A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS DURING A CRISIS

National Democratic Institute

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This guide was written by the National Democratic Institute's Citizen Participation & Inclusion team, in close collaboration with the Middle East and North Africa team.

About NDI

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since opening its doors in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the fact that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communication among citizens, political institutions and elected officials, and strengthens their ability to improve the quality of life for all citizens. For more information about NDI, please visit www.ndi.org.

NDI is a leading organization working to advance citizen participation and increase political inclusion around the world. Emphasizing locally-led, issue-driven approaches, NDI programs focus on citizens organizing around their interests and taking actions throughout the political cycle to open, access and occupy political space. The Institute recognizes that citizen-centered activism and collective action – driven by real community needs and desires – is a powerful transformative force. Since 1983, NDI has provided assistance to more than 15,000 civil society organizations in over one hundred fifty countries across the globe.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to help civil society organizations (CSOs) plan and act during a crisis, which is defined as an unexpected situation that impacts the lives of many citizens in a country or region. CSOs are typically more familiar with local circumstances than government agencies or emergency relief organizations and can therefore contribute to more effective solutions to problems caused by crises. Since many of the issues that a crisis creates require "collective action" solutions, this guide focuses on steps CSOs can quickly undertake in the aftermath of a crisis and emphasizes the need for coordination between institutions, organizations, and individuals. Only through working together can societies recover from crises and emerge more resilient.

The guide will assist CSOs in understanding a given crisis, planning a course of action, ensuring the flow of critical information, and fostering solidarity and cooperation among relevant stakeholders. The guide also recognizes that an organization has a responsibility to protect staff members and prevent overwork that might lead to exhaustion, mental or physical illness, burnout, or general discord. Recommendations for addressing staff well-being are found throughout the guide.

Civil society is a critical component when communities must band together and respond to a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Under these circumstances, civil society often facilitates understanding of government activities, allowing citizens to better understand and evaluate policy decisions and the execution of government authority, along with providing citizens with the skills to voice their concerns and act collectively. The need for access to information concerning government actions and the freedom to act without government harassment or interference is exacerbated in times of crisis.

Although crises created by natural disasters, pandemics, and man-made disasters require immediate action to prevent suffering and hardship, they also present opportunities for positive change. Historically, crises have created important moments to reset politics, economies, and public health systems. They also have helped build greater social cohesion and advance policies to prevent or mitigate future crises.

Civil society organizations have important roles to play supporting collective action as societies respond to and recover from a crisis. In addition to mobilizing around immediate needs, such as public access to information, food assistance, shelter, or medical supplies, CSOs also play a central role in bringing societies together and fostering mutual aid. Likewise, CSOs serve to protect civic space and ensure an appropriate and inclusive crisis response by holding the government accountable.

Collective Action: Many problems are too big or too complicated to be addressed single handedly by an institution, organization or individual. In these cases, different actors must join forces and break down the problem into manageable pieces than can be addressed simultaneously through a collective effort.

Some overarching lessons can inform crisis response plans and actions. These include an emphasis on transparency, communication, prioritization, and coordination. For instance, ensuring that citizens understand the nature of the crisis and ongoing efforts to address it can reduce fear and uncertainty. It's also important to recognize that not everything can be done at once; the most urgent and important issues need to be dealt with first. Solutions should minimize the negative impact on people's lives, alleviate deprivation, and work towards resolving the crisis as quickly as possible. This includes managing first response needs, setting up emergency measures and regulations, and thinking through long-term solutions.

SECTION 1: Situation Analysis and Planning a Course of Action

> **Health & Wellness Tip:** An organization's first responsibility during a crisis is to ensure the physical safety, health, and well-being of staff members and stakeholders. If staff members are expected to continue working, their well-being, including food, security, and shelter, is paramount. CSOs should demonstrate flexibility to allow staff members to meet their needs outside the workplace.

Step 1: Collect Information and Assess the Situation

To help make sense of the crisis and determine the type of support that is needed, an organization can conduct a rapid assessment. Depending on the size and structure of the organization, the assessment can involve all staff in a smaller organization, or a representative from each office or department in a larger organization. One approach to a rapid assessment is based on examining an interrelated set of factors using PESTEL analysis, described below. This approach accounts for the cross-cutting impact of a crisis involving all sectors of society. Additionally, it can help determine where there might be critical gaps in the response efforts.

The PESTEL analysis can be a facilitated team exercise, lasting two to three hours, where the below questions are discussed by the group and recorded. In addition to identifying needs and gaps in the current crisis response, the group should also consider how the crisis can compound pre-existing issues (e.g., conflict, poverty, corruption, gender-based violence, etc).

The component questions involved in a PESTEL analysis are as follows:

P – Political

What action is the government taking? Where are the critical decisions being made? How much authority does local government have? Is information being adequately shared? Are emergency measures being employed? Are there dissenting voices? Is the security sector involved in the response? Are public services being provided to everyone in need?

E – Economic

How are resources being allocated? How have livelihoods been impacted across the socioeconomic spectrum? Do people have access to basic needs, like food and fuel? Are supply chains functioning? Are banks operating?

S – Social

Who is most vulnerable? What are other organizations doing? Are any social groups being scapegoated (i.e. blamed for the mistakes or wrongdoings of others or for a situation beyond any individual's control)? Is there a need to address local beliefs or expose prevailing myths about the crisis? Are there security concerns or potential for violence?

