

2020 PFD Consultation: responses on COVID-19

Executive Summary

The Policy Forum on Development (PFD), the European Commission's multi-stakeholder space for dialogue on EU development policy, includes in its membership **75 civil society organisations (CSOs) and associations of local authorities (ALAs)** who in turn represent thousands of development organisations including marginalised communities. The PFD is carrying out research to understand how development cooperation, and specifically its work in support of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is affected by COVID-19. Without a better understanding of what is happening to development partners in the field, adequate policy, social and economic support cannot be properly put in place.

Hence, the PFD organised a **consultation** amongst member networks to obtain open-ended feedback on **how COVID-19 is impacting**: 1. the SDGs; 2. the enabling environment; and 3. multi-stakeholder partnerships. The SurveyMonkey questionnaire was shared via newsletters, email, and social media between 16 April – 18 May 2020. Of the more than 360 total respondents to the survey, roughly 28% came from Europe, 21% from Africa; 17% from the Neighbourhood, 14% from global networks, 10% from Latin America and 10% from Asia and the Pacific. Grounded theory analysis was used to analyse the data. This note contains the key feedback for each of three COVID related questions.

The respondents expressed **concern about the slowing or halting of work affecting SDGs** and gave specific examples, notably around SDG 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 10. Many were optimistic about using this crisis to “build back better” and emphasised **the importance of the 2030 Agenda as a framework for the future**. Some respondents noted that countries already indifferent to SDG advancement (and human rights protection) were taking advantage of this time to ignore development goals in some cases and in worse cases to impose **disproportionately restrictive measures infringing on civil liberties**. This tightening of civil space was raised in each question, showing a changing environment for everyone, but whose impacts are felt unequally. Restrictions on movement, assembly and expression have specific implications for women and girls, agricultural and short-term workers, those living in fragile contexts and those living on day to day wages.

The **enabling environment** was deemed worse by the majority of respondents, with the **exclusion of civil society and local authorities in the consultation** and discussion around policy and responses decided at national level. Further limitations on movement and subsequent changes in ways of working were showing the “**digital divide**” amongst organisations and people. Changes in priorities and centralised decision-making are raising financial concerns for both CSOs and LAs. This **financial impact** affects several levels, including operations of CSOs and LAs themselves, their beneficiaries (especially the most vulnerable), and the ability to continue to provide services and capacity building. Respondents were in agreement that

multi-sectoral and multilateral partnerships are needed more than ever to pool human and financial resources, reach the most vulnerable in their own languages, show solidarity and search solutions together.

Question 1: How could the COVID-19 situation impact SDG implementation in your country/region?

190 participants to the consultation answered this question. They primarily commented on the negative impacts the situation is having or is expected to have on : specific SDGs, notably **SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 10**; the slow down or stoppage of work; and the deferment of resources toward the current situation and away from SDG implementation. The majority of respondents are concerned that SDG advancement is already and will continue to be negatively affected. They discussed the implications of job loss, shrinking economies, stalled schooling, inadequate healthcare, disruption of food supply chains, limitations on movement and access to goods and information on SDGs, their own work and their thinking about the future. The responses can be summarised in three perspectives:

A. Paralysis of work

Actuellement toutes les initiatives de développement sont à l'arrêt, les financements sont suspendus, même la réalisation des projets en cours sont retardés à cause du COVID-19...Les inégalités se font plus ressentir surtout en ces périodes d'urgence sanitaire. Donc la mise en œuvre des ODD est bloquée.

La ville de Fort Dauphin, Madagascar

B. Indifference to SDGs

The real threat is the indifference shown toward the SDGs by the stakeholders.

Albanian CSO

C. Opportunity

In the crisis that we are facing we have an opportunity to implement SDGs in all levels.

National Association of Entrepreneurs of Colombia

A. Paralysis of work

As many entities are not operating at full capacity, beneficiaries are not receiving services.

As a global network with cooperative members within all sectors of the economy, we have experienced a slowdown of our efforts/services towards our members to create awareness around the SDGs (targets and indicators), mobilise them towards VNRs, assist them towards the

"localisation" of the SDGs and support their engagement in multi-stakeholder mechanisms for the SDGs at national level.

International Co-operative Alliance

SDG2, Zero Hunger: Some stressed the impacts on food security, affecting the most vulnerable and the strain for people who live on day-to-day income or in the informal economic sector. Beyond hunger linked to loss of income, there were concerns about food wastage and impacts on smallholder farmers.

Hunger may increase as people are encouraged to remain indoors and yet it is harvesting period and the result there may be wastage of food.

Malawi Federation of Cooperatives

SDG 3, Good health: Many noted the need to focus on the health response and strengthening health systems, highlighting that this crisis has shown the fundamental need for health system strengthening.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of "health for all" has emerged in sustainable development goals.

World Academy for Local Government and Democracy, Turkey

SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities: Many commented on the exacerbation of inequalities witnessed and expected. More specifically, respondents commented on how this inequality affects most at-risk groups, including low income, informal workers, migrants, women, children, and those in detention.

