



Localised response to COVID-19 global pandemic A4EP Position paper

The Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) is a network of organisations committed to strengthen the humanitarian architecture and locally led response. On 21st of March A4EP held a meeting with Directors of 14 local/ national organisations from 11 countries, some of whom are part of larger networks in country and representatives on the national, regional and international coordination mechanisms. This position paper contributes to the discussions and decision making on COVID-19 at international, regional, national and local level. It is aimed at the governments, their international development partners, aid donors, INGOs, the private sector and citizens.

Most countries of A4EP members have reported only a limited number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. We recognise, that this may be the result of lack of testing rather than reflect the real epidemiological situation. The measures taken so far, to control gatherings of people and restrict mobility, tend to be less drastic than in China, South Korea or Europe for example, but this may change rapidly. While the message on hand washing is already circulating more widely, maintaining physical distance is lagging. Some of our CSO members are already limited to working from home. Overall, our populations, and our own staff, are deeply concerned. Many people in our society are not digitally well connected, and do not receive the health messages already circulating. Partial and often uncoordinated messaging adds to rather than reduces the confusion, stress and anxiety. Also for us this is an unprecedented situation, for which we have no standard operating procedures – so far.

Local and national civil society organisations have a critical role to play in the response to this pandemic. This all the more so because drastically reduced international travel and supply lines make large scale international mobilization impossible. Many international actors are also dealing with their own operational disruptions and domestic COVID-19 crisis.

We know that this will be not only a public health, but also an economic and social crisis. It may also lead to a rise in ethnic, gender based and domestic violence, and may cause social unrest among daily wage earners and people working in informal sector faced with loss of jobs, income and food security. All local and national capacities need to be mobilized to mitigate these impacts as much as possible.

1. We urge for clear, coordinated and understandable communications and protection for health care personnel and humanitarian workers and uninterrupted supplies

The most visible and immediately concerning impact of COVID-19 is on public health. We can learn from other countries about where major stresses in the health response will occur: effective testing on a large scale; expanded intensive care capacities with specialized equipment (ventilators); protective equipment for frontline medical staff; support for stressed and exhausted medical staff, several of whom will be infected and some of whom may die. In-country manufacturers who can, should switch production temporarily to the production of much needed supplies such as hand sanitizers, soap, ventilators to support patients developing severe symptoms, protective clothes, gloves, masks and goggles etc.

A significant capacity lies in the private health care system, that is inaccessible for much of our populations. This is not the time for socio-economic discrimination: all health services' capacities, including that of the security forces, must be mobilized in a coherent effort to control the situation and limit the mortality rates. All means of mobile communications and internet services must be functioning and accessible at subsidised cost to all during this crisis.

A very vital component at this juncture is a psychosocial programme. A large number of the population is fearful in the face of such unprecedented crisis. That emotional unrest will contribute to other socio-economic problems. Tailored psychosocial activities ought to be launched through mainstream and social media.

Clear, coordinated and understandable communications to the public and all responders is vital. This should be in all languages and dialects spoken in our territory and disseminated not only via the Internet but also the relevant social media networks, and -for those without smart phones, computers or electricity- via phone calls and community workers. Younger people, the overwhelming majority of our populations, need to be told – in a messaging that resonates with them- that they can be spreading the virus but are also themselves at risk.

While restricting people's mobility, 'key personnel', necessary to maintain essential services, needs to be designated. This obviously includes pharmacies, bakeries, grocery stores, but also drivers of water trucks, garbage collectors, banking and insurance company staff, fuel station personnel and humanitarian and social workers.

We are a key capacity: Local and national civil society organisations, not only those with health expertise, should be considered as an important 'auxiliary' to the governmental efforts as our national Red Cross or Red Crescent societies and civil protection units. Our staff should be classified as 'key personnel' with the permission to move about and assist.

2. We urge support to maintain or restore our operational continuity through technical support and funding

To be able to play our part, we need to maintain or restore our operational continuity. We must be able to continue paying our staff, provide them with protective equipment, and – in line with the benefits enjoyed by staff of international organisations- with a robust health and life insurance. We need to maintain access to finance: ATMs must be kept supplied and accessible and/ or all employees need to be able to have a digitized account. As organisations, we need to be quickly set up with e-banking where this is not yet the case, and the issue of multiple signatures resolved within days.

When requested, aid donors should quickly agree to an extension of all ongoing projects/programmes with additional operational and overhead costs, given current circumstances. Especially now, no staff of a local/national organization should lose her or his job, due to suspension of projects or delay in the approval of new grants.

Volunteers will be coming forward in our societies once we have the capacity to safeguard, train, guide and accompany them, and cover their operational and living costs, they become part the much-needed surge in response capacity in the country.

