

March 2020

The Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) Statement: COVID-19

The coronavirus COVID-19, which was first identified in China in late 2019, is now affecting 203 countries and territories around the world¹, marking the first time in nearly a century that almost every country on the planet is experiencing a complex humanitarian crisis. Though the pandemic has begun to spread relatively slow in the Global South, we know that we may be most severely affected by COVID-19.

Despite significant challenges, local NGOs and informal groups of citizens are already taking actions and supporting their communities, notwithstanding the risks and in many countries, despite a government lockdown. We are implementing a range of interventions to contain the spread of the virus and alleviate its health and other direct effects. As local and national NGOs (LNNGOs), in aid recipient countries, we have the capacity and willingness to do much more in communicating critical risk information to our communities, counter misinformation, support our national health systems, improve hygiene conditions, promote solidarity, protect the most vulnerable, while addressing the psychological, social and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We recognize the international institutions have started to mobilize: the World Health Organization (WHO) has launched a global appeal, the United Nations (UN) released its Global Humanitarian Response Plan - COVID-19 and the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) have released a significant response package. Those global funds are critical and welcomed. Yet, we continually reiterate that as Global South local and national NGOs (LNNGOs), we are best placed to urgently respond to these specific vulnerabilities. We know in our communities the specific needs of different age groups, those most vulnerable to the pandemic, and those at risk of increased exposure to gender-based violence. As local civil society and community-based groups, we are ready to take leadership in the design and implementation of a national-led response, in cooperation with other local actors, led by the

¹ https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200329-sitrep-69-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=8d6620fa_4

government. We insist that this be a national-led response, given the critical need for complementarity and synergies with other existing social protection services and schemes due to the nature of this specific crisis.

In the past weeks we have consulted our members and affiliates, that represent organizations in over 41 countries, in identifying key areas of support for consideration, engagement, and action in order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations in the Global South. We address these key areas of support on behalf of our members and partners to the international and donor community.

Preventive Measures: Currently Global South actors, including governments, the private sector and civil society members are working around the clock to prevent misinformation, promote solidarity, and provide the most accurate and contextual information on a novel and quickly spreading virus. Local and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have noted that messages and measures being used elsewhere in the world are challenging to put in place in dense, urban settings in the Global South. Whether informal settlements, favelas, overpopulated estates, or IDP and refugees camps – where overcrowding is the norm and water access and good hygiene are already severely lacking – messages around social distancing and frequent and thorough handwashing are simply irrelevant or inappropriate. In several settings, the cultural and social construct often leads to family gathering and being together – and how to address this in a voice resonant in the Global South continues to be a challenge.

Local and national NGOs (LNNGOs) are at the forefront in their communities, already providing information and critical support to their communities, to the existing national infrastructures. It is vital that their role is recognized, supported, and facilitated, to allow for scaled operations in all countries. We request these initial actions to continue preventive measures:

- Utilization and immediate collaboration of existing coordination bodies (Government, UN Cluster Systems, National/Local Coordination bodies, etc.) to ensure quality information has been verified, contextualized and is distributed at scale for public consumption. This includes increased support and utilization of local communication mechanisms/outlets.
- Improving existing health and community outreach structures to support in timely, scaled testing and identification of the virus. Support should be focused on highly dense communities with the establishment of specified quarantined areas and widespread testing.
- Increased support of vital WASH programs including access to basic hygiene facilities and encouraging a strong referral system from Local and National NGOs to medical infrastructure.

Livelihood Support to Vulnerable Populations: In the past quarter the early economic impact of COVID-19 on the most developed countries and sophisticated economies has been immense. A majority of NEAR members support the most vulnerable populations in the world, who are

unable to plan for the next meal, let alone the next days or weeks. Local civil society has already started in providing food and hygienic kits. Some organisations have also starting to organize direct cash transfer to reduce the economic impact of this pandemic.

We anticipate an exponential impact to our economies, with prices of basic commodities already spiking, Global South actors (including governments) are not, in many already affected humanitarian crises, able to support widespread compensation to vulnerable populations in terms of food, hygiene, and basic needs.

- We ask that the global community prioritizes the livelihoods of the most vulnerable communities as the inflation of basic costs, the lack of income generation and ultimately the spread of collapsed economies at scale continues to become a pre-cursor to the health crisis in many countries in the Global South.
- We call on donors to prioritize future funding – both humanitarian and development –to support communities in responding to COVID-19. In the short term, we urge all funders, traditional and philanthropic to not only target health and WASH support – though crucially needed – but also livelihoods as a response and preventive measure, as we are all unaware of the breadth and longevity of COVID-19.

Funding to Local and National NGOs (LNNGOs): LNNGOs are at the forefront of the prevention work and already in action. Several calls to action, guidelines and response plans, including the recent UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19 precisely highlight the role of local and national civil society, alongside private sector and government infrastructure. It is paramount to identify opportunities amongst current funding while guiding both the international community and donor communities alike on funding in the foreseeable future.

Current Funding (both current grants and any recently allocated grants):

- In unification with other national, regional and global networks, we request flexibility on current funding (inclusive of direct and indirect budgeted lines), cost extensions of current grants and subgrants to local partners, and a donor waiver of no-cost extensions requests for the next 6-8 months.
- While struggling with the severe impacts of COVID-19, most of our fragile contexts will also have to respond to and recover from annual disasters such as hurricanes and monsoons. We request the continuation of funding to cover these cyclical stressors on our countries.

Future Funding:

- With international actors having moved out of aid recipient countries due to the pandemic, increased partnership with and support to national and local actors – being local and national governments and/or local and national NGOs will ensure immediate and continued action in relation to the COVID-19 crisis. The necessary local and national

actions to save lives, communities and economies must be rapidly scaled up. This can only be done through the active role and leadership of local and national actors.

- We call on donors to pour fresh financing to the several global response platforms such as the Global HRP, while building on and not replacing ongoing humanitarian funding for pre-COVID-19 emergencies. Given the fact that people targeted in ongoing operations will be the most affected by the direct and indirect impact of the pandemic, it is essential to continue responding to pre-existing humanitarian needs while stepping up funds to address the additional vulnerabilities and needs arising from COVID-19.
- Since the establishment of the Grand Bargain, a positive outcome has been the establishment of several localized modalities of funding. We urge the donor community to go beyond the OCHA Country Based Pool Funds, which currently cover just 18 countries; and to work with already existing community foundations, national funds, and Global Funds such as the Global Fund for Community Foundations, the Start Fund, the Global Fund for Women, and the Global Fund for Children (to name a few), who are already structured to manage both small and large grants to local and national NGOs.
- Support national mechanisms allowing sub granting – with effective risk sharing and partnership principles in place – in order for local and national NGOs to access funding.
- Coordination of efforts linked to COVID-19 can easily be integrated into existing national coordination mechanisms in country as led by local actors. NEAR calls on donors to also channel funding for strengthening existing coordination mechanisms instead of establishing parallel coordination systems in country, specific to COVID-19.

The current situation is extremely fluid and therefore the recommendations and demands expressed here, developed by Global South actors in March 2020, will continue to evolve with the pandemic.

Note:

Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) is a Global South network of local and national NGOs (LNNGOs), present throughout the Global South. We advocate for a world where local communities have the capacity, resources and agency to address the challenges that impact them. As a network we work towards restructuring the global response to human, economic and environmental challenges so that actions to address these are locally driven and owned, and promote equitable, dignified and accountable partnerships.

For any question or comments, please reach out to us at advocacy@near.ngo.