The Covid-19 crisis is exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly for low-income, migrant, informal and temporary workers which lose part or all of their income.

Women Engage for a Common Future, Global CSO

SDG 5, Gender Equality: Particular effects on women and girls have been highlighted.

Women which hold 65% of 90% of care jobs are at the frontline of the pandemic, are severely underpaid, while the burden of care work (closure of schools, support of sick relatives) has broadened. (...) Lockdown situations are increasing gender-based violence, restricting access to reproductive health and rights, including access to contraception, menstrual products, or safe abortion.

Women Engage for a Common Future, Global CSO

Individuals in fragile context are particularly vulnerable.

Vulnerable children and families are particularly at risk from the consequences of this situation: difficult access to medical care, interruptions in education, increased trauma. The situation is also critical in detention centres, which are often overcrowded and lack adequate healthcare and sanitation.

Albanian CSO

Many commented on the breakdown in communications due to lockdown and restrictions on movement. Communication difficulties for platforms and networks are hindering the work and capacity building training carried out by some CSOs. As well, the inequalities of the digital divide and the risk of its increasing was noted, as some respondents emphasised that rural areas and more vulnerable populations have less access to the technology that has been increasingly relied on for education and communication.

SDG 4, Education:

Education has been seriously impacted as most learning institutions have closed down and unlike in western world people in rural setting do not have technologies where people can be learning from home.

Malawi Federation of Cooperatives

B. Indifference or new priorities

The diversion of resources and attention from SDGs seems to be occurring both in situations where SDGs were being addressed and in places where SDG implementation was not a high priority prior to the crisis, thus allowing coronavirus to become an excuse not to advance the SDGs.

There is no political will for the implementation of 2030 Agenda and with the coronavirus it became worse.

FORUS member, Brazil

C. Opportunity

Numerous responses noted the potential positive impacts on the SDGs and future ways of thinking and highlighted the importance of using the existing 2030 Agenda framework to address this crisis and continue toward achievement of the development goals.

We realize how society can be run without excessive logistics/pollution and we can take quick steps toward several SDGs.

Green Cultural Association, Finland

... this pandemic and the economic and social crisis it triggered also generates an opportunity to accelerate the shift towards a just transition.

ActionAid International, Global CSO

By tying the stimulus packages to sustainability goals and specifically fostering fair supply chains that increase empowerment through living income and wages, we can make producers and workers more resilient towards future crises.

Fairtrade International

Question 2: How is/could the COVID-19 situation impact the enabling environment for civil society organisations and associations of local authorities?

Of the 179 respondents to the consultation who answered this question, the majority noted negative immediate or expected impacts on the enabling environment due to the current reactions and restrictions to the threat of COVID-19.

Consequences of new ways of working

The current situation has led to **exclusion of civil society and local authorities in the consultation** and discussion around policy and responses decided at national level. Notably, the suspension of some activities has “reduced the consultation process between government and NGOs.” (Albanian CSO). As well, this lack of consultation is changing the nature of some development actors to mere executors.

Many governments and multi-lateral organisations are coming up with stimulus packages to support those affected by Covid-19 without any consultation with CSO that are active at country level and can ensure further targeted support to the needs of those that are mostly affected.

International Co-operative Alliance

Changes in ways of working **risk to exacerbate inequalities and strengthen the “digital divide”** as referenced in response to question 1. At the operational level, the digital gap is one additional challenge that “should not be underestimated when the decision-making processes are launched to just tick the box of consultation” (International Co-operative Alliance).

Communication challenges affect the enabling environment and access amongst members organisations, between recipients and implementers, and amongst multiple stakeholders, including sub-national governments.

CSOs and associations of local authorities are vulnerable in this situation and they are missing the communication with their working target group.

Albanian CSO

This increase in inequalities applies to CSOs and LAs as well, as some are better equipped and able to take advantage of technology to implement their work than others.

Financial changes have reduced the capacity of CSOs and LAs to act. Immediate financial changes are impacting awareness raising, training, capacity building, etc. Much work will need to be done to restart the enabling environment after the crisis has passed. Local authorities may have less capacity to collect autonomous financial resources in order to provide basic services. As well, CSOs may have less budget to implement projects, and less say in the design of such projects, thereby decreasing the reach of the services to be provided. One anonymous local municipality shared that their revenue flow has been reduced to 20% of what was previously collected.

Weakened civic space and rights violations are arising as a consequence of response measures to the spread of the coronavirus.

Some governments are using this crisis to restrict the enabling environment for civil society organisations under the guise of emergency measures.

Cooperatives Europe

Repressive governments have taken advantage of the situation to take action against CSOs. Limits on movement, assembly, expression and notably protest are seen as disproportionate in many cases, impacting civil liberties and leaving no alternative channels for disagreement. Respondents noted emergency response to the detriment of other SDGs and human rights. Others commented that the pre-existing enabling environment was disappearing.

