

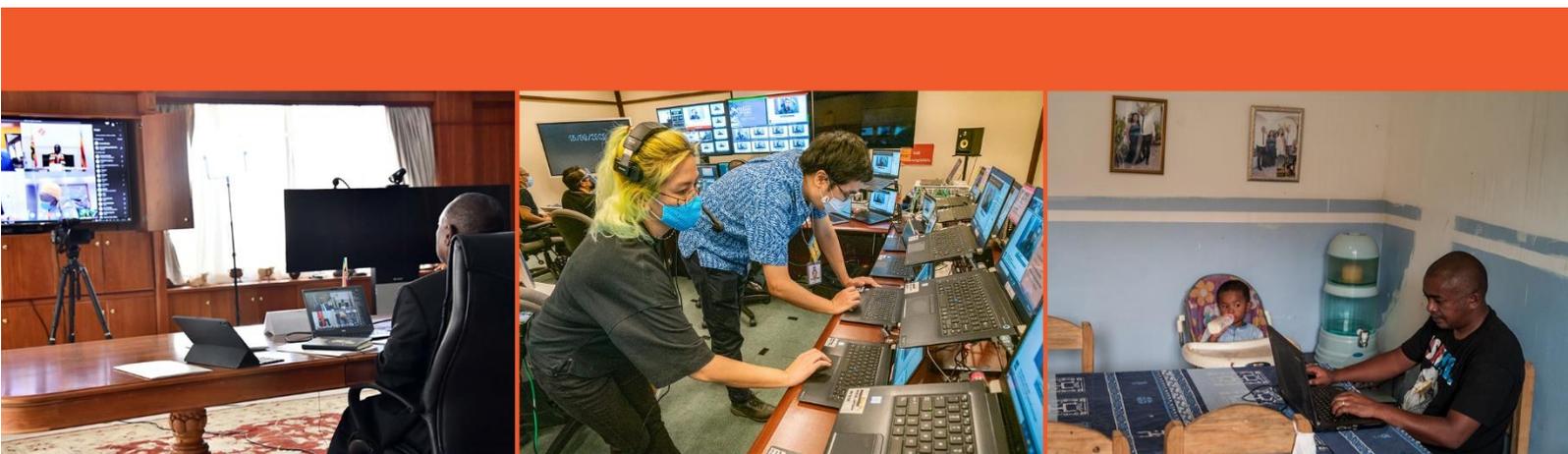


# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: HOW ARE HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION ACTORS DOING SO FAR? HOW COULD WE DO BETTER?

Synthesis of early lessons and emerging evidence  
on the initial COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts

*The COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition*

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition has conducted an early evidence synthesis of initial lessons from bilateral and multilateral COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The synthesis can support actors involved to learn and take actions to improve the ongoing effort, and future crisis responses. The intended audience is policy and decision makers in humanitarian and development organisations/Ministries, and partner countries, particularly COVID-19 task forces and co-ordinating bodies.*

*The lessons focus on success factors and challenges related to organisational arrangements and procedures followed in response to the pandemic, including crisis management and reprogramming strategies, communication methods (internal and external), human resources, mainstreaming of gender equality and women's empowerment, and innovation and risk management practices.*

*This review highlights some areas where the international community can be proud, including taking quick action to adjust or re-focus support and providing additional funding to respond to this unprecedented crisis. Several concerns also emerge, including unsustainable pressures on staff, limited attention to systems strengthening and insufficient reactivity to update approaches as new information became available*

*The report draws on evidence available from the first year of the pandemic March 2020 - February 2021 and includes some 200 evaluations, as well as other lesson-learning exercises such as results monitoring, action reviews, and internal reflection exercises deemed by the partner to be credible and relevant. Future syntheses will look at results and effectiveness, as more evidence becomes available.*

### Disclaimer

The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of the OECD member countries or the participants in the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition. Lessons presented in this brief are not prescriptive, and users are advised to carefully review these lessons along with lessons from comprehensive and systematic reviews in the context of country, sector, and thematic conditions. The authors do not guarantee the accuracy of the data and accept no responsibility for any consequence of their use.

This document, as well as any data and any map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

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*Cover Photos left to right: South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa chairing a virtual meeting (GovernmentZA, May 2020); Staff preparing for the virtual 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the ADB Board of Governors, 16 September 2020 (ADB, 2020); Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mozambique, April 2020 (World Bank / Henitsoa Rafalia).*

## Summary of findings

The conclusions presented here are based on the emerging evidence and lessons discussed in this synthesis report. These key messages represent areas where the available evidence converged. These are categorised as areas that seem to be going well (green); areas where there are warning signs or some concerns (yellow); and areas that seem to be off track and may require corrective action.

These initial conclusions are provided in the spirit of real-time learning to encourage reflection; further evidence and analysis are needed on all of these topics.

What is going well:

- Building on trusted partnerships and leveraging existing co-ordination mechanisms to quickly deploy resources at scale
- The speed of initial responses, both for new support specific to COVID-19 and for adjusting programming and allowing flexibility in ways of working and partner requirements
- Embrace of innovations and a higher relative risk appetite to leverage ideas in support of response efforts

What is cause for concern:

- Operational and implementation challenges, including displacement effects of COVID-19 that affect other priorities, and reduced capacities of implementing agencies, government counterparts and beneficiaries to fully participate and engage in project activities
- Gaps in collection, consistency and reliability of financial and results data and, (in some cases), reduced participation in monitoring, reporting, and evaluation
- Challenges in consistent, effective communication (internal and external)

What may require corrective action:

- Unsustainable pressures on staff
- Insufficient focus on systems strengthening, including health systems strengthening and preparations for a large-scale vaccine rollout
- Organisations insufficiently reactive and slow to revisit decisions or update strategies as the crisis continued, new information became available, and the scale and duration of the pandemic came into focus

This review is an early look at the initial performance of humanitarian and development actors responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It highlights some areas where the international community can be proud, including taking quick action to adjust or re-focus support and providing additional funding to respond to this unprecedented crisis.

