

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

The COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition has conducted an early evidence synthesis to provide an overview 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 similar.

Introduction to the review

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts across the world, including more than 3 million deaths. Even in countries where the direct health impacts are so far limited, the secondary socio-economic effects on well-being are immense. The pandemic has had profound implications for development co-operation and humanitarian assistance, including south-south and other forms of international co-operation. For more than one year, people, governments, United Nations organisations, multilateral institutions, civil society organisations, 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.

Contributing to this effort, the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition was formed to support real time action learning. The Coalition is a collaborative project of independent evaluation units of countries, United Nations organisations, international NGOs, and multilateral institutions, supported by the OECD Secretariat.

In April – May 2021, the Coalition reviewed over 200 evaluations and reviews conducted during the first year and has identified nine key lessons, based on this early evidence. The lessons primarily focused on success factors and challenges related to organisational arrangements and procedures followed in response to the pandemic, including their 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.


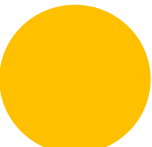

The report draws on evidence available from the first year of the pandemic March 2020 - February 2021 and includes evaluations, as well as other lesson-learning exercises such as results monitoring, action reviews, and internal reflection exercises deemed by the partner to be credible and relevant. Future syntheses will look more at results and effectiveness, as more evidence becomes available. Over 160 COVID-related evaluations – both by individual coalition participants and joint evaluations – are planned. The Coalition will also identify lessons about what is working for particular contexts and for particular populations.



Key lessons from the review:

1. **Quick, un-bureaucratic disbursement of new funds and flexibility in reprogramming**, facilitated funding to address emergent needs in the early phases of the crisis.
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.
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 the most expertise and contextual knowledge necessary to take informed decisions.
4. Institutions that were able to quickly **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.
5. **Business continuity and crisis planning** work better as they become part of normal operations and are integrated into management systems (such as quarterly reviews), ensuring core services are maintained while new, targeted services are mobilised to respond to crisis.
6. Consistent and well-targeted **public messaging in partner countries** 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.
7. Consistent **internal information sharing about decisions and operational issues** across departments was identified as useful in avoiding confusion, and sustaining a coherent response.
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.
9. The crisis made organisations more **open to innovation, including calculated risk taking** they may not have tolerated in normal circumstances, enabling timely action.

The following **key messages** emerge from the evidence:

	<p>Areas that are going well:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
	<p>Areas of emerging concern (potentially problematic):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational and implementation challenges, including displacement effects of COVID-19 that affect other priorities, and reduced abilities of implementing agencies, government counterparts and beneficiaries to fully participate and engage in activities • Gaps in collection, consistency and reliability of financial and results data and, reduced participation in monitoring, reporting, and evaluation • Challenges in consistent, effective communication (internal and external)
	<p>Areas that may require corrective action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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

Photos: South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa chairing a virtual meeting (GovernmentZA, May 2020); Staff preparing for the virtual 53rd Annual Meeting of the ADB Board of Governors, (ADB, 2020); Mozambique working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank / Henitsoa Rafalia, April 2020).

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.