T – Technological

What lines of communication are available? Is there cellular service? Are radio and TV operating? Is disinformation or misinformation being spread?

E – Environmental

Do people have access to clean water and sanitation? Have citizens been displaced? Is there a risk of a secondary crisis (e.g., disease spreading after a natural disaster)?

L – Legal

Is the rule of law being followed? Are human rights being protected? Do civil society organizations have the freedom and space to act? Is public safety being ensured?

By answering these types of questions, an organization can make decisions about what is needed to effectively address the crisis and mitigate potential ripple effects. It is a good idea to confirm the results of the analysis by comparing the views of external stakeholders. Once an organization has a clear view of the needs during a crisis, it is much more well-equipped to take the next step and plan an initial course of action.

Step 2: Develop a Crisis Response Plan

A national crisis requires collective action and a "whole-of-society" approach. It also requires top-down and bottom-up strategies that rely on the abilities of both local-level and national-level CSOs for success. In every case, CSO's must be strategic about the actions that they decide to take based on their resources, capacity, relationships, and function. If an organization chooses to act, they should do so in a way that will make a positive contribution that complements or intensifies the work of others, including the actions taken by public officials. To help with the planning process, an organization can undertake a SWOT analysis that corresponds to the PESTEL findings. SWOT refers to Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

This analysis also can be undertaken through a facilitated discussion with the same group of staff who completed the PESTEL analysis. A four-quadrant chart can be drawn, as illustrated below and lists can be created in each quadrant.

S – Strengths

What are the organization's assets, including relationships, technical expertise, credibility, geographic reach, human resources, and communication channels? For example, an organization might already have a mechanism for delivering information to rural communities, or a process for monitoring government expenditures.

W – Weaknesses

What are the organization's limitations? This can include the inability to physically access the office or being physically cut off from certain parts of the country. It can also involve having limited experience working with vulnerable groups or the inability to shift financial resources.

O – Opportunities

What need is the organization uniquely positioned to address? How can the organization leverage its existing work? Are stakeholders turning to the organization for assistance? This can include having access to unrestricted funding or having support from other civil society organizations.

T – Threats

What risks are associated with different courses of action? Do any actions jeopardize the health and safety of staff? Is the government reluctant to engage civil society? Is the government trying to co-opt or silence civil society? Will funding be unavailable? For example, governments may exploit the pandemic to obstruct the work of civil society organizations.

Based on the findings of the PESTEL and SWOT processes, the organization should have enough information to decide: 1) Whether they will take action and 2) If so, where it should invest its time and effort. This can include making shifts to ongoing organizational activities and/or launching new initiatives to directly address crisis-related issues.

Step 3: Form a Crisis Management Team

In order to respond more rapidly and effectively during a crisis situation, an organization might create a crisis management team tasked with helping the organization monitor the crisis, **protect** its staff, **adjust** operations, and **engage** in response and recovery efforts.

Depending on the course of action an organization chooses, a crisis management team can be the same group that undertook the PESTEL and SWOT analysis or it might be an existing management unit that takes on the ad hoc responsibility of better navigating the crisis. The team might also include board members, particularly if there is a need to alter strategic plans or major organizational policies. Regardless of the composition, the crisis management team should have a clear and distinct function during the crisis period.

The crisis management team should have the authority to make and communicate decisions, as well as monitor and reevaluate plans and activities. The team should have standing meetings several times a week, if not daily, during the early stages of a crisis. The team should also create well-defined avenues to allow other staff members to provide input and feedback. Staff members and external stakeholders are a key source of information and can help inform planning and action. This can be done through regular staff meetings to exchange ideas, simple surveys that can be completed on-line, or through a specific email address or phone number dedicated to such feedback.

Prioritize actions: Not everything can be done at once, and not everything can be a priority. Think about the needs and the organization's comparative advantage. For example, if an organization has strong relationships with media outlets, collaborating with these media outlets to share practical information with the public about the crisis could be an immediate priority.

Align resources: As choices are made about what to do, the organization also needs to consider the time, people and money involved. In part, this might mean that a reallocation of resources is necessary. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations shifted their activities from in-person to online, and utilized digital technologies. In some cases this resulted in additional resources for other activities, such as the production of additional on-line content.

Assign responsibilities: Before action can be taken, the organization also needs to make reasonable decisions that are internally communicated about who is responsible for tasks. This includes how different people or parts of the organization should work together. For example, there needs to be a clear decision about who speaks publicly for the organization.

Monitor and adjust: An unfolding crisis necessarily requires close monitoring and regularly reviewing activities. These are important roles for the crisis management team. They not only help determine whether activities are having the desired result, but they also help keep staff safe, assured and encouraged. Keep a detailed record of activities and their outcomes as an effective way to monitor impact and inform strategy adjustments as a crisis progresses.

Step 4: Establish an Internal Communications Plan

As the organization's crisis response plan comes together, timely and reliable communications with staff members is crucial.

Deliver regularly scheduled communications that keep staff apprised of new developments and allow for follow up on previous information. For example, organization leadership may send out a weekly email with updates about the crisis and the organization's crisis response plan.