Several concerns also emerge, which will require attention and potentially action to ensure effectiveness in the ongoing efforts on COVID-19 and to improve the response to future pandemics. These include unsustainable pressures on staff, limited attention to systems strengthening and insufficient reactivity to update approaches as new information became available.

The long-term implications of these lessons on the overall development and humanitarian response, and the outcomes of these efforts for people around the world, are only now emerging and require further investigation in future evaluations and syntheses.

# SYNTHESIS OF EARLY LESSONS AND EMERGING EVIDENCE ON THE INITIAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE AND RECOVERY EFFORTS

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts across the world, causing more than three million deaths. Even in countries where the direct health impacts are so far limited, the secondary effects on well-being are profound. Likewise, children, who have been relatively unaffected by the disease itself, have been profoundly affected by secondary effects, including rising food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty, increased threats of violence and abuse, and school closures. At least 20 million more people are facing acute food insecurity, and more than 150 million people are expected to be pushed into extreme poverty due to the pandemic (WFP, 2021; WB, 2020). Huge labour income losses of over 10% (equal to 5.5% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP)) have also been reported (ILO, 2020). The diverse impacts on well-being across the world are innumerable, and only beginning to be fully understood (Snapshot 1).

For more than one year, people, governments, United Nations (UN) organisations, multilateral institutions, civil society organisations (CSOs) and other partners have been working together to tackle the unique challenges of the protracted health crisis and its multiple knock-on effects on people and economies. Responding to the pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge — in both scale and depth of impact— to sustainable development efforts, including international development co-operation, humanitarian assistance, South-South, and other forms of international co-operation. This report, produced by the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition (see Annex), aims to support actors involved to learn and to take actions to improve both the ongoing effort and future crisis responses.

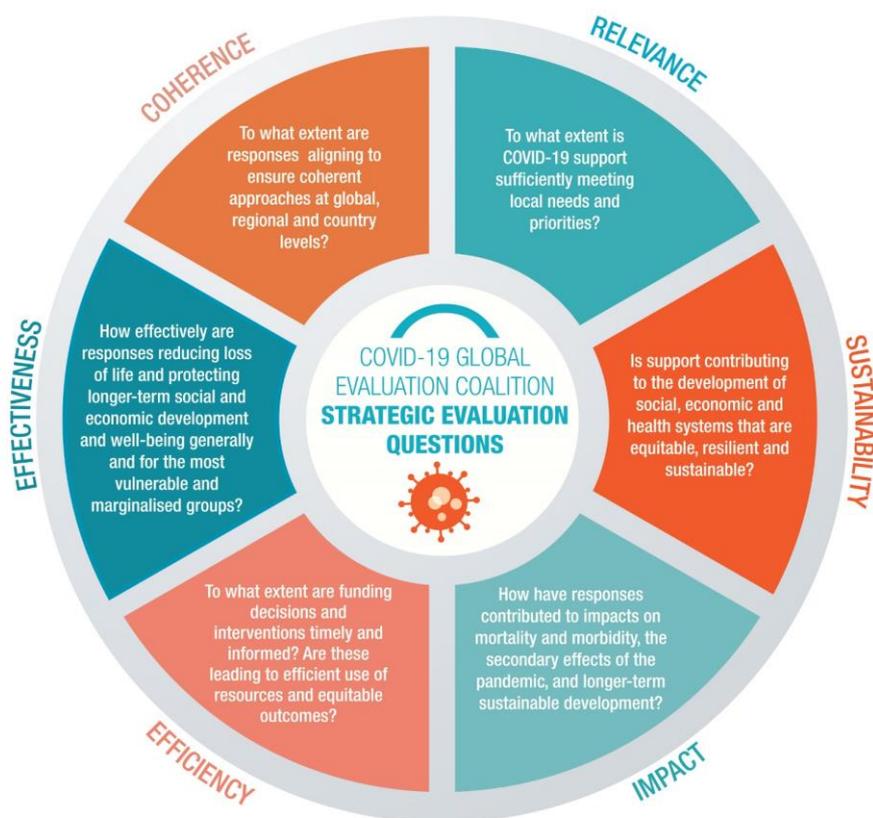
The COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition is an independent, collaborative project of evaluation units supported by the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate (the Secretariat) and the ALNAP Secretariat. Participants work together to produce, share, analyse and communicate evidence about the effectiveness and results of the non-clinical pandemic response efforts.

A shared evaluation framework (Figure 1) structures the Coalition's work, elaborating six strategic evaluation questions around which participants are generating evidence. The questions are meant to inform the design of high-quality evaluations that explore the delivery and results of different responses to the pandemic as well as the logic and assumptions underpinning these responses. They further aim to support the development of a more coherent, robust and comprehensive evidence base that can be synthesised — as done in this review — including within sectoral and thematic reviews.

