



ARC Learning Brief: COVID-19 and Adaptive Programming



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Introduction

Background

The Addressing Root Causes (ARC) Fund of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands aims to tackle the root causes of armed conflict, instability and irregular migration. As part of the Addressing Root Causes global learning agenda, the “adaptive programming” learning group composed of Red een Kind, Oxfam Novib, Woord & Daad and the Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law, has developed this learning brief on how the ARC program is coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Objective of the study

The ARC adaptive programming learning group sought, via a survey, inputs from ARC organizations with the objective of enriching the debate and broadening views and perspectives on how to improve adaptive programming in fragile and conflict affected settings, amidst pandemic.

This exercise aimed specifically, to collect insights on how ARC organizations are putting adaptive programming in practice in times of COVID-19, and to highlight how ARC partners are reinventing themselves to respond to the immediate needs linked to the crisis, and how they are using the said crisis as a source of innovation.

Methodology

To fulfil the objectives, the learning group developed a survey targeted at ARC grantees. Questionnaires were then deployed using a Microsoft Form. The survey had both structured and unstructured questions. More specifically the survey was structured around a Likert scale (1-5)¹. Some of the scaled questionnaires had options to provide additional explanation beside the rating. Although the 21 ARC grantees² were approached to complete the survey, only 18 respondents representing 5 countries and 7 projects responded to the survey. Respondents include consortia lead organizations, consortia member organizations and local implementing actors from Burundi, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia and Pakistan.

¹ A Likert scale survey question is a question that uses a 5 or 7-point scale, sometimes referred to as a satisfaction scale, that ranges from one extreme attitude to another. Typically, the Likert survey question includes a moderate or neutral option in its scale.

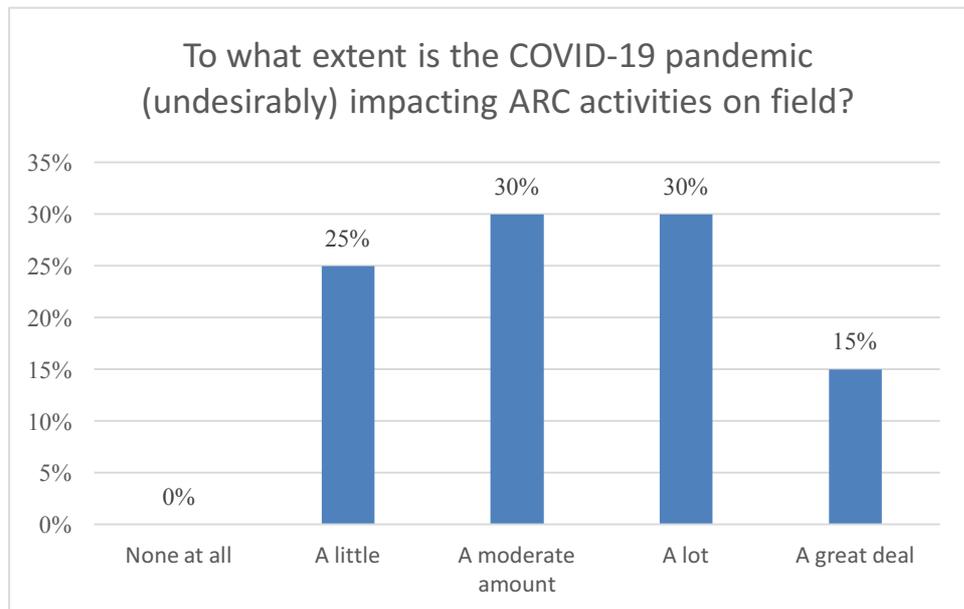
² In total, 19 ARC partner organizations are working on 21 programs in 12 countries for a 5-year period (2016-2021).

Overall, the survey was intended to be designed and implemented rapidly to capture the effects and subsequent adaptations of COVID-19 on ARC programming as they happened.

Findings

Effect of COVID-19 on ARC countries, project and beneficiaries

83% of respondents confirmed that their respective countries (five) are negatively affected by the pandemic. Another 78% confirmed that their ARC programme in general is affected by the pandemic. Regarding the extent of the negative impact on project activities, 61% said the impact is a lot/a great deal. 38% also confirmed that the crisis has modified the relationship of NGOs with local/national authorities to a greater extent. Some respondents explained this is due to mobility restriction, physical distancing and the prohibition of people are not allowed to assemble. As a result, partners were not able to make face to face consultation and regularly communication with other actors and deliver services to beneficiaries. Due to COVID-19 only 2 projects were fully operational,



and all others were in some form of holding phase.