Be open, accessible and willing to respond as much as possible to requests for information. Leave time at the end of meetings for additional thoughts and questions.

Be truthful to establish and maintain trust and cohesion within the organization. Share information about the crisis with all staff in a timely, professional manner.

Be compassionate and empathetic recognizing that everyone in the organization is experiencing the situation and staff should be able to count on one another. Reiterate this in communications with staff. Also recognize that different people will experience the situation in unique ways and refrain from making assumptions about how the crisis is impacting someone.

Be positive, but also accurate about the challenges since unified action will be needed to deal with a range of problems a crisis creates. It is possible to be optimistic while being open and honest.

Share successes to keep staff motivated. Crises, by their very nature, breed pessimism. However, the organization's leadership can provide hope and a cause for optimism. As plans are implemented, share success stories and focus on the future.

Emphasize that a process is in place to help address the challenges and that staff feedback is helpful. Be transparent about the process and how it addresses challenges.

Create opportunities for staff or volunteers to offer feedback and raise questions, ideas or concerns. All-staff meetings where staff are given the time and space to share their thoughts may be a useful way to gather feedback. For sensitive topics, online forms or surveys with the option to remain anonymous may be a good approach to soliciting feedback.

Ensure a system for rapid communication is in place to help alleviate potential safety or security issues, such as a Whatsapp group or phone tree. The organization can also schedule regular check-in communications that allow management to confirm the welfare of staff members.

Step 5: Develop a Plan for Communicating with External Stakeholders

The organization will need to ensure that external stakeholders have clear expectations about its crisis response and plan of action. It is critical that donors, public authorities and citizens are not surprised by changes in the organization's objectives and use of resources,

Donors – Keep expectations realistic. Share your perspective on the crisis and be honest about any adjustments the organization needs to make.

Authorities – Provide actionable information, evidence, stories, and narratives. Explain any changes in the organization's approach. Ask practical questions about government obligations, actions and intentions.

Public – Share facts and 'need to know' information. Amplify public service messages, let them know your role, empathize, and include a call to action. Share positive narratives that focus on community and collective action.

Health & Wellness Tip: Providing space to debrief is a critical component of employee self-care. This could include routine "stress checks" or other check-ins during team meetings in order to remain aware of crisis-related fears, traumas, or concerns in staff members' lives that may impact their work. To improve the overall experience of a debrief it is recommended that other needs are met, such as providing food. If stress and trauma are affecting staff welfare, then it is recommended that a professional counselor be involved in helping identify paths to recovery.

Safeguarding and Do No Harm

CSOs have a responsibility to do no harm, which includes safeguarding those they work with and populations who are the most vulnerable1. In times of crisis, measures implemented in response can put some people at greater risk. For example, prolonged stay-at-home orders or lack of basic needs may lead to an increase in sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH), which includes domestic violence and gender-based violence (GBV). Although contexts vary, women and girls are disproportionately impacted by SEAH. Overall, the dual health and economic crises that often occur alongside a crisis or pandemic disproportionately harm women, older people, children, people with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LBGTI) people and other marginalized populations. For some populations, the layering of multiple identities - for example, being female and young and indigenous compounds the disproportionate impact and harm they might experience from crisis response measures. Those belonging to ethnic, linguistic, indigenous, or racial minorities are frequently subject to discrimination, stigmatization, and violations of their rights, including denial of access to services, subsistence activities, and security. Crisis response measures, such as restricted freedom of movement, increased surveillance and shifting public-assistance resources, can lead to an increase in rights violations and discrimination for people who experience marginalization.

Populations Experiencing Greater Risk or Vulnerability

- The populations most at risk are those that:
- depend heavily on the informal economy;
- occupy areas prone to shocks;
- have inadequate access to social services or political influence;
- have limited capacities and opportunities to cope and adapt; and
- limited or no access to technologies.

In cases where an organization does not already have safeguarding policies and procedures, CSOs should assess their operating environment as part of their SWOT analysis and develop a safeguarding checklist for emergency situations. Steps should be taken to ensure that activities are enhancing safety and security, rather than increasing the risk of SEAH and other types of violence or conflict.

1 The principle of "do no harm" requires that civil society organisations strive to minimize the harm they may inadvertently cause through providing aid or services and through their interactions with civil society, as well as harm that may be caused by not providing aid or services.

Considerations for Safeguarding

- During the SWOT analysis process, identify hazards and risk factors that have the potential to cause harm to specific groups. Consider how these risk factors impact safeguarding. A change in operations for an organization could increase or reduce risk.
- Identify vulnerable population groups in coordination with other community-level organizations, with a focus on people who are not prioritized within existing social safety nets. Partner with trusted civil society organizations and local leaders to reach the most vulnerable segments of society.
- Ensure that continuing programs and new programs are realistic and safe.
- Identify and act on negative impacts or increased risks. The new operating environment means that an organization may be interacting with new partners or populations who are facing challenging realities. For example, crisis measures can put additional caretaking burdens on women with children. If new actors are involved in program delivery, ensure they are clear on the safeguarding policy and any additional responsibilities.
- Identify support structures (social services, social networks, and institutions) and provide support to strengthen their role.
- Work in coordination with partners who are experts on GBV such as first-responders, temporary shelters and emergency housing for victims of GBV or domestic violence prevention networks. Whenever possible and appropriate, integrate violence prevention messages into your communication strategy or information campaigns.
- If activities are moving online, be aware of safeguarding implications. If you are interacting with children or adults who are vulnerable online or increasing the interaction between staff online, organizations will need appropriate safeguards, such as using a VPN and providing digital security training to staff and activity participants. For additional digital security tips, see the digital security section later in this guide.
- Establish an appropriate complaints mechanism and assess how concerns will be raised. Also, consider what capacity your organization has to handle any reports if they come in during this time from staff or community members..Are there existing community-based reporting mechanisms and do they still work in the new operating environment?

