



REPORT SUMMARY

Community experiences and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in eastern and southern Africa

Introduction

Communities across eastern and southern Africa have been facing numerous, in some places almost annual, crises – with the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple climate change-related crises such as floods, droughts, and cyclones all impacting on them.

Whenever one of these crises strikes, community-based organisations (CBOs) are on the frontlines, providing vital support to the most vulnerable communities and operating as a key liaison channel between government and the communities themselves.

The report, *Community Experiences and Responses during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Eastern and Southern Africa*, was commissioned to examine the key challenges that CBOs and their communities faced during one such crisis. It aims to understand how these CBOs responded and, finally, consider the lessons they have learned so we can learn more about building the resilience of CBOs and the communities in which they are rooted.

It was based on primary source material written by CBOs themselves about one year into the pandemic and was designed to be read as direct insights from CBOs from a moment in time during the pandemic, without additional interpretation and implications included by Firelight.

This summary presents highlights from the report, focusing on the challenges faced by CBOs and their communities and the response of CBOs to those challenges. It looks at the factors that supported them in their unexpected roles and the impact that the pandemic ultimately had on their organizations. Finally, it identifies key areas where funders can provide enhanced support for CBOs working to address future crises

Background

Guided by CBO advisors, Firelight assembled a “COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund” in response to issues as they arose emerged following the emergence of COVID-19.

Firelight awarded small unrestricted grants (averaging \$8,000 USD) in mid-2020 to 87 CBO grantee-partners across all countries of operation. In February 2021, Firelight sent out a simple 'Learning Capture' questionnaire in February 2021 with a set of questions about CBOs' and communities' experiences during the pandemic, the challenges they faced, and how they responded in the face of these challenges. Twenty-one grantees responded, with representation from all CBO clusters and countries of operation. The responses from these partners were qualitatively thematically analyzed and key themes that emerged are reviewed in this summary report.

Challenges faced by communities and families as a result of COVID-19

Economic poverty was one of the single biggest – and most relevant – COVID-19 impacts experienced by communities, with some families left unable to pay for school fees, ensure shelter or afford food because of loss of income.

CBOs said that families faced other difficulties in securing food for themselves (even if they could afford it), with COVID-19 also leading to lower harvests and government restrictions on the movement of food. Communities reported a rise in levels of malnutrition – particularly amongst children – as a result of this food insecurity.

Restrictions on movement and gatherings had specific economic impacts on families operating small businesses but, as around the world, also had broader community consequences with the loss of education- and recreation- related interaction.

Many CBOs in the sample reported community-level psychosocial challenges, with COVID-19-inspired anxiety and fear causing tension within and between communities, and COVID-19 related factors being attributed for a rise in domestic violence in a small number of homes.

CBOs further said communities struggled to deal with the direct implications of COVID-19. Some could not afford preventative equipment such as masks, soap, tests, or hand sanitizers. Others lacked access to the sanitation facilities needed to wash their hands. Misinformation meant some people were too frightened to go to the hospital when they needed treatment. A few respondents noted deaths caused by COVID-19, and the personal and economic impacts that these events had.

Specific challenges experienced by families with young children

Most CBOs reported a reduction in the number of children returning to school, and/or an increase in dropout as a result of COVID-19. They further noted that some children in rural areas were unable to learn at home during school closures because of a lack of resources.

Some CBOs said that COVID-19 had led to increases in child labor, child pregnancy, and child marriage, and many communities reported an increase in cases of child abuse, particularly against girls.

CBOs also reported that parents and caregivers were experiencing difficulties in providing adequate care and support to their children. Some CBOs also noted that their community was perceiving negative changes in the behaviour of some children such as greater sexual activity and illicit/illegal activity as an indirect result of closures of schools and other safe spaces.

CBO priorities in responding to COVID-19 in their communities

CBOs overwhelmingly said that listening to and collaborating and coordinating with their communities and relevant stakeholders was the most important factor in deciding how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- CBOs prioritized responses to some of the most urgent needs of communities – including protection from COVID-19, provision of nutritious food, earning an income, childcare, and support to keep children learning.
- All CBOs said they had played a key role in ensuring their communities could receive accurate information about COVID-19 prevention and could protect themselves from the virus.
- Some CBOs reported providing educational support for children, especially for children learning at home.
- They were often involved in direct food distribution, education on nutrition and well as agricultural training and helped address job losses by supporting community members to engage in new income-generating activities.
- Many CBOs said they worked with parents on positive parenting practices and encouraged community members to report cases of abuse to relevant community and legal authorities.
- Many added that they also encouraged and supported families to join village savings and loan (VSL) groups to help them weather economic difficulties.