### *Snapshot 1: The impact of COVID-19 on women domestic workers in Georgia*

UN Women conducted a study to examine the extent of protection provided for women domestic workers and employer experiences and attitudes during the pandemic. It found that the pandemic deeply impacts working conditions and the government's protective measures: Working hours increased without a hike in compensation, for instance, informally contracted workers experience job losses, and access to unemployment compensation or assistance is lacking. Personal relationships between domestic workers and their employers were also affected. Many of these workers reported undergoing psychological abuse and neglect. In other cases, their overly friendly relationship with employers sometimes got in the way of demanding fair pay and defending their rights. The pandemic has increased unpaid labour for domestic workers (e.g. care-giving responsibilities). (Source: UN Women, 2020)

Figure 1. *The strategic evaluation questions of the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition*



### *Purpose and audience of the early synthesis*

This paper synthesises emerging evidence and lessons from bilateral and multilateral COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The aim is to support critical reflection and to identify opportunities to improve both the ongoing efforts and future emergency preparedness. The evidence and insights summarised here can enable corrective action within individual institutions as well as facilitate collective learning and action. As the first in what is expected to be a series of syntheses related to COVID-19 (see Annex), the report also serves to document learning to support ongoing analysis.

The intended audience is those programme officers, policy makers and decision makers in humanitarian and development organisations, and governments, particularly COVID-19 task forces and similar groups, who are actively engaged in responding to the pandemic in low- and middle-income countries.

### *Scope of this report*

This early synthesis draws on available evidence from roughly the first year of the pandemic and includes evaluations as well as other lesson-learning exercises carried out by the institutions participating in the Coalition such as results monitoring, action reviews and internal reflection exercises. Early reviews and evaluations primarily focused on institutional processes, systems and operational issues. Most do not draw conclusions about results, and the lessons described here reflect that focus. Still, the report highlights initial findings on relevance, coherence, efficiency and, wherever possible, effectiveness. Subsequent synthesis reports will look at the effectiveness and results of these efforts and provide further lessons on the six strategic questions outlined in Figure 1.

The lessons and conclusions presented reflect the available evidence, which does not fully capture and is not representative of the totality of response and recovery efforts. It should be noted, therefore, that the present report is not a comprehensive review of the pandemic response to date.

## Approach to the synthesis and limitations

Evaluation teams identified five lessons learned areas from a review of two bilateral agencies' internal learning reviews (and discussion with other bilateral partners). The OECD Secretariat triangulated these with the research carried out for Chapter 4 of the *Development Co-operation Report 2020: Learning from Crises, Building Resilience*, which entailed review of the emerging literature and interviews with more than 20 senior decision makers in DAC member ministries and/or agencies. These inputs resulted in an initial list of lessons that the OECD Secretariat used for a structured review of the material provided by Coalition participants. Based on the initial list, the Secretariat invited Coalition participants to provide inputs in April and May 2021. Studies were included if Coalition partners deemed them to be both credible and relevant. About one-third of the material was based on internal reviews, which were confidential. The more robust independent evaluations included were all conducted under adverse conditions, including capacity constraints and limited access to data and key stakeholders.

This paper reflects the following material:

- internal reviews by four bilateral agencies (unpublished)
- real-time evaluation by Enabel (Belgium)
- interim findings of a process evaluation of three providers' responses in Bolivia (unpublished)
- the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) (United Kingdom) review of UK Aid spending and procurement
- a summary of the real-time evaluation by the Independent Evaluation Department of the Asian Development Bank (ADB)
- fast-track assessment of the European Union (EU) initial response to the COVID-19 crisis in partner countries and regions unpublished summary (final report expected in September 2021)
- a review of 150-plus evaluations by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP),
- 11 evaluations from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and initial findings from a first-phase synthesis review of the ILO's influence and results
- an internal stock-taking by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
- a synthesis of four evaluations from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Latin America and Caribbean region, a real-time assessment of the UNICEF Middle East and North Africa region, and a Malawi country evaluation
- the April 2021 Multi-partner Trust Fund (MPTF) report, *Early Lessons and Evaluability of the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery*
- the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (IPPR) report, *COVID-19: Make It the last Pandemic*
- a lesson report from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

This report is also informed by scoping work on COVID-19 funding by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation Evaluation Department, a study of German public opinion from the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), an impact evaluation of social protection from Colombia, an OECD study on innovation, an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of women in Georgia by UN Women, and a landscaping analysis on knowledge management by the United States Agency for International Development.

The evaluation units that provided material also then provided feedback and finally validated the draft synthesis, confirming that their own emerging evidence base supported the lessons presented here and that they could stand behind the conclusions of this report. This validation process increases the level of confidence in the validity of the lessons presented here.

As the crisis is ongoing — and, at the time of writing, is accelerating in many countries — the lessons here may look different over time. As a next step, Coalition participants are exploring whether the actions being taken and adjustments being made will ultimately prove to be “the right ones”. This review focused on common themes from the available evidence. More lessons can be identified for individual institutions or by asking different questions. Not all of the lessons and insights in the underlying material are included here, and the conclusions may therefore not entirely reflect the experiences of each contributing institution.



*Photo: UNHCR/Eduardo Weisberg Refugee chefs cook for vulnerable people on World Refugee Day (Argentina, 13 June 2020)*

### **Acknowledgements**

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Coalition participants who contributed expertise and insights to this review included: Winston Allen, David Domes, Jörg Faust, Kevin Andrews, Joanne Asquith, Konstantinos Berdos, Eric Bloom, Giulia Camilotti, Michael Francis Craft, Patrick Empey, Amélie Eulenburg, Mona Fetouh, Annalena Flury, Tom Hennessy, Christoph Jakob, Richard Jones, Isabelle Mercier, Susanna Morrison Metois, Olga Lucia Romero Londono, Camilo José Pecha Garzon, Riccardo Polastro, Veronique N. Salze-Lozac'h, Fabien Sordet, Carlos Tarazona, Romana Tedeschi, Guy Thijs, Miki Tsukamoto, Fredrik Ugglå, Mathew Varghese, Patricia Vidal Hurtado, Cecilia De Decker, Anette Wilhelmsen, Adrian Rivera and Maya Vijayaraghavan. OECD reviewers included Alison Pollard, Anita King, Mariana Gamarra, Rahul Malhotra, Benjamin Kumpf, Mags Gaynor, Elisabetta Gioffrè and Eleanor Carey. Graphic elements were designed by Stephanie Coic and TFK. Autumn Lynch and Ola Kasneci provided administrative support. Susan Sachs edited the document.