Intersectional Crisis Response

All social groups have intersecting identities, influenced by historical, social, cultural, and political contexts, that determine their relationships to power as well as vulnerability and resilience to disasters, emergencies, and crises. Although a relatively new tool to international development, intersectional approaches serve as a useful framework in uncovering the pre-existing, inequitable power dynamics that shape vulnerability,resilience and explain the disproportionate impact of crises on certain populations.

Mercy Corps utilizes an intersectional, gender-sensitive lens when evaluating resilience using four guiding questions that allow organizations to better understand how shocks and stresses impact desired development outcomes and adjust their strategies based on an intersectional evaluation of the context.

1. What needs to become more resilient?
2. Whose resilience capacity needs to be enhanced?
3. What types of shocks and stresses should individuals be resilient to?
4. What resources and strategies are needed to maintain progress when facing shocks and stresses?

SECTION 2: Ensuring the Flow of Critical Information

> **Health & Wellness Tip:** If possible, CSOs should consider having conversations with their donors about self-care and building self-care activities and support into existing or forthcoming budgets. In addition, local CSOs are often asked to report on violence, harm, and oppression, at times forcing program staff to relive negative interactions or experience retraumatization ; CSOs can work with donors to reformat reporting that mitigates some of this harm.

Community and communications are keys to overcoming a crisis. Public information is particularly important in the context of emergency planning and crisis management. Citizens have a right to be informed about what has happened, what is occurring, how authorities intend to respond to the crisis, and any potential consequences of those responses.

Considerations for Sharing Key Information

- Recognize who has power and influence in existing communities, networks, or local organizations. Work within these channels to disseminate information, as people are more likely to follow the example of leaders and trusted groups embedded in their community.
- Create an engagement plan that includes information and tips on communicating with different groups; contact details for relevant stakeholders, such as healthcare centers or emergency responders; and key perceptions, risks, and challenges that come with engaging specific communities and possible mitigating measures.
- Consider the information needs of different audiences. Communities are made up of diverse groups and each individual will understand the information in the context of their own experiences, so it is important to tailor messages to target groups for each communication. Information should also be shared in the most accessible format and language possible, adapted to literacy levels within each group.
- Consider the source of information and, when applicable, use local government as a resource. Share current guidance from your local health department if it is accurate and up-to-date.
- Ensure that there is space to listen to concerns, feedback, myths, and rumors about crises as well as communicating information about the crisis.
- Address stigma and discrimination by engaging with stigmatized groups in a given community and speaking out against any behaviors targeting these groups. Consider that volunteers may also be considered a 'stigmatized group' and viewed with suspicion by others in the community.

> **Maintaining Credibility**
>
> It's extremely important for civil society organizations to maintain their legitimacy and credibility during a crisis. Civil society organizations should think about four important components for maintaining credibility: openness, competence, fairness, and empathy.

Disinformation and Misinformation

Disinformation is inaccurate or false information created and disseminated with the intent to mislead and cause harm. For example, during a crisis, an elected official may knowingly spread false information about the origin of the crisis to shift blame away from him or herself. If citizens were to see the false claims of the same elected official on social media and share them without knowing they are false, they would be spreading disinformation. Misinformation is also inaccurate or false information, but it is not intended to cause harm. When misleading information is widely shared, it damages the social contract between citizens and the state, which relies on the flow of accurate information about government actions, so that citizens are accurately informed about the actions of the government and can hold the government accountable. Disinformation also negatively impacts citizens' trust in government institutions, leading to a breakdown in civil discourse, and increased polarization, all of which threaten the health of a democracy. Disinformation and false narratives about a crisis can spread quickly and, in some cases, are exacerbated by political leaders, which can aggravate existing tensions or cause citizens to ignore credible health and safety advice. Widespread disinformation also prohibits citizens' ability to openly share and compare information, which can be particularly damaging during a crisis. Civil society organizations, with their knowledge of the local context and media environment, can play an important role in educating the public, monitoring online content, and holding those who spread disinformation accountable.

What Should Government be Communicating?

To protect citizens and reduce the uncertainty that can fuel fear and unrest, governments have a responsibility to provide timely and accurate information. This includes providing the public with information about:

- What is the nature/origin of the crisis?
- Who has been affected or is at risk?
- Which regions of the country are being affected by the crisis?
- What are the risks and dangers to the public?
- When did the crisis take place or how long is it expected to last?
- What should people do in response?What actions are public officials taking?
- Where can you get more information?

