckily were cancelled because we would not have been able to make it work). This required our members to make a choice about which meeting to attend - most chose the IRSA meeting, so we continued our tradition of holding our business meetings at IRSA, rather than at the Forum. A virtual forum will facilitate this situation for RC40 (and many other RCs I imagine) as we could still hold our sessions online at the Forum, but participate in person at our traditional mid-term meeting that is outside of the ISA format.

3. Why a hybrid format is not an option proposed in this vote

One may think of a hybrid Forum as a solution in which both on-site and online participants would be happy and have a good experience of the Forum. What I learned from the exchanges about the 2023 Congress is that online or on-site participation requires two different ways to think about the Forum and organising it. There are two different projects we propose to the participants. While any "on-site" ISA Congress or Forum will offer possibilities for some speakers to deliver their talk online, these participants experience will be limited to delivering their talk and listening to a few sessions. It is very different from an online Forum. Most aspects of a Forum will have to be thought and set up either online or on-site.

Here are some examples:

1. An online Forum is not the "online translation of an on-site Forum" (as was the case in February 2021). An online Forum opens different possibilities in the format and scheduling of our sessions. We all agree that a Forum is about much more than the session. Socialisation, networking and meetings are crucial. New platforms provide a good online experience of socialising and specific socialisation activities. It requires time to organise it properly and cannot work in a hybrid way.
2. Only a limited number of rooms will be equipped with videoconference/ Livestream material. In the other rooms, each RC may be able to screen a video of a participant or to record a session from a smartphone. These solutions offer limited possibilities of interactions during the sessions and none in socialising sessions.
3. The infrastructures required for on-site and online Forums are specific and are both quite expensive. A hybrid Forum would require the ISA to pay both for rooms and for a solid online platform.
4. Holding the Forum online would allow us to propose very accessible fees (or no fees) in order to increase the participation of young researchers and colleagues from the Global South. An on-site forum is more expensive to held and would require regular fees for all participants.
5. If we decide the Forum should be "on-site", offering the participants to opt for full online participation represents a financial (and organisational) risk. For the 2023 congress, Dan Woodman explained to us the LOC would not have access to most government funding if at least 3.000 participants attend the Congress in Melbourne. If we opt for an on-site Forum, we should ensure most participants attend the Forum in the host city and not online.
6. Helma Lutz (RC05): Based on experience in Frankfurt: While the hybrid format may work for smaller meetings (e.g. RC conferences), it seems that it is impossible to set it up for a 4000+ person meeting.

For these reasons, the two options proposed in the vote are:

- An on-site Forum (with the possibility to held a limited number of sessions online, as Jan proposed).

- An online Forum (In this case, the organising committee may later decide to hold a few sessions in different sites.)

4. Ideas to improve the Forum

- Whether online or on-site, "this is an excellent opportunity to assess the organisation of the Forum and make changes that meet the wishes of the divisions" (notably mentioned by Jan Fritz, Brad West and Steven Wolf). The Research Council will be invited to make suggestions to improve the Forum experience whether we choose to hold it online or on-site.

- "Econference organisers can do more to draw attention to the environmental impact of our internet usage and encourage participants to adopt eco-conscious computing habits." ex: switching off your video saves 96 % of emissions, streaming in standard definition instead of HD saves 86% ." "Virtual gatherings have a relatively small carbon footprint in comparison to the impact of driving or flying to a face-to-face gathering. However, econferences are also not without environmental impacts. An hour of video conferencing or streaming produces anywhere from 150 to 1,000 grams of carbon dioxide. For perspective, the carbon emissions for major conferences, which attract participants from far away, can easily exceed two tons per attendee." (Embracing econferences, University Affairs, Canada, sent my Susan McDaniel, RC06).