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RESILIENCE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES: LESSONS FROM COVID-19

When a crisis hits, community organisations can draw upon six social dimensions of resilience. Here we highlight learnings from how communities in the Global South responded to the COVID-19 pandemic

Executive Summary

We provide a first assessment on how 15 local communities in the Global South are building resilience in the face of COVID-19. We found that communities used many different coping strategies, spanning multiple social domains of resilience, when responding to a crisis. Social domains of resilience not only imply communities having access to capital, but also that people having the flexibility to change strategies, the willingness or agency to influence change, the capacity to organize themselves collectively in order to mobilize responses, and having reservoirs of trust and social cohesion. Importantly, community-based organizations, such as womens' and youth groups and grassroots movements, were key resilience-building features.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most severe global shocks of modern time. The direct health impacts and loss of human lives are devastating, and the unprecedented disruptions to societies and economies will be felt globally for years to come.

Similar to climate change, COVID-19 is having disproportionate impacts on vulnerable and marginalized communities in the Global South (Valensisi 2020). Most of these communities are living in poverty, often at the base of global supply chains, and more vulnerable to shocks and decisions made elsewhere. Dense living conditions, and poor access to water, sanitation, education and health facilities make social distancing and hygiene measures impractical and less effective. Lockdown regulations have a disproportionate impact on the informal sector and migrant workers, dependent on daily wages and with limited social safety nets. Slowdowns and shutdowns in the production and tourism sectors are also affecting the poorest. Dependence on fresh markets, disruption of agricultural production and urban-rural supply chains, and limited financial means to bulk buy and store foods also exacerbates food insecurity of the most vulnerable. Government assistance is often delayed or limited.

As a response, we are seeing signs of local communities self-organizing and mobilizing sources of resilience in the face of COVID-19. Resilience is the capacity to live and develop with change, and absorb shocks and stresses (Folke et al. 2016). Research has identified six key social domains of resilience (Cinner and Barnes 2019), and these are:

(1) the **assets** (natural, physical, human, financial) that people can draw upon,

(2) the **flexibility** to change strategies,

(3) the ability for **social organization** to enable (or inhibit) cooperation, collective action, and knowledge sharing,

(4) **learning** to recognize and respond to change,

(5) **behavioural and cognitive factors** (e.g., risk attitudes, personal experience, social norms) that enable or constrain resilience, and

(6) the **agency** to determine whether to change or not.

Despite substantial interest and ongoing investment by local and national governments, non-governmental organizations and development agencies to bolster the resilience of local communities, it is unclear which domains should be prioritized in policies and programmes. A key reason is that most previous studies have focused on a single social domain of resilience, rather than simultaneously examining all six domains.

This brief builds on the [Voices from the Frontline](#) (VFL) initiative, which supports communities across the globe to share their stories on the challenges of and the responses to the pandemic. We provide a first assessment on how many of these communities are building resilience in the face of COVID-19, with a specific focus on the domains of social resilience that they are drawing on. The findings in this brief are targeted at a broad number of actors (e.g., investors, businesses, development agencies, philanthropists, NGOs) working in vulnerable regions, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) with the aim to shine a light on how programmes and policies can help bolster the social resilience of these communities organizations in the future.

Research overview and results

This study analysed a series of semi-structured interviews carried out with 35 community leaders and representatives from 15 communities around the world. The interview framework was collectively produced by the International Center for Climate Change and Adaptation (ICCCAD), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the Climate Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), Huairou Commission and the Global Resilience Partnership (GRP). The framework was designed to create an evidence base of community-led responses to COVID-19. The research team coded the interview responses based on the six key social domains of resilience – assets, flexibility, social organization, learning, behavioural and cognitive factor, and agency. Each was broken down into different indicators. A simple qualitative content analysis was used to identify key patterns emerging from the responses.

Results show that half of the communities drew on all social domains of resilience when responding to the COVID-19 crisis, with all communities mobilizing at least four domains.