Combating Disinformation and Misinformation During a Crisis:
- Organize education campaigns to improve citizens' media literacy and their capacity to recognize disinformation. These campaigns can also dispel common dis- and misinformation that has spread about the crisis. It may make sense to shift the focus of pre-existing campaigns to the crisis. For example, in Senegal, the youth movement Y'en a Marre (Fed Up) shifted from advocating for transparent and democratic governance to creating and disseminating songs that promote social distancing, in response to the government's failure to disseminate important information about the virus.
- Monitor the information space and fact-check information shared by the general public, government and media outlets. Identify sources of hate speech and integrate early warning and response mechanisms into monitoring systems. For example, a number of Polish NGOs are working to debunk common conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic through online media campaigns focused on sharing accurate information.

- Utilize relationships with local and national decision-makers to raise awareness about disinformation and pressure the government to take action against disinformation (if the government is not one of the actors spreading disinformation). This can involve reaching out to decision-makers that an organization has a pre-existing relationship with to discuss a coordinated approach to combatting disinformation.
- Collaborate with other civil society organizations or other actors working to combat disinformation. Collaboration can increase the reach of advocacy campaigns and the ability of civil society organizations to effectively counter disinformation. In Brazil, civil society organizations have joined together in a national coalition to combat President Bolsonaro's disinformation about the seriousness of the crisis and spread awareness in the poorest neighborhoods, using the hashtag #coronasperiferias (#coronaintheperipheries).
- Implement strong digital security measures within your organization. Civil society organizations are often a target for online threats because of their important role in educating the public, the inclusion of marginalized people, and building trust within a democracy. Strong digital security measures can protect against threats.

Digital Security Measures

For digital security to be most effective, it should be context-specific and involve a comprehensive set of policies, processes, and behaviors across an organization.

- **Establish a culture of digital security awareness:** Take cybersecurity seriously. Take responsibility for reducing risk, train your staff and volunteers, and set the example. Human error is the number one cause of breaches.
- **Address structural vulnerabilities:** An organization should have a holistic understanding of the digital threats it faces and what might be targeted by attackers. It can be helpful to have an external organization conduct an audit of the systems and communications platforms, networks, and devices used within the organization to identify vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities should then be addressed through an organization-wide, sustained strategy.
- **Use the cloud:** Consider using a cloud-based office suite like GSuite or Microsoft365 that will provide all your basic office functions and a safe place to store information.
- **Use two-factor authentication and strong passwords:** Require two-factor authentication in order to add a second layer of protection for all important accounts. Use a mobile app or physical key for your second factor, not text messaging. For passwords, a long string of random words without symbols (somethingreallylonglikethis) is more difficult to break than something short, with L0t$ 0f $ymB01$. Never repeat passwords.
- **Use encrypted messaging for sensitive conversations and materials:** Using an encrypted messaging tool for sensitive messages and documents prevents adversaries from seeing them if they hack into your email. Encryption scrambles the data, reducing the likelihood that someone can read your messages even if they intercept the data.
- **Plan and prepare:** Have a plan in case your security is compromised. Know who to call for technical help, understand your legal obligations, and be ready to communicate both internally and externally as rapidly and effectively as possible.

Prioritize Positive Messaging

To build a stronger sense of community and promote positive action, citizens need to hear messages of unity, collaboration and hope, such as:
- We will get through this together.
- Our own health depends on the health of the person next to us, and the person next to them. Ensuring others can access care is how we take care of ourselves.
- Our families and neighborhoods are stronger, safer, and healthier when we come together in moments of joy and celebration, and of illness and crisis.
- We pull through this by pulling together.
- This moment calls on us to go all-in for all of us.
- This is a time to come together across the differences used to divide us.
- Anyone who seeks to use the crisis to divide us, scapegoat minorities, immigrants, or those struggling to escape poverty, endangers us all.
- Now more than ever, the crisis has shown us that we are dependent on each other and no matter where we come from, what we look like, or how much money we have, we know it's time to pull together.
- By standing together and making sure each and every one of us has the resources and information we need, we can prevail.
- Protecting our most vulnerable makes us stronger.
- No matter what you look like, where you live, or how much money you have, when you're sick, getting care is the first priority.
- The choices we make now to help us weather the crisis can also set a better course for the future of our communities. Now is the time for us to unite across our differences and make policy choices that help every-day people in pursuit of a safe and thriving nation.

SECTION 3: Community-led Responses

> **Health & Wellness Tip:** Remember to celebrate small victories!

During a crisis, top-down approaches taken by governments or international actors can disproportionately neglect particular communities, multiplying the hardships those communities face. Exclusively top-down approaches can also exacerbate community vulnerability by not adequately understanding or responding to community needs based on historical inequities and a lack of localized knowledge. Local community-led responses to crises are often needed to ensure practical solutions and that the most vulnerable are supported. Local solutions and community-led approaches, like mutual aid, are decentralized and can be more responsive. Community-level action during a crisis can also create structures and a support system that last beyond a crisis

Examples of Community-Led Responses:

1- Community Canvassing: In late 2014, during the Ebola crisis, the Liberian government deployed an innovative, volunteer-based outreach program 2. The program, consisting of mediated outreach and door-to-door canvassing by community volunteers, spread valuable information and changed public practices during the epidemic. An independent study found that people knew more about Ebola, had a more factual

2 http://news.mit.edu/2020/how-door-to-door-canvassing-slowed-epidemic-ebola-0227

understanding of the outbreak, and were more willing to comply with government control measures. The informational campaign was also remarkably effective at increasing adherence to safety precautions, support for contentious control policies, and general trust in government.