The Secretariat would also like to acknowledge the many evaluation teams whose work is presented here, and the people whose extraordinary efforts drove the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic covered in this review.

## Findings: Emerging lessons on the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts

An initial review identified five functional areas where the evidence base was sufficient to draw broadly applicable lessons: *partnerships and operations, management, communications, human resources, and opportunities for innovation*. These areas structure the report.

**Structure of this report:** Each of the five sections briefly introduces the context and then draws generalisable lessons based on the evaluation findings, highlighting strengths or weaknesses that affected performance and outcomes. Examples help to illustrate the lessons. While all lessons require further analysis, some key areas for further investigation are flagged at the end. “Snapshot” boxes discuss examples and explore the underlying evidence base in greater detail.

**All lessons come from the material listed above and are supported by multiple sources of evidence.** Where this documentary evidence was published, references have been cited. When evidence was gathered from internal learning reviews or unpublished work, we have not included specific references. This way of working helped us to balance the credibility and ethical integrity of this work.

### PARTNERSHIPS AND OPERATIONS

**Context:** *In an emergency, speed of response matters. Delivering official development and humanitarian assistance relies on a network of funding and implementing partners that bring a range of experiences and expertise to work at international to local level. Evaluations of past health crises and natural disaster emergencies have demonstrated the importance of finding the right combination of experts, funders and implementers for the problem at hand in order to provide timely relief and long-term support. Exploring new and creative partnerships is key to addressing the complex challenges of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As operations were scaled up, the COVID-19 pandemic context presented unique challenges to existing and new partnerships.*



#### **LESSON 1: Quick, non-bureaucratic disbursement of new funds as well as flexibility in reprogramming existing funds facilitated funding to address emergent needs in the early phases of the crisis.**

- Many governments made new funding available immediately, most often by using established channels and multilateral institutions. For example, Switzerland quickly provided a general support COVID-19 loan of up to USD 222 million to the ICRC. Colombia rapidly expanded support to families with a cash transfer programme complementing its existing national social protection programme (Snapshot 2). MPTF reports found that projects were approved and implemented in a timely manner during the most acute early phases of the development emergency. While many reports remarked on the speed of the initial response, further analysis is required to determine if these responses (most of which came in late March – May 2020) were “fast enough” or as fast as they could have been under the circumstances.
- Multilateral institutions moved quickly and deployed often unprecedented resources at scale (ADB, 2021; MPTF, 2021; Norad, 2020). Governments, and development and humanitarian agencies refocused and adjusted existing projects and established rapid and flexible financing instruments and technical assistance to help governments meet emergency health needs, including for supplies and equipment (ICAI, 2020).
- Budget support proved to be a rapid and efficient means to provide financing to governments. For example, in the Philippines, the ADB’s COVID-19 Pandemic Response Option operation was fully disbursed within two months of approval. As a result of its quick action, the ADB was able to commit USD 16.1 billion (97%) of the USD 16.6 billion that it approved in 2020, thus delivering urgent assistance in major sectors including social protection and health (ADB, 2021).
- The International Community COVID-19 Task Force in Mozambique is an example of rapid co-ordination under strong national leadership to identify priorities and reprogramme funds (OECD, 2020). Led by the prime minister, the task force co-ordinated efforts by key stakeholders in Maputo and all main funders of Mozambique’s health system to repurpose funds, making USD 13 million in international funds available to the Ministry of Health on the day it launched Mozambique’s initial COVID-19 plan.

- The handful of studies that looked at how the initial responses incorporated gender equality found there was a good level of effort overall to address the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women and girls in early funding and reprogramming efforts, including a concerted effort to address risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (UNICEF, 2021b; ADB, 2021; Enabel, 2020). This appears to be the case only for those organisations that already had strong strategies, approaches and systems in place.
- Much initial funding went to humanitarian aid – which in most donor systems is easier to deploy quickly and makes use of rapid response mechanisms such as the Central Emergency Relief Fund for urgent provision of life-saving support. While comprehensive official funding figures are not yet available, there are indications that the majority of funding at the outset focused on inputs and immediate material health needs (protective equipment, ventilators, etc.) and gave less consideration to support for building systems capacities or longer-term needs and responses. An Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation and other evaluations will investigate further the use of humanitarian assistance.
- There appears to have been less overall appetite for funding systems capacities and longer-term needs. As one report noted, drawing on analysis from nine case study countries, “systems strengthening, including health systems strengthening, continues to be the most challenging aspect of the response” (unpublished report). Specifically, several reports flag inadequate attention to systems required to prepare for COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

### *Snapshot 2: An impact evaluation on scaling up social protection in Colombia*

At the outset of the crisis, Colombia rapidly scaled support to vulnerable families through the value added tax (VAT) compensation programme, an unconditional cash transfer programme complementing its existing national social protection programme and benefitting one million households in poverty during the pandemic. Building on its existing partnerships with the research entity, Innovations for Poverty Action, Colombia evaluated the programme to identify impacts on recipients’ financial health, food access and security, political attitudes, and other outcomes, providing valuable evidence to support ongoing social protection policy work.