On a more optimistic note, some respondents witnessed the increased legitimacy of the role of CSOs. They were recognised in the responses for their role in the protection of civic rights, awareness-raising and access to information, service provision, increasing solidarity, cooperating with local authorities to support vulnerable populations, and holding governments accountable. In some cases, it was felt that the government was better able to recognise the role of CSOs and work with them in times of crisis. For example, CSOs are working more closely with government in South Asian countries via direct response in providing food and shelter as well as developing toolkits for disaster training.

COVID-19 has to great extent indeed brought an enabling environment for civil society organization as some have taken the role of advocacy and education to the masses. As for Malawi we witnessed the civil society taking duty bearers through court injunction on the lock-down when government had not put in place the required safety net for the disadvantaged and vulnerable society. COVID -19 has also seen local authorities joining hands with CSOs in creating awareness on the pandemic. In some case there has [been] sharing of cost to meet some obligations which was not the case before COVID-19.

Malawi Federation of Cooperatives

In many cases, CSOs worked to fulfil their role as development actors through information gathering and monitoring: the International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL) is tracking national legislation and impacts on rights - [COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker](#). Forus is gathering case studies on civic space which will include a focus on COVID-19.

Question 3: How could partnerships contribute to addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 situation in your country/region?

All of 168 the respondents stressed the **importance of multi-sectorial and multilateral partnerships**, noting that they are all the more important now. In fact, the responses on partnerships seem to answer some of the issues and concerns raised in questions around SDG implementation and enabling environment. Strengthening partnerships is the underlying factor necessary to implement the SDGs and maintain, obtain or improve an enabling working environment for CSOs and LAs. Beyond the fulfilment of SDG 17 itself, respondents highlighted the importance of cooperation in multiple areas and usual roles, including:

- Cross sectoral cooperation; connecting various aspects of the situation
- Awareness raising and information dissemination in accurate formats, languages, across geographic regions
- Pooling resources – human and financial to generate ideas and solutions
- Identifying the most vulnerable
- Strengthening CSO resilience
- Protecting CSOs in shrinking civic space

Some examples of current partnerships were shared. The current situation has allowed for increased collaboration amongst CSOs and LAs in the cases of South Africa, Israel and Pakistan and Uganda.

In Pakistan, the government and CSOs are joining hands together to respond to COVID-19 crisis. Some of the leading steps including Ehsaas Cash Programme, Youth Volunteer Force and Health Emergency Response are being done in close collaboration with CSOs and volunteers.

United Cities and Local Governments Asia-Pacific

Cooperatives shared an example of partnership between civil society organisations and local authorities in a region in Israel. Their 200 active volunteers are coordinating efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the region. They have provided food packages for families in need, sanitary products, and organized an awareness campaign on social media where people can find useful health information.

CSOs and women's organisations have been able to influence State and Central Governments to address the issues that were neglected or adversely affected by government actions. As in the case of Migrants in India.

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, Asian CSO

Partnership has enhanced response to COVID-19 in Kenya. This has realized through resource mobilization particularly from private sector, support with emergency response, support to the vulnerable communities and enhanced local production of medical equipment and commodities such as hand sanitizers and personal protective equipment. Partnerships have been with research institutions, civil society Organization, private sector, foundations, media and academia.

Council of Governors, Kenya

Together with the women2030 coalition partners... we are organising virtual spaces for our feminist partners to analyse the situation in light of the Covid19 crisis and the impact on women, and to start formulating recommendations in view of post-Covid policy priorities.... For instance, our partner Uganda is organising information and capacity building sessions among remote grassroots groups that are difficult for governmental bodies to reach, to inform them about COVID-19 and on behaviours to adopt to limit the spread of the virus.

Women Engaged for a Common Future, Global CSO

Recommendations

Respondents strongly recommended that policy makers not push back on progress or compromise on environmental and climate commitments; they support standing strong in support of the ambitious **Green Deal**. Equally important is **maintaining the commitments to the 2030 Agenda** and using this framework to build back better.

Financial concerns are still at the forefront, so requests to continue to **financially support organisations with budget and technical assistance** were noted as well as a suggestion to established dedicated funds to ensure CSOs and Local authorities continue their work. The EU could consider channelling funds jointly with other donors through established mechanisms (such as multi-donor trust funds and the Global Fund that could be adapted or repurposed to channel humanitarian assistance in the context of COVID-19). As well, the EU could consider ring-fencing support to programmes to improve governance and financial management of key systems, particularly in the health sector.

As well, respondents stressed the need for EU policy makers and diplomats to recognise and react to the suppression of civil liberties even in times of a health emergency, emphasising the **importance of civic space and freedom of expression**.

Finally, many respondents emphasised the need to **involve multiple partners in policy and regulations development**. Some specific suggestions included:

- Examining an inclusive, people-centred cooperative model that looks beyond growth as one potential model to resilience for people in crisis
- “Crowdsource accountability” by engaging multiple actors, such as civil society organisations, journalists and state anti-corruption bodies