Lessons Learned:
- Understanding that trust in the government was low, this initiative was conducted and structured in close coordination with civil society organizations, which, over the life of the program, resulted in greater buy-in from citizens.
- Community volunteers were equipped with bibs and badges to identify themselves as program volunteers. Volunteers also worked with community leaders to identify and avoid households with sick persons, used rubber boots and hand sanitizer, maintained a minimum distance while canvassing, and monitored their body temperature daily.
- The program utilized volunteers that were already well-known or lived in the area where they would be canvassing. This added a layer of social trust to the program. The volunteers also worked hard to alleviate any suspicion of them by visiting communities on multiple occasions and stressing their dedication and loyalty to the community.

2- Awareness-Raising Campaigns: In Kenya, CSO networks organized a campaign to raise awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic and safe hygiene practices to prevent the spread of the virus. The CSOs printed posters and distributed them to healthcare facilities and other key service facilities in different counties. In some counties, CSOs also used social media and radio to reach citizens. Finally, CSOs engaged with county governments to advocate for them to install water tanks in key locations, such as county markets, and to allocate funds for COVID-19 prevention, while continuing to fund prior water sanitation and hygiene projects.

3- Service Provision: Syria Relief and Development, a humanitarian organization based in Idlib, has shifted toward training medical staff and aid workers on infection prevention and control of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Working During the Time of COVID-19

- **Bolster your network and legitimacy:** a shift to delivering essential services or filling a gap in the government response can help grow your constituencies and social networks, particularly through new alliances such as with businesses or public service providers.
- **Stand in solidarity with those delivering essential services:** civil society organizations can use awareness-raising initiatives or information sharing to shine a light on the experiences of essential workers and on the ability of civil society and government agencies to meet the demands of citizens through the provision of essential services. Civil society organizations can also take a more direct role in supporting essential workers and services such as taking part in the distribution of relief packages.

- **Continue supporting social movements in innovative ways:** social movements and protests have been forced to abandon in-person gatherings and mobilization and many movements have shifted their focus to inequities brought to the forefront by the pandemic and addressing the immediate needs of the communities. Although protests are constrained, activists have identified creative forms of action, such as car caravans, pot banging, collective performance of protest songs from balconies, live-streamed actions, digital rallies, virtual marches, walkouts, boycotts, and rent-strikes.
- **Prioritize inclusion:** civil society leaders and activists should continue raising awareness of the plight of local communities, including utilizing traditional media and social media to highlight the unheard voices and those that are most vulnerable and the unheard voices.
- **Prioritize community-driven initiatives to counter dwindling resources and restricted funding.**
- **Think beyond emergency response and consider long-term strategies for political activism or reform:** while crisis response becomes an immediate priority, it also signals a coming together of civil society. Ideally, civil society organizations that have emerged or transformed to respond to the crisis can build longer-term momentum and better engage the state. CSOs should look forward and use this time as an opportunity to gain traction on a more ambitious reform agenda. For example, activists in the Gugulethu community action network in South Africa have emphasized that the problem of hunger, while worsened by COVID-19, has always existed. They are developing a long-term plan to enhance and maintain the new community kitchens that have been set up, and to significantly expand community gardens.

Mobilization During a Pandemic

The usual tactics that civil society organizations deploy are not available when crisis response restricts in-person mobilization and pivoting initiatives and campaigns that involve direct contact with citizens can be difficult. The characteristics of typical government responses (lockdown, tracking, tracing, modeling) have also pushed digital technologies to prominence for citizen mobilization. After taking stock of the current social and political realities, civil society organizations should reconsider their objective for mobilizing citizens and develop a new strategy that is responsive to citizen's needs, including their health and well-being, and fulfills the needs of the initiative or campaign. This strategy can include:

- Working with an existing network or community to co-design a mobilization response.
- Choosing messages that resonate with citizens and keeping your messages brief and to the point. Consider messages that center social justice and human rights such as access to healthcare.
- Considering virtual training programs or virtual events.
- Ensuring the voices of the most vulnerable populations are being heard. Include indigenous civil society organizations, religious institutions, and community-based organizations in your mobilization strategy as they play a crucial role in wide-reaching mobilization.

- Considering the available political space. Depending on the restrictions on freedom of assembly and association that are being imposed by governments, consider what local leaders and governments will allow regarding new strategies to mobilize?

Remote Community Engagement 3

- **Consider engaging communities through different technologies.** Online means, such as WhatsApp, allow for communication through both text and audio messages. Mobile networks can support hotlines, phone trees or simple phone calls. Where mobile networks are either not present or unstable, two-way radios can be an alternative. Ensure that the communities you're targeting have the means to use different technologies.
- **Advocacy can contribute to the continuity of community engagement.** Depending on the context, consider developing advocacy strategies that include issues such as digital rights or discrimination against civil society organizations. These could be key to guaranteeing people's access to information and preserving political space.

Monitoring Government

Previous crises have emphasized the need to coordinate monitoring efforts between private actors, public entities, donors, and civil society organizations. Top-down and bottom-up information sharing is an important aspect in managing how public funds are spent and that a government is acting within its authority.

