

COVID-19 and the Critical Need to Support Local Leadership

IN THIS UNIQUE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The unprecedented COVID-19 global humanitarian challenge will require comprehensive and extraordinary responses from everyone, including national governments, public and private donors, international aid agencies, multi-lateral coordination bodies, and local civil society and communities. People around the world are experiencing a call to solidarity in the face of great challenge, and it is critical we respond quickly to protect life, care for those affected, especially the most vulnerable, and ensure human dignity, while securing a path to recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic also raises new challenges to the global humanitarian systems. With the necessary travel limitations, as well as potential disruptions to aid supply systems, this humanitarian response will rely especially heavily on local actors to lead in new ways and meet community needs. Effective COVID-19 responses will require effective local government as well as strong local civil society organizations to design and implement humanitarian and development programming responses. **It is critical that international actors – donors, multi-laterals, and INGOs – support local leadership through quality partnerships, effective capacity strengthening, flexible and adaptive funding, fair multi-stakeholder risk sharing, and reasonable and realistic compliance requirements.**

FLEXIBLE FUNDING AND COMPLIANCE SYSTEMS

Early action and quick response is critical. For local actors to effectively respond to the COVID-19 challenge, they need accessible funding that is flexible and adaptive. Humanitarian funding that is less earmarked, more flexible and with multi-year possibility; harmonization of funding and reporting requirements; improved transparency and cost efficiency; innovative tools and mechanisms that all

encourage and support local institutions in taking more lead roles. In addition, though in many countries there are experienced and highly capable local organizations ready to lead humanitarian responses, these organizations may not yet have been resourced to develop the systems to ensure the compliance and comprehensive reporting required by many donors. Though accountability to those we serve is always paramount, and accountability to donors and intermediaries critical, the burden of compliance should not be an obstacle to effective humanitarian responses to the COVID-19-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- Existing pooled funds should be made easier and quicker for local and national agencies to access. In countries where they do not exist, the Start Network can be leveraged to widen its outreach to include more local/national organizations or other modalities should be created quickly to make funding rapidly available.
- Simplify and harmonize minimum application criteria among donors where possible, share criteria information, expand pooled fund coverage.
- Support incentivizing INGOs to provide greater technical support to local/national actors as they continue critical humanitarian and/or development programming while adapting implementation modalities to address COVID-19-19 related safety and security concerns for their own staff and the vulnerable communities that they serve.
- Loosen or eliminate the restrictions on current grants. This can include: extending end dates of current projects, converting project-based grants to unrestricted support; accelerating payment schedules; and not holding grantees responsible if conferences, events, and other project deliverables must be postponed or canceled.

- Contribute to community-based emergency response funds and other efforts to address the health and economic impact on those most affected by this pandemic.
- Explore progressive due diligence systems, such as the START Network's pilot [Tiered Due Diligence system](#), as operational capacity increases.

PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING AND COORDINATION

As noted in the Grand Bargain agreement, in addition to locally led implementation, it is also critical to strengthen the ownership of local responders and strengthen community engagement and accountability. COVID-19 responses will require partnership that ensures that local organizations participate in core decision making and coordination forums.

Recommendation

- Encourage and support local institutional participation in decision-making and coordination processes related to the COVID-19 response.
- Ensure funding for LNGOs to hold a lead or co-lead role in cluster or sector coordination
- Establish & provide ongoing funding for LNGO coordination mechanisms.

RISK SHARING

As made clear in the recent [Interaction report on NGOs & Risk Management](#), locally-led humanitarian response should not put undue risk burdens on local institutions. It is critical that donors, government, INGOs and local/national NGOs develop joint strategies to manage/overcome compliance/due diligence obstacles and move towards effective risk-management and sharing. Local institutions must have the resources to ensure their staff safety and security and should not be asked to put the safety and security of their staff at risk to reach programmatic goals.

Recommendation

- Develop and fund strategies with local actors to manage risk and risk transfer, ensuring risk is not all or always transferred to local actors.

- Ensure local institutions have strategies and secure funding to cover both direct and indirect costs that mitigate risk.
- Support and encourage local institutions to thoughtfully manage and support the resiliency of their staff throughout the pandemic and beyond.
- Ensure sufficient funding for costs related to PSEA given the expected increased need due to COVID-19.

CLEAR AND COORDINATED COMMUNICATION

Given the enormity of the crisis and its cross-cutting nature, it will be important for donors and the international community to regularly and proactively communicate around decision-making and the response with the full range of response stakeholders.

Recommendation

- Coordinate communication with similar messaging and approaches, as feasible, to eliminate confusion and provide increased support to local/national responders.
- Consider and support local and national actors as important 'auxiliaries' to governmental efforts, and as key communication channels on COVID-19 messaging to local communities.
- Listen to the needs and concerns expressed by local institutions and local communities to help inform COVID-19 related decision-making. Given all the current travel restrictions, local actors based in the communities they serve will have a better understanding of the urgent needs and how donors and the humanitarian community can best support and serve the vulnerable communities in need.
- While maintaining critical accountability standards, consider monitoring and evaluation timelines in light of the crisis. Listen to people on the front lines and be open to pivoting programming and M and E activities as needed.

Ending COVID-19, and mitigating its impact on communities is critical, and will rely on effective local leadership. CRS is committed to supporting local leadership in its response to COVID-19 and urges all donors and policymakers to strengthen their commitment to, funding of, and engagement with these leaders during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.