The evaluation found:

- Beneficiaries were 15.5% less likely to sell their assets during the national quarantine.
- More than 90% of beneficiary households used the funds for food, and food access improved by 6.1% though this did not translate to increased food security.
- Beneficiaries were more likely to invest in their children’s education. This effect was higher in urban areas.
- While beneficiaries were 7.4% more supportive of the government’s social protection response to the pandemic than people who were not part of the programme, the programme did not influence trust in the government or support for lockdown policies (which have widespread support).

Source: Londoño-Vélez and Querubin (2020).

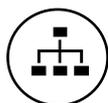


## *LESSON 2: Working through experienced, trusted partners and using existing co-ordination mechanisms enabled rapid mobilisation of resources and provided a more informed and coherent approach.*

- Close collaboration and partnerships with central and decentralised institutional partners were found to be useful in ensuring quick internal decision making, strengthening delivery chains, tackling last mile problems and rapidly implementing the responses during the pandemic. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Niger, the dual anchoring approach of the Belgian development agency, Enabel, and its strong relationships with national, regional and local partners ensured immediate action to access health equipment and resources (Enabel, 2020). Several reports also highlight that the crisis deepened existing partnerships — with governments, the World Health Organization (WHO), implementing agencies and others — as trust was strengthened by working together to solve pressing challenges (UNICEF 2021a; UNICEF 2021b; ILO 2021e).
- Partnerships were also critical in providing capacity to monitor the changing needs of local communities to guide the response and strengthen socio-economic resilience (Enabel, 2020).
- CSOs also reacted quickly to the crisis, and where strong donor partnerships were in place, there was effective and rapid reallocation of funding of ongoing grants to respond to the emergency, support post-pandemic recovery, and make sure vulnerable people and women were supported (OECD, 2020; unpublished reports).
- At regional and country level, partnership co-ordination mechanisms already in place proved invaluable to national governments and international partners to quickly assess the situation, develop comprehensive plans and avoid duplication of effort (Enabel, 2020; UNICEF 2021a; UNICEF 2021b; OECD, 2020). The leveraging of long-standing relationships and alignment of priorities among partners were essential in facilitating a targeted, fast response to the pandemic.
- Existing partnership co-ordination mechanisms helped in information co-ordination and joint action. For example, One Health is a cross-sectoral collaboration between the FAO, WHO and the World Organisation for Animal Health to expand emergency management and strengthen prevention and response to zoonotic diseases like COVID-19. In April 2020, the *UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-economic Response to COVID-19* established the overarching structure for planning and programming the UN development system response at country level through socio-economic response and recovery plans (SERPs). These plans provided a valuable platform for information sharing and co-ordination in many countries.

## MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE OF THE RESPONSE

**Context:** Organisations had to adjust their ways of working and governance structures to the unprecedented crisis. Although many had existing preparedness plans and standing operating procedures in case of an emergency, these were not sufficient for a crisis of global and simultaneous nature that affected business lines as well as internal operations. The pandemic caused significant implementation delays, thus increasing the likelihood of not meeting planned output targets in the difficult context of the pandemic. Many projects had to expand to reach new beneficiary groups to support people who had become newly vulnerable due to COVID-19.

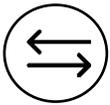


**LESSON 3:** Quickly establishing or activating a centralised crisis task force, with sufficient leadership and input across sectors and departments, was valuable for efficient and effective decision-making. Such mechanisms were particularly effective when paired with the rapid delegation of authority to those units with necessary expertise and contextual knowledge.

- Across various institutions, crisis task forces or similar entities that included senior management from across the organisation enabled joined-up thinking and consistent communication. Bilateral reviews highlight that crisis units with a clear mandate and representation from all relevant business units were able to deliver a co-ordinated and timely response to emerging needs and priorities. UN evaluations show that country offices that had crisis management mechanisms already in place (namely, those that were already managing humanitarian emergencies or epidemics) were better placed to mobilise the response quickly and effectively than those contexts that were setting up the mechanisms for COVID-19.
- Several organisations reported that the pandemic had the unexpected positive effect of greater knowledge sharing and inclusiveness in decision making, which the new virtual working environment facilitated. Introduction of a modular management model and the extensive use of digital tools helped organisations become “flatter” (less hierarchical) and more inclusive.
- In many countries, a blended management of centralised crisis units working cohesively with dynamic teams at local level supported the rapid implementation of changes. Working closely with decentralised units enabled local situation monitoring to inform central decisions. The high level of autonomy and decentralised decision making for programmes spurred ownership and commitment.
- These hubs also support incorporation of new information as the pandemic unfolds. Many reports flag both the critical importance of managing the interplay between information and action, and the need to revisit actions as new information became available. These findings mirror the IPPR assessment of what worked at country level: effective high-level co-ordinating bodies were critical to countries’ ability to adapt to changing information.



*Photo: South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa as the Chairperson of the African Union chairing a virtual meeting with Heads of State and Government of Countries neighbouring South Africa discussing responses to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic." (Photo by GovernmentZA, May 2020. Licensed with CC BY-ND 2.0)*



**LESSON 4:** *Institutions that were able quickly to adopt more flexible ways of working, or which had systems to support strategic adaptation already in place, were able to respond to emerging needs and balance new pandemic-related priorities without losing sight of their core mandates.*