CSOs can take several approaches to monitor government budget decisions, the use of emergency powers, the impact on marginalized communities and civil liberties, and the effectiveness of public policy implementation. These approaches all involve gathering information and comparing it to policy decisions, budget allocations or legal requirements.

Key Challenges when Government Must Move Quickly

Policy Design. The key challenge is to balance urgency and timeliness of the response in a volatile economic environment with achieving transparency in the identification and presentation of the response measures. Likewise, policies need to adequately address the needs of citizens.

Implementation. The key challenge is to have adequate control and tracking/traceability of budget and procurement interventions, to ensure that the agreed emergency measures are deployed effectively and in line with their intended purpose and – if needed – give the opportunity to revise and adapt the set of measures to changing circumstances.

Oversight. The key challenge is to put in place comprehensive and transparent reporting and public accountability procedures that oversight institutions (e.g. Parliament, the Supreme Audit Institution (SAI), independent fiscal councils (IFCs), civil society organizations, and the public at large are able to enforce while the support measures are being designed and implemented.

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3 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gd-covid-19-community-engagement-13-practical-tips-270420-en.pdf

Even when a government is responding to an emergency caused by a crisis, human rights still need to be protected. In some instances, the government might use the crisis as a pretext to limit rights and fundamental freedoms. Some steps the government might try to take include:

- Restricting access to information or obscuring the nature of the crisis;
- Preventing civil society access to decision making;
- Limiting free speech by controlling the flow of information or restricting media coverage;
- Banning peaceful assembly for indefinite periods of time;
- Authorizing security measures that invade privacy, such as surveillance; and
- Placing civilian responsibilities into the hands of security service.

Emergency Powers

In most countries, there is a specific way that emergency powers might be activated or drawn upon. These are usually provided for in the constitutional, executive and legislative arrangements, and may, for example, enable access to certain powers when an "emergency" is declared. These emergency powers tend to be implemented through urgent procedures. This can override or curtail normal procedures for passing laws (for example they can be done in a quicker time frame with less scrutiny). While these emergency procedures exist to allow Governments to deal with extraordinary events, they can only be used when a situation rises to the level of an emergency, and create requirements for a Government to show the emergency laws and policies are reasonable and justified to achieve their goals. An emergency should not relieve the Government of this burden to prove it meets these standards. Civil society organizations have a role in ensuring this takes place.

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid is an umbrella term for collaborative networks of support or community action networks that consist of sharing and exchanging resources and skills based on what different local groups have and what they need. Mutual aid is also a type of political participation where members are both engaged in filling gaps in the system and working to change that system. Mutual aid is also a preferred approach, in comparison to charity or other types of transactional aid, because it results in civil society organizations being in community with one another. This contributes to greater social cohesion and resilience over time, which are necessary for organizing and taking political action after a crisis and for mobilizing during the next crisis. Mutual aid is voluntary and serves as a shared benefit for the community. Local actors are able to use their existing skill sets and relationships to identify and respond to the needs of their local community. While mutual aid is not a new concept, these networks are particularly useful in times of crisis when many government-run service delivery systems are strained and may not be operating at their usual capacity, or reaching the most vulnerable. This creates or perpetuates an existing gap, particularly in traditionally underserved communities, which civil society organizations can fill. Many civil

society organizations already practice some form of mutual aid in contexts or communities where resources are scarce and service delivery is lacking. Ultimately, mutual aid is a strengths-based organizing effort where every member is able to contribute and all members get what they need.

Examples:

1. In Tunisia, more than 100,000 people joined a Facebook group bringing together volunteers to help fight the virus. The group now has 24 coordination centers across the country; its volunteers have raised money, collected medical supplies, disinfected public spaces, and worked with regional authorities to identify families with urgent financial needs.
2. In Libya, a university debate club set up a Facebook page and tip line to collect information on citizens' needs during the pandemic. The campaign then organized a network of volunteers to deliver goods and services to hundreds of Libyan citizens.

Key Features of Mutual Aid Projects and Networks

Mutual aid projects or networks often have key features that differ from traditional aid or the work of traditional CSO's. CSO's can either start a mutual aid network along with other CSO's that they usually collaborate with or join an existing mutual aid network. The crisis management team should consider how mutual aid compliments the organization's existing work and whether there are new opportunities to support mutual aid projects during the crisis.

- Mutual aid groups or networks figure out and connect to other groups who might be able to provide a service, such as **strategies to better understand each other's needs**, including food, housing, medical care, and disaster relief.
- Mutual aid networks often **organize against the system** causing the shortage in the first place. In many cases, this may have already been part of the organization's mandate.
- Typically, mutual-aid groups are **member-led, member-organized, and open to any willing participants**. They are often structured as non-hierarchical, non-bureaucratic groups with members controlling all resources -- they are also designed to share power and decision-making amongst the members.
- **Demonstrate transparency** in how they work and with any money they use or manage (many mutual aid networks or projects are volunteer-run).
- Have **open meetings and pathways** for new people to join and participate.
- **Opportunities for civic and political education** within the network to help those working in the project to expand their awareness of experiences that are not their own, to build solidarity, and to make the project supportive and welcoming to marginalized people.
- **Humility and willingness to accept feedback** about how to make the project more useful to the people it serves.
- **Opportunities for short and long-term commitments.** Often this work leads to increased collaboration after a crisis and can lead to national opportunities for collective action.