Shifts in the ways CBOs engaged with stakeholders as a result of COVID-19

- Many CBOs said they recognized that the pandemic had changed the way they conducted their activities. A few CBOs specifically acknowledged innovation and use of technology in order to engage with their communities.
- A few CBOs noted that they had deeper engagement with government partners during stages of the pandemic, with government serving as collaborators focused on finding solutions for community needs. CBOs said they had also lobbied for certain issues (such as hunger, gender-based violence) to take precedence in governments' emergency response plans.
- Given the disproportionate impact on the healthcare sector caused by COVID-19, a few CBOs noted that they used the crisis to serve as better partners to, or collaborators with, the healthcare system and healthcare workers.

Factors which promoted CBOs' resilience and responsiveness during uncertainty of COVID-19

CBOs noted that many factors had helped promote their resilience and responsiveness during the pandemic. While funding was important, ensuring strong, participatory relationships with their communities emerged as the most salient theme from CBOs:

- Most CBOs surveyed indicated that a key way they could be responsive to their communities was by directly listening to their voices, and using participatory approaches to include them in decision-making and prioritization of activities.
- While external funding was a key to resilience for many, some CBOs also highlighted the importance of community-mobilized resources and development of new strategies to become self-sustaining.
- Many CBOs noted the importance of organizational capacity, strength, focus, effectiveness, and preparation.
- Many CBOs also credited said staff and volunteers had played a key part in promoting their resilience and ability to deliver the organization's activities during uncertain times.
- Partnerships and coordination within an ecosystem of CSOs, government partners, and other CBOs played a key role in helping many CBOs improve their effectiveness and coordination within the communities they served.
- Some CBOs said they had been able to persist throughout the difficulties of COVID-19 by drawing inspiration and motivation from their mission and values.
- A number of CBOs said their status as trusted community organizations was essential for their effectiveness and responsiveness during the pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19 on CBOs

CBOs highlighted three key areas in which COVID-19 had impacted on their operations/relationships with the communities where they work:

- While many CBOs highlighted the value of their reputations as trusted community organizations, more than half of those surveyed said the crisis also had a negative impact on their relationships with their communities. Sometimes this was due to communities having expectations of program delivery that could simply not be met, and other times this was due to poor channels of communication.
- More than half of CBOs reported negative effects of organisational 'stretch' as a result of having to balance their core objectives/mission with the critical, emergency-related needs of community members.
- CBOs noted that limitations in financial resources hindered them from being able to both respond to the COVID-19 crisis and deliver their core objectives and meant they had to slow down their original planned activities.

Community-based organizations' reflections on the report

After data was analyzed and the themes were drawn out, the findings were shared with CBOs for discussion, validation, and further insights. During these validation meetings, CBOs highlighted the following key points:

1. Strategic relationships with three key partners were essential in their response to the crisis:
 - Funders: CBOs appreciated the flexibility of funders which allowed them to focus on urgent emergency response activities.
 - Government: Many survey participants noted the supportive environment that their government partners created – for instance, working with Ministries of Health to spread validated information about COVID-19 instead of myths and rumors, or transport assistance from local government offices.
 - Communities: CBOs described how the pandemic had created opportunities to work differently with their communities – for instance, allowing more time to work with parents on home-based learning and child development activities; redeploying HIV-support groups to help in implementing COVID-19 response activities; and working with local religious, public health, and community leaders to disseminate accurate information about the pandemic.
2. While some of their priorities as organizations shifted during the pandemic (e.g., uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine, digitizing programs, planning for and creating guidelines for future emergency response), other priorities remained consistent (e.g., child protection activities, supporting child development and learning).
3. There was recognition across the group that COVID-19 was unlikely to be the only destabilizing factor for CBOs and their communities, especially with climate-related crises affecting their localities with increasing frequency. These concerns prompted a strong desire to plan effectively for future “unknowns” and to work with funders like Firelight to strengthen the resiliency of communities and of the community-based organizations themselves.

CBOs recommended the following three areas requiring further unpacking and investment in order to build the resilience of community-based organizations to support communities in future crises:

- Planning for greater community and organizational resiliency;
- Use of communications tools and technologies to effectively collaborate with community members; and
- Creation of an emergency contingency fund.

Though this inquiry was small, its findings are contributing to informing and steering CBOs' and Firelight's onward thinking and work around how to build resilience in CBO and community resilience.

Indeed, different types of crises will unfortunately more frequently affect communities across eastern and southern Africa in the years ahead. Grassroots organizations such as CBOs are at the frontlines of the community experience and response during these times, and it is essential to engage in proactive, intentional, and strategic thinking and planning around how to best support and strengthen resilience in CBOs and communities.

If you are interested in learning more about this inquiry or related, please reach out to Firelight's Learning & Evaluation Team at learning@firelightfoundation.org.