- Reviews showed that projects that were in a position to adjust their activities to directly respond to the new context, while not delivering on their original objectives nonetheless made good use of their resources and were highly productive despite the disruption.
- Agile management and flexibilities in project design and programme operations were displayed in the face of this crisis. Minor modifications such as accelerated loan sanctioning, shorter procurement processes, scaled-up use of digital technology tools, and providing flexibility to implementing partners in terms of cost sharing, staffing and reporting were critical in facilitating programme delivery on the ground. For example, the UNDP Partnership for a Tolerant and Inclusive Bangladesh, a multi-year initiative to understand and prevent violent extremism, repurposed its social media tools to curb COVID-19 disinformation in Bangladesh (UNDP, 2021). Its flexible structure was the key enabling factor for the project to pivot in its focus.
- While adaptation of existing interventions helps ensure continuity of work, it was found that targeted interventions are required to reach vulnerable populations worst affected by pandemic.
- Clearly these adaptations need to be monitored, and several reviews indicated that strategies that were developed were not “refreshed” when more information was known about the impact of the pandemic and what works — and does not work — to mitigate its effects.
- It is too early to say whether and which of the new practices, increased flexibility and responsiveness will remain and become a “new normal”. Some organisations are reporting that the positive experiences of the past year – during which such working modalities proved to be more efficient and effective – make it more likely that such good practices will finally be incorporated into humanitarian and development co-operation systems.



**LESSON 5:** *Business continuity and crisis planning work better as they become part of normal operations and management systems, ensuring core services are maintained while new, targeted services are mobilised to respond to crisis.*

- Given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 crisis, most studies found a remarkable level of rapid adaptation that ensured work continued and (often) scaled up as the pandemic struck. Institutions with existing frameworks and systems that were flexible, responsive and allowed greater capacity to increase capacity as needed, performed better. Still, many found that the business continuity planning and risk management frameworks in place were insufficient (particularly in the medium term). Most did not anticipate a crisis of this scale. It worked well when these structures were complemented by regular and embedded business continuity activity and shared responsibilities across all business units, and worked better as these tools were incorporated into regular planning, budgeting and reviews. It was critical for organisations to focus early on risk management and set up crisis management governance structures with clear roles and responsibilities.
- Different phases of the pandemic require different management approaches, attention and instruments. Organisations that reported they effectively adopted an iterative approach, changing what they were doing in response to new information and the emerging pandemic effects, found they were able to do so by adopting a “no regrets” strategy alongside messaging from leadership to prioritise “speed over perfection” during the crisis. This enabled innovation (see Lesson 9).
- Numerous reviews pointed to the need for governments and businesses to make building resilience integral to the way they “do business”. As a 2020 evaluation of the ILO noted, “It will never be possible for governments or businesses to be resilient to every possible disaster ... but COVID-19 has demonstrated that too many countries and too many businesses have little understanding of what is necessary to stand firm in the face of disaster” (ILO, 2020e).

- Active monitoring assessments are useful in timely decision-making. Several organisations reported that learning from business impact assessments had wide-reaching benefits in initiating and establishing processes around remote working, resource mobilisation and staffing, etc. Remote, real-time assessments based on participatory approaches, phone and internet-based surveys, secondary data analysis, and dedicated local support were identified as practical methodologies to adapt COVID-19 programming and field operations (ILO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020; OECD, 2020; Enabel, 2021).
- Providing spaces for internal reflections and documenting learnings from stakeholders involved in the response strategy strengthen the current response and can support future preparedness. Many countries have conducted internal lessons learned reviews to identify, distil and reflect on their response to the pandemic. For example, Enabel has established “communities of practice” to facilitate active communication between experts at headquarters in Brussels and the field staff that collect initiatives and experiences from the field, post relevant information from reference organisations, and share good practice and scientific evidence (Enabel, 2020:17). This helped motivate staff in co-creating and scaling up new solutions and allowed for better synergies between headquarters and the field.



*Photo: The 2021 ILO Green Week was fully online and open to all, offering an overview of monitoring and modelling work for greening the economic recovery of COVID-19 (ILO, 2021).*

## COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

**Context:** As COVID-19 was an unprecedented crisis, understanding the evolving effects of the pandemic and response measures was challenging. Many actors reported that they lacked necessary information for coordinating with others. Various institutions scrambled to gather and analyse data about the evolving situation, the responses and priorities for action. The importance of clear, transparent communication (internal and external) about the pandemic and the response efforts became evident over the year. Individuals and institutions had to manage waves of new information on the COVID-19 pandemic — including misinformation and even disinformation.



**LESSON 6:** Consistent and well-targeted public messaging was useful to track the pandemic and its effects, combat the spread of misinformation, raise awareness, and support the transparency and credibility of response efforts.

- A clear and transparent public communications strategy about the humanitarian and development co-operation response to COVID-19 created awareness and engagement and helped to build trust among the public in both donor and partner countries (Snapshot 3).
- Many partners reported that communications efforts that aimed to provide equal access to information at all levels (for instance, on gender-based violence and safety measures) were useful. Reports also showed the value of using a range of communications channels (websites, social media, infographics, webinars, etc.) to ensure broad coverage and uniform messaging to all. However, information overload and the multiplicity of, and sometimes-even contradictory, messages, especially at the onset of the pandemic, may have affected the uptake and influence of the communications efforts.
- Various strategies for tackling the spread of misinformation were tested. A key lesson that emerged was the need to take into account the varying contexts across countries where the pandemic had different impacts and was perceived differently. Public trust in government was identified as a particularly important factor affecting opinions and behaviour related to the pandemic (DEval, 2020; UNICEF, 2021c).
- Several reports indicated that public messaging worked better when it emphasised that the response efforts were being guided by scientific evidence and informed by lessons learned.

### *Snapshot 3: German public opinion supports global support to cope with COVID-19 impacts*

Deval, which collected opinion-based data from the German public until mid-2020, found that:

- The public is in favour of greater global solidarity to cope with the coronavirus pandemic, especially food supply measures and support for health care systems.
- There was less support for debt relief, more general economic support and aid for refugees.
- The indicators for “own health concerns” correlated slightly positively with support for development co-operation — i.e. the greater the concern for the health of family and friends or one’s own health, the greater the approval of increased development and humanitarian spending.
- Trust in Germany’s own government correlates positively with support for increased global solidarity, creating potential risks if trust declines. This finding is consistent with previous studies that found trust in one’s own government positively affects the support for development co-operation.