- **Connection to and solidarity with other mutual aid networks** and other transformative work.
- **Commitment to dignity and self-determination** of people in need or in a crisis.
- **Consensus-based decision-making** rather than majority rule.

Getting started & key points to consider:

- The development and trajectory of a mutual aid network is varied and depends on the needs of the community and existing channels for organizing. Most mutual aid initiatives start with a mapping, conducted by a CSO or an existing network, to identify members, determine their area of responsibility, which can range from a neighborhood to a city, and conduct a mapping of skills and resources. If an organization establishes a crisis management team, this work can be done by the crisis management team.
- Although the start of mutual aid networks can be fluid and organic, an extensive amount of coordination is required. At the outset, a system should be put in place for collecting and sharing information and the process of distributing goods and services. This can be done using social media, online spreadsheets, and messaging platforms. Groups have also used fliers and phone trees to spread awareness about pick-up and drop-off locations.
- As the mutual aid initiative grows, the coordinating members will have access to a considerable amount of data on civil society organizations, vulnerable communities and community-led initiatives. It is important to come to a consensus or majority vote about who controls the data and information? While some of this information may be useful for local governments, it can also be used to target communities or specific organizations.
- Consider the limits of technology and the unlikelihood of reaching citizens who are most in need of services through approaches that prioritize online organizing. Consider multi-prong approaches for organizing offline, including messaging platforms, radio, direct outreach, creating service centers at accessible locations and the development of an inclusive, communication plan. All network members and volunteers should also adhere to a clear, documented safety plan that ensures limited physical contact with others.
- Representation and inclusion are extremely important when establishing mutual aid initiatives. Two key challenges with initiatives led by external actors during a crisis is their lack of information about the priorities and needs of the community, which impacts their ability to respond quickly, and their inability to address systemic inequalities that place certain communities, like people with disabilities and women, further behind. During the initial mapping exercise, coordinating organizations can work with CSOs that are representative of diverse communities and have a history of working with and serving those communities.

Collective Action Challenge

Collective Action Challenge: A collective action problem may occur when everyone would be better off cooperating, but fail to do so because of conflicting interests between individuals that discourage joint action. Collective action problems exist

when people have a disincentive to take action. For example, a crisis may result in a shortage of a critical resource, such as access to clean water. Instead of working together to come up with a solution that benefits everyone, individuals may refuse to collaborate and hoard water, only looking out for their own benefit. Actions to help overcome collective action problems include explaining the mutual benefit, combining assets, giving credit to others and leading by example..

Even when it may be in the interest of a group of organizations to organise and coordinate their strategies, different stakeholders may want a "free-ride" and go about their business without making the effort required to protect the entire community's interests. This often occurs when there are conflicting views, needs, and priorities and can be exacerbated during a crisis. These efforts may also be negatively impacted by other stakeholders who have a conflicting agenda, such as local government. In order to overcome these challenges and make collective action work, there are several steps to consider.

1.The reason for acting collectively is clear and easily understood.
   a. What are the benefits of working together? What are the downsides of working separately?

2. What needs to be done is clearly communicated in order of priority.
a. What actions are being taken? What is the highest priority? How long will it take?

3. All parties understand why particular actions are being taken and trust that these are the right actions.
a. How do we integrate clear communication and dialogue? Are there practical examples from previous situations we can reference?

4. Organizations establish a strong sense of solidarity and togetherness.
a. How can we unite others and help them feel connected to the actions we are taking?

5. All parties should have a direct channel to express disagreement with decisions that are being made and call out individuals who attempt to disrupt collective decision-making.

6. Take action, measure the impact and clearly communicate the results.
a. Have we implemented as we discussed or have we deviated from the plan? What are the successes and what have been the challenges?

SECTION 4: Resources

Communication & Disinformation
1- An Open Global Rights Guide on Hope-Based Communications
2- Supporting Information Integrity and Civil Political Discourse
3- RESIST: Counter Disinformation Toolkit
4- People's Solidarity Brigades
5- Electronic Frontier Foundation's Surveillance Self-Defense Guide

Localization and Mutual Aid
6- Oxfam: Community Engagement During COVID-19
7- Oxfam: Community Engagement During COVID-19 Checklist
8- Big Door Brigade
9- Mutual Aid 101 Toolkit
10- Mutual Aid Network
11- Evaluating What Skills You Can Bring to Radical Organizing

Organizing and Campaigning
12- 2020 Digital Organizing Toolkit
13- Blueprints for Change: Distributed Organizing
14- COVID-19: Resources for Organizers during a Crisis
15- Toolkit: Advocacy in Restricted Spaces
16- Coronavirus organizing guide
17- Budget Monitoring

Health & Well-Being
18- Experts explain how to manage mental wellbeing during COVID-19

Gender & Inclusion
19- COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement
20- Intersectional Approaches to Vulnerability Reduction and Resilience-Building
21- Addressing safeguarding and SEAH in the COVID-19 response
22- COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

General Resources
23- COVID-19 Toolkit for Civil Society Partners
24- Coronavirus Tech Handbook

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Appendix

Appendix A: Safe Office Operations During COVID-19