Where there are country-based pooled funds, they should now be made easier and quicker for local and national agencies to access. CBPF exist however only in a minority of COVID-19 affected countries. Setting them up typically takes much time: where they don't exist other modalities to make funding rapidly available, need to be created quickly.

Start Network, with its capacity of rapid financing, leverage of anticipation funding and strategy of national/regional hubs is in a good position to widen its outreach by looking beyond its existing members to reach out to more locally rooted organisations, particularly in the countries where it has incubated national hub formation. This will offset the lack of CBPFs in a given country.

We are a key capacity: From our international partners, we need an urgent and clear message that delays and interruptions in ongoing projects (and their reporting requirements) are inevitable and accepted. We need to be able to switch the funding that may have been allocated for other purposes, to deal with COVID-19, until other funding becomes available. We need access to reliable information and solid and practical technical advice – which can be offered remotely.

We now need, more than ever, upfront and flexible funding – writing elaborate project proposals and waiting weeks for a decision is not -currently- an option. We need to remove bureaucratic hurdles, introduce quicker decision making. Financial reporting requirements need to be adapted so that we can maintain our cash flow. As the international crisis-response system is not able to be present in these many countries as it may wish to, this is the time to put Agenda for Humanity commitment 4A and Grand Bargain commitment 2 in practice: “reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities”, “in a spirit of partnership (...) where we all meet as equals”. New partnerships modalities might be needed. Instead of going through repeat due diligence processes that all of us have undergone multiple

times already, we ask donors to adhere to commitment 4 of the Grand Bargain, i.e. reduce duplication and management costs. Women led organisation can play an important role in the response and need specific support.

3. We urge for social welfare and protection for economically vulnerable

Reduced mobility within our countries, closure of all non-essential services, and interrupted import and export flows, will have a major economic impact. This will follow fast in the wake of, and may even temporarily outpace, the public health impact of COVID-19. Casual labourers, street vendors, small shop owners, small producers, private urban transport providers, small- and medium enterprises, in short, the hundreds of millions who are already economically more vulnerable, will be first and hardest hit. The widening gap between demand-supply due to hoarding and disrupted supply chain is likely to cause inflation in the prices of essential commodities. The result will be increased household debts and poverty.

Our governments do not have the billions of dollars to mitigate the economic impacts, in loans or grants, that the richer nations have. Our countries may need a moratorium on national debt interest repayments, debt rescheduling and debt cancellations. We may need very soft loans and grants for social welfare protection. The international financial institutions, and private sector lenders, have a significant responsibility to mitigate a possible global depression. Our governments on the other hand have the ability to provide policy guidance and legislate to mitigate this impact. We also ask the corporate sector to demonstrate more social responsibility at this critical time, by working for the common good.

From experience, we know that in times of economic and social stress, domestic violence, often directed at women and children, increases. Women, and women's rights organisations, have a particular role and contribution to make here, also providing support to men who have difficulty coping with much bigger challenges. Ensuring enabling conditions for women's rights organisations, as well as those focusing on the elderly and the disabled, must be an explicit objective for our governments and international partners.

We are a key capacity: Local and national civil society organisations have important roles to play here e.g. to identify which households to prioritise, in distributing cash grants, and helping small, indebted producers and workers renegotiate their debt with lenders, and where needed, provide legal assistance.

4. We urge our Governments, fellow citizens and fellow humans to treat everyone with dignity and respect during this crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic can become a social crisis: Faced with this unprecedented and rapid onset-threat, it is normal to feel fear and to think about our own physical and economic survival. We may be tempted to look for a scapegoat to blame, or to argue that the limited resources should be available to 'us' and not to 'them'. 'Them' may be the poor, slum dwellers, 'tribals', domestic workers, migrant workers, religious or ethnic minorities, IDPs, asylum-seekers, refugees and others who usually are already in a weaker economic, social and legal position. That would be a mistake: Like climate change impacts, this is not a national, class, majority-minority or citizen-foreigner crisis: This pandemic threatens all human beings, and our global economy. Political and business leaders, as we have seen, are not immune or able to effectively protect themselves. It is humanity's challenge, that we must confront together.

We are a key capacity: Local and national civil society organisations are at the forefront of the fight against discrimination, injustice, exploitation and exclusion in their own countries. They have a vital role to play in ensuring that the tone of public discourse and practice is and remains one of empathy and inclusion, not blame, discrimination and exclusion.

Localization is inevitable now, also due of the travel restriction. However, this localization should reflect the real spirit of partnership and complementarity instead of transferring the risk to local humanitarian workers.

COVID-19 with its public health, economic and social impacts is a major threat. It is also a major opportunity for experiencing our shared humanity, expanding our empathy and solidarity, and -finally- investing seriously in local and national capacities.

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