Source: DEval, 2020



**LESSON 7: Consistent internal information sharing about decisions and operational issues across departments was identified as useful for avoiding confusion, and sustaining a coherent response.**

- Numerous contributors emphasised that establishing timely communications channels with all stakeholders, including all regional missions, for crisis reporting and response updates was important to overcome the sense of uncertainty. DAC members reported using intranet websites, weekly newsletters, regular meetings, etc. to share updated analysis and research and disseminate timely information across all levels (Enabel 2020; OECD 2020; unpublished reviews). ILO's review found strengthened internal collaboration and improved communication in several programmes (forthcoming).
- Also identified were the challenges posed by rapidly evolving and large volumes of information — termed an “infodemic” — combined with limited absorption capacity. Several reviews reported that people's capacity to take action on new instructions and frequently updated guidelines was overestimated. While communication from headquarters to the field on adaptation of operational modalities and on organisational issues was effective overall, in some cases, it lacked clarity (for instance, on public procurement procedures) or was insufficient to guide decision making in country offices (Enabel, 2020).
- Several reviews described how inadequate transparency and more hierarchical communication during the crisis resulted in a less coherent responses across the institution.
- Organisations reported that in a context with high uncertainty and limited information on the new virus, drawing on learning from previous crisis response efforts and interventions was useful for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and delivering assistance more effectively. Evaluation units often played a key role in leveraging past lessons. In one early example, in February 2020, the Independent Evaluation Department of the ADB published 13 lessons from evaluation for responding to the novel coronavirus crisis (ADB, 2020). Among many other examples: The ALNAP produced a report with lessons from responses to Ebola outbreaks; the *Reflections* series by the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office drew on evaluations of the organisation's work in response to crises to provide key lessons that were taken into consideration in COVID-19 programme design; and the Independent Development Evaluation at the African Development Bank pulled together lessons from budget support and created a knowledge platform to share insights relevant for the COVID-19 response. In addition, the ILO's analytical experience on decent work during the 2007 global financial crisis proved useful in supporting partners as they began navigating the fallout of the pandemic.



Photo: 16 September 2020. Staff preparing for the virtual 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the ADB Board of Governors (ADB, 2020)

## HUMAN RESOURCES AND DUTY OF CARE

**Context:** Unlike in more geographically concentrated crises of the past, organisations responsible for responding to the COVID-19 crisis have themselves been affected. The global nature of the pandemic meant that few places were unaffected (from which additional capacity could be drawn). Many staff were “at home trying to work”, with care and other crisis-related responsibilities. The pandemic and lockdowns affected people in different ways, with equity implications.



**LESSON 8: Developing organisational policies and ways of working that prioritise the mental health and well-being of employees is essential to sustain a protracted response effort.**

- Many institutions rapidly developed policies and adapted ways of working to enable business continuity, support well-being and provide COVID-19 support to employees (e.g. access to testing and medical care, implementation of sanitary and health protocols in workspaces, and information sharing mechanisms).
- Several reviews found that continued delivery was possible only through the high level of dedication and resilience of staff, but that such levels of effort were not sustainable over time and mental health was not sufficiently addressed. In many cases, new, rapidly developed COVID-19 work came *on top of* existing workloads for many during lockdowns and this compounded stressors. The expectations that staff perform in a “business as usual” mode, demands such as 24/7 availability and long hours on work-related calls, and the addition burden of balancing care-giving responsibilities (as caring burdens increased and normal care-giving arrangements were disrupted) created challenges affecting the response, adding to staff pressure. The repatriation of staff and families affected those staff and partners left in country.
- Some strategies that were reported to work well included expedited staff appointments and local hiring and capacity building to offload work from staff; providing psycho-social and/or counselling support; providing flexible working schedules, additional leave, no-work days, reduced hours, or a phased return to work; and promoting the spirit of collegiality across departments (e.g. sharing workloads).
- Agencies that had surge capacity plans in place gave mixed reports on how these worked in practice. Local hiring was reported to be more effective than mobilising or transferring international staff, in terms of rapidly bringing more hands on deck.

## RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATIONS

**Context:** A crisis can be the impetus to reimagine the status quo, including how development co-operation providers and partners work and collaborate. Pursuing innovation includes working across sectors and hierarchies, adapting proven long-term programming, and scaling up tested solutions to accelerate the pace of change. The immense scale of the crisis has forced organisations to adapt quickly, including through the rapid uptake of digital platforms. Although the struggles faced by organisations cannot be underestimated, the crisis has also sparked creative problem solving.



**LESSON 9: The crisis made organisations more open to innovation, including calculated risk taking that they may not have been tolerated in normal circumstances, enabling timely action.**

- There has been a surge in the usage of information and communications technologies (ICT) and digital tools. All agencies reported that the pandemic accelerated ongoing reforms to promote greater use of ICT and digital tools, internally as well as by government and CSO partners, and created momentum to deploy large-scale remote data collection mechanisms for better needs assessments and monitoring of their work. Reports also highlighted the acceleration of the use of digital tools by governments to ensure continuity in government operations and the provision of services. At the same time, reports acknowledged that not all support can be effectively delivered remotely, that some institutions and communities are not well placed to use virtual technology, and that some vulnerable people may be excluded as a result (ILO, 2021).