Communities used a broad diversity of natural, physical, human, and financial **assets** when responding to COVID-19. Physical assets, such as information and communication technologies (ICTs) provided quick access to news, helped community leaders raise awareness about COVID-19 and facilitated connections with vulnerable community members in need of food materials and other response actions. Financial assets mainly involved individual and communal cash savings, in conjunction with remittances and donations from different sources. The use of existing knowledge, skills and experiences to make materials, for example, detergents and masks, showcases how communities mobilized human assets. Some community members used their communication and other skills to raise awareness of COVID-19 in communities. Natural assets included land suitable for agriculture that was vital to produce food locally.
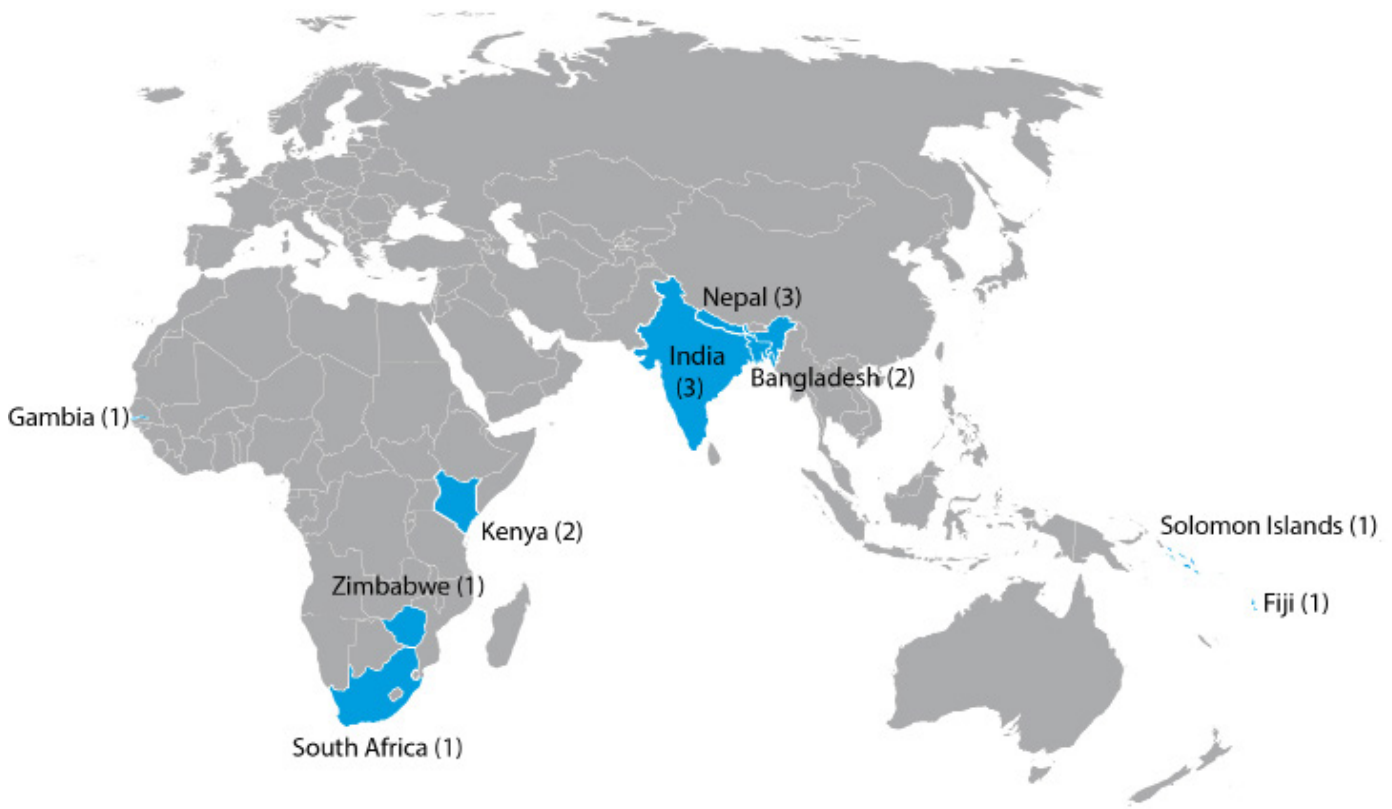
The 15 communities are located in nine countries highlighted in blue: Gambia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. The number of communities in each country is indicated by the number in parentheses.

Flexibility was mainly exhibited through livelihood diversification, the migration of community members from urban to rural settings, and the adjustment of cultural and social norms. Many communities also reported a quick adjustment to online communication, and working virtually from home.

The ability for **social organization** and collective action was a critical social domain of resilience in the face of COVID-19. Results show that women's and youth groups, church networks, and good community leadership provided vital platforms for sharing resources, such as food and cash donations, providing homes for the homeless, and adhering to COVID-19 restrictions. These social networks also maintained community bonds and unity.

Learning was mainly mobilized through the creation of group trainings, education and information campaigns. Also, some communities indicated that some individuals used the lockdown to learn new skills, such as making detergents, which were later translated into community businesses.

Some **behavioural factors**, such as drawing on experiences from previous humanitarian crises to respond to COVID-19, were key sources of resilience in many communities. However, in some cases, certain behaviours such as the stigmatization of individuals and families, and myths and misinformation about COVID-19, proved to be barriers to resilience.

Agency (the ability to have free choice when responding to change) was the most difficult domain to assess in these circumstances. However, it was clear that the active involvement of women and youth in designing and implementing various response actions provided clear benefits. Women's and youth groups spearheaded effective responses, such as supporting communities to acquire food and financial resources, implementing community awareness and information management to shape community perception and prevention of the infections from outside their communities. They were also involved in building and maintaining social networks within communities.

Key recommendations

Investments in resilience by governments, development agencies, and civil society organizations cannot focus on a single policy angle, but must target multiple social domains of resilience.

Communities use different coping strategies, spanning multiple social domains of resilience, when responding to a crisis. In other words, resilience is not only about communities having access to capital. It is also about people having the flexibility to change strategies, the willingness or agency to influence change, and the capacity to organize themselves collectively in order to mobilize responses. Policy makers must acknowledge which domains are being mobilised by communities ahead of interventions, so that external investments complement existing actions and avoid unintended negative social impacts. For example, collective action and community-based organisations can be crowded out by the provision of certain types of government services (that is, building assets).

Programmes and policies to bolster resilience must support the actions of community-based organizations and treat them as key partners in this endeavour.

Community-based organizations, such as women's and youth groups and grassroots movements, are key elements of locally-led adaptation and resilience. They act as enablers of several of the social domains of resilience. For example, they play a key role in assessing the needs and delivering basic services (assets) to the most vulnerable members of communities. These organizations also function as trusted 'knowledge brokers' and ensure reliable two-way information flows between vulnerable groups and local authorities and other external support systems.

Invest in programs that increase reservoirs of trust and social cohesion.

Trust, social networks and community cohesion are forms of social capital, and important in determining resilience to shocks. These features are critical in providing a social architecture for mobilising collective action and shared learning, and empowering community-wide decision-making processes. Interventions that foster these forms of social capital could include focus groups, social events, and the redesign of community physical space in order to maximize social interactions.

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