SUPPORTING LOCAL RESPONSES TO COVID-19: NINE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY
Institute for Human Security and Social Change

April 2020

As the impacts of COVID-19 spread across the globe, many of those who work in international aid and community development are being called on to support the response. This may mean you are working in an area where you have little expertise or experience. Many of your partners – whether in national or local government agencies or community organisations – may also be new to this. To help you navigate this, we have pulled together an initial list of some key lessons - drawn from past experience - as well as some links to further information.

This document is not aimed at specialists in humanitarian response, who will already be very familiar with these lessons. Instead, it provides some starting points for people who have never been involved in a response of this kind as well as for their partners.

We welcome your feedback on these lessons. At the end of this document you'll also find some suggestions for other information guides we could develop. Please let us know if you'd find these useful.

1. Get the basics right

A core principle for those who work in both development and humanitarian response is 'do no harm'. This means being aware that what you do can have negative effects - on people's safety, security, dignity and rights, the local economy, the environment, or on people's social and political relationships or livelihoods - and taking steps to avoid this. Another fundamental principle is that aid should build local capacity, not undermine it. This means recognising that local leaders and organisations understand best what is needed and that whatever you do should build on and support what they are doing.

These two principles are reflected in the principles and Code of Conduct developed by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Another good reference is the Sphere Handbook, which includes the Humanitarian Charter, the Protection Principles, and the Core Humanitarian Standard. Sphere has also produced some guidelines and resources on applying these standards to the COVID-19 response, as have CHS Alliance and ALNAP.

2. Reach out to other responders and find ways to work together

Coordination and communication are even more important in a crisis, when things are changing quickly, as is building trust with new partners. National governments are responsible for leading the response to COVID-19. Some already have systems and plans in place, which you should support wherever possible. If you already work with national government ministries, ask them how best you can support them. If you work at the local level, reach out to local governments to see how you can contribute.

NGOs and community organisations are often able to respond quickly or reach more vulnerable populations so get in touch with them to find out their priorities. Think about supporting existing coalitions. There are good examples of working with the private sector in emergencies – like this example from Papua New Guinea – as well as guiding principles for collaboration.

3. Talk to people about their priorities and get feedback

As in all development work, listening to people – whether in local communities or partners in government agencies - is the best way to find out their priorities and ensure what you're doing supports their efforts. Make sure you reach out specifically to women, people with disabilities and other groups, so what you do takes into account everyone's views. People in different cultures may respond to trauma and stress differently and have different ways of looking after each other, so listen carefully and be culturally sensitive.

The Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network has developed a COVID-19 resource portal with information on communication and community engagement as well as other materials, information, guidance, tools and templates on communications in humanitarian contexts.

4. Find out the risks and what skills and resources are already available

As well as understanding people's priorities, you need to understand what the most important risks are and what things might make it more difficult for people, communities or organisations to respond to the crisis. Is the community a long way from a health clinic? Do people depend on selling things at the market for their income? But even more important is understanding what capacities people and organisations already that you can support and build on. Are there groups or organisations which can help spread information or distribute supplies or food? Do people in the community have particular skills which might be useful? The Humanitarian Practice Network has produced some guidelines on Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis/Assessment which includes links to other toolkits and resources.

5. Pay particular attention to those who are already more vulnerable

People who are already vulnerable often face additional risks in emergency situations. Women and children can be more vulnerable to abuse or violence and more likely to be forced into situations where they are exploited. Women, children, older people, people with disabilities, LGBTQI, people with chronic illness, migrants, ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous people face unique challenges in adapting to a crisis situation and returning to normal life.

A good resource is the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' minimum standards for protection, gender and inclusion in emergencies. For specific information on gender and disability issues related to COVID-19, see the UNFPA's Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility's guidance and resources and the World Health Organisation's information on disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak.

6. Gather information, share it and use it to learn how to do things better

Things can change quickly in emergencies and communications can be more difficult. Having good information is critical for decision-making. This includes information about the different needs and impacts on women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities. Think about the information you need and how to get it in a way that keeps everyone safe and healthy e.g using mobile phones or social media. Share what information you have with others and ask them to share with you. Your partners may be focused on responding and might not be able to provide you with information in the same way they did before. Real time evaluation and other approaches to evaluating humanitarian action can help improve ongoing response efforts or identify lessons. Getting feedback from communities is critical for accountability.

7. Expect that things will change and be prepared to adapt

Crises are disruptive. They require us to quickly understand what's going on and adjust what we're doing. This can make us feel uncomfortable, but being flexible is important. Responding effectively means working together to make sense of the situation - including the politics - and being adaptive.

In emergencies, money, supplies or people have to get where they're needed quickly. This might mean you need to look at your budget or staff to work out what and who can be used to support the response. Resources also need to be managed effectively, efficiently and ethically.

8. Look after yourself and your staff

Your staff may well be under additional stress. If you are a manager, make sure you touch base with your team regularly. Being as clear as you can with your staff about what they should be doing will help them feel reassured.

KonTerra Group has some resources on managing stress and anxiety, self-care during isolation and supporting staff during this time. The World Health Organisation has also produced guidelines on mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak.

If your staff are being asked to do things they haven't done before, or take on more responsibility, make sure you support them to do this. There are some good online training options available (provided you have a relatively good internet connection), including Building a Better Response, an introduction to the fundamentals of humanitarian action and online courses on the Sphere standards for humanitarian action.

9. Understand that emergencies and development are linked

Many of us are thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic as an emergency and focusing our response on immediate needs. But the impact of the pandemic in many countries is a result of longer-term development issues, including health systems that don't function effectively and levels of poverty and inequality. Focusing on the short-term response means we can overlook the more complex development challenges that make it difficult for governments and communities to respond to events like this when they happen.

This is why the Global Humanitarian Summit commitments to action called for a new way of working that acknowledges and supports local leadership and builds longer term resilience, such as this example from the Pacific. A learning stream on this topic is being developed by the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Practice.

Other resources and links

ALNAP
covid19.alnap.org/
alnap.org/help-library

Centre for Humanitarian Leadership
centreforhumanitarianleadership.org

Humanitarian Advisory Group
humanitarianadvisorygroup.org

Humanitarian Practice Network
odihpn.org/

Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
odi.org/our-work/coronavirus

Save the Children
resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/keywo
rd/covid-19coronavirus

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)
unocha.org/covid19

World Health Organisation
who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

Further information

Are there topics you'd like more information on? Let us know which of the following you would find useful or add other topics.

- Minimum standards for gender, inclusion and protection for organisations and for programming;
- Activity and program (re)design in an emergency: balancing rigour, speed and risk;
- Applying adaptive and politically-savvy approaches in pandemics;
- Pivoting education sector programs: immediate responses, risks, and planning for post-emergency;
- Remote and rapid monitoring and evaluation: getting credible, real time information remotely;
- Localisation in emergency contexts: balancing immediate humanitarian needs with sustainability;
- Economic development and livelihoods: evidence of the effectiveness of different responses in crisis contexts;
- Using traditional and social media for emergency communications: options, risks, and benefits;
- Macro-economic responses to crisis: options and risks;
- Supporting social accountability and state legitimacy in emergency contexts: why it matters and lessons on how to do it.