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- Local people's innovations have been of vital importance in the COVID-19 pandemic. Some innovations enabled wholly new solutions and approaches to the impacts of the pandemic, such as digitally enabled case tracking and tracing in the Kenyan public transport system. Other innovations provided enhanced safety and protection and addressed bottlenecks, for instance the collaboration of makers' collectives and the Indian government to produce personal protective equipment (OECD, 2021).
  - In another example of pandemic-related innovation, volunteers in Jordan collected prescriptions for vulnerable, homebound people. While such a novel response might have been complicated to organise in another context, the urgency of the need and reassurance of the leadership enabled the relevant staff and authorities to act quickly and decisively (UNICEF, 2021c).
  - At the same time, the emergency context limited the extent of actual innovations because it often did not leave time for experimentation with new ideas. During the pandemic emergency, adapting proven innovations — tried during the Ebola crisis, for example — to the new contexts was found to be more useful than testing entirely novel concepts and solutions (Enabel, 2020).
  - Several reports highlighted that the pandemic aggravated the risk environment, requiring more attention and analytical work to understand risks and the evolving context (ADB 2021). Most institutions, when faced with the pandemic crisis, found there was little time for assessing risk and providing the due diligence necessary to engage responsibly with new partners while also ensuring aid did not exacerbate the crisis or other inequalities. However, there were cases where a relaxing of operational requirements and increased risk tolerance allowed for funds to be deployed to new (local) partners, including local governments that were well placed to increase the reach and effectiveness of the response.

## Emerging issues and areas for further investigation

Several issues emerge from that merit further attention and may affect future learning, management and evaluations.

- Coherence and co-ordination of efforts are emerging as key areas of challenge that will require further investigation. Early reports flag questions regarding comparative advantage of individual actors. Many reviews also point to difficulties gaining a clear picture of what others are doing, in order to prioritise and co-ordinate inputs.
- Tracking of COVID-19 spending varies both within and across governments and institutions. Several reviews point to challenges in financial reporting, including a lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities, and varied use of “COVID” tags. Nearly every report highlighted constraints to data collection for monitoring funding, activities and results. The effects of reduced monitoring and fewer on-site visits, and the increased use of digitised reporting for programme delivery, monitoring, audits, oversight and evaluation, are not yet fully understood. Documentation of decisions taken and the reasoning behind them, including intended objectives and the evidence informing the decisions, may be insufficient.
- Evaluations are only beginning to assess the contributions of national governments and bilateral and multilateral agencies to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on people’s health, food security, well-being and livelihoods. But it is already clear from the emerging findings synthesised here, including from Enabel, the EU, the Bolivia country evaluation, ADB, UNICEF and ILO evaluations and reviews from bilateral providers, that humanitarian and development co-operation have made significant impacts in helping governments and people to respond to the crisis. It is also evident that there are real challenges and trade-offs to be managed between delivering on programme objectives and strategic priorities defined before the pandemic, adapting these to the pandemic, and adjusting them over time as new needs and priorities emerge (Snapshot 4 gives an example). Future Coalition syntheses will explore these questions.

### *Snapshot 4: Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the impacts and sustainability of ILO interventions*

The ILO Evaluation Department’s high-level independent evaluation of the ILO’s Decent Work Programme in the Andean countries of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela examined implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, took place in 2020, capturing insights on how the pandemic was affecting the programme. It found the pandemic is impacting not only health and social protection systems but also affected economic forecasting, international prices for natural resources, and labour markets, as evidenced by increased unemployment and informality; has reduced governments’ fiscal space; and is causing a greater deterioration in social dialogue. In general, the pandemic has forced governments to put high-priority issues on the negotiating table.

As a result, in the medium term, some of the ILO’s core labour standards have come to be considered less urgent. The ILO’s experience and knowledge on current employment trends in the context of the pandemic are fundamental for guiding the future of employment policy and supporting the principles of decent work. The ILO could play an important role in mitigating the destruction of employment. There is an opportunity for the ILO to sit down with its constituents, review its programming, and adjust its menu of interventions to suit the needs of the present moment and the needs of the constituents. This would put it in a better position and reorient its relationships with national and international donors and social partners.

Source: ILO, 2020e

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## Annex. About the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition

The COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition (the Coalition) is a network of the independent evaluation units of countries, UN organisations, international NGOs and multilateral institutions that provides credible evidence to inform international co-operation responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, thus helping to ensure that lessons are learned and that the global development community delivers on its promises. The Coalition has 52 participants (as of June 2021) and is led by a core group made up of the evaluation units of: the ADB, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, UNDP, UNICEF, the United States, and the WHO (observer). The OECD Development Co-operation Directorate (EvalNet Secretariat) and the ALNAP Secretariat provide research, communication and facilitation support to the Coalition.

The Coalition has taken a phased and modular approach to support individual and collaborative evaluations and syntheses and to inform real-time COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The Coalition is supporting several different types of evaluative work, both individual and collective. The first phase of work focused on drawing evidence from past evaluations to inform the COVID-19 response and recovery; the Coalition published five Lessons from Evaluation briefs. In early 2021, the work began to shift into a new phase focused on evaluating the current response and recovery efforts and supporting real-time learning.

Coalition participants are planning more than 150 COVID-19-specific evaluations. Future work in 2021 and beyond will evaluate the overall response, consolidate learning and inform future pandemic responses. This will include additional syntheses that capture lessons on key themes.



This paper has been produced by the evaluators of the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition. Comments on this paper are welcome and may be sent to the DAC EvalNet Secretariat: [COVID19evaluation@oecd.org](mailto:COVID19evaluation@oecd.org), Development Co-operation Directorate, OECD, 2 rue André Pascal, 75775 Paris Cedex 16, France.

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