Effect on annual plan

As a result, most respondents (72%) think projects will achieve less on indicator targets for 2020 due to COVID-19. The same percentage of respondents expect to make adaptations to the 2020 annual plan. When it comes to the opinion of respondents on MoFA's (the donor) flexibility to adapt programmes due to COVID-19, the view of respondents drastically differ. Half of respondents feel

there is a lot of flexibility while the other half believe there is a little flexibility³. Furthermore, 89% of respondents claim organization used some sort of ARC community structures to deal with the COVID-19 effects. From this, it appears that already established community structures were an effective enabler in allowing ARC programmes to adapt to the crisis. Hence the necessity to capitalize on the potential carried by holistic community based approaches to respond to plights in fragile contexts.

Safety of ARC beneficiaries

Respondents are divided on the extent of the safety of ARC beneficiaries being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. One third think it has a little effect while another third think it has a moderate effect while the other one-third think it has a lot of effect⁴. Those who consider that the safety of beneficiaries has been undermined by the pandemic put forward various reasons:

Specific nature of activities

- *Safety of beneficiaries is at risk due to the nature of work of beneficiaries that expose them to the risk of COVID-19.*
- *The economic stress remains high due to reduction in demand for their products and skills and many were forced to shut down their small businesses.*

Movement restrictions

- *Beneficiaries that were eager to be trained in vocational training and get employed were desperate because all schools are closed, and their training discontinued shattering their dream of employment⁵.*

Governments failure to communicate fact-based information on the pandemic

- *Governments that could not recognize the impact of COVID-19 has put programme beneficiaries in danger. In addition, a lack of compliance to government regulation and myths and misconceptions about COVID-*

³ It is worthy to explore further the rationale behind differing opinions/perceptions regarding the extent of donor's flexibility, in order to check if it is due to the nature of measures taken at this effect, or if it depends on specific contexts of implementation.

⁴ This might be reflective of simply not enough information, data or understanding yet as to the long-term local effects are on beneficiaries. one could not claim to be able to holistically collect the most profound consequences of a crisis of this magnitude through this type of survey. It is therefore, crucial to invest in further research on long term implications of COVID-19 on program beneficiaries.

⁵ Beneficiaries from EYE program in Ethiopia where the project is trying to increase employability of migration-prone youth through acquiring short term relevant trainings that make them ready to be employed. EYE works on addressing root causes of youth migration, and wants to enlarge local opportunities and challenges the idea that migration is not necessarily the best option.

19 may have led to an exponential increase that put all people including the beneficiaries' danger⁶.

44% of the respondents think that the extent to which pandemic affected the ability of the community to better protect, respect and fulfil their rights in the area where they currently live is moderate. 61% of respondents think COVID-19 has changed the socio-economic stability of the area where beneficiaries live a great deal/a lot and only a few (11%) see positive effects of the COVID-19 crisis on beneficiaries.

Positive Effect: Among the few positive effects observed among beneficiaries some of them include: the development of new and innovative ways of working, interns switched to work from home, opening to digital means of delivering training courses (which we have been promoting prior to COVID-19 but without much success). The introduction of additional business revenue strategies through product and service diversification⁷.

Good practices – as reported by respondents

- Following up on beneficiaries remotely (parrying to travel restrictions/lock down and related field visits difficulties);
- Remote assistance to value chain activities with minimum field presence;
- Nurturing local market actors and enabling them to increase their market network helped trained beneficiaries to remain relevant for certain local jobs and hence absorb some of the shocks of lockdown. In this way, the market actors will quickly return to work once restrictions are eased;
- The use of various social media platforms to continue delivering theoretical training and communicating with beneficiaries and the use of virtual program delivery to reach out communities using Television, Radio, Social media platforms like YouTube and telegram groups
- Raise awareness of the community in protecting especially women and girls against gender-based violence consequential to the pandemic and ensuring a gender analysis of the local covid-19 situation, as the pandemic has gendered impacts
- The improvement of the tippy tap toe tools in WASH practices in poorest communities developed by local community manufacturers and the prometon of locally and reusable masks for protection;

⁶ Non recognition of the pandemic was also highlighted as a key issue, especially in countries which were experiencing civic space shrinking even before the pandemic eruption.

⁷ It is worthy to mention that comments related to leveraging on new ways of working (working remotely) are very contextually specific, and emanate mainly from HQ/Office level where staff have access to enabling technologies.

- The production of a song (video) to raise awareness on COVID-19 at national level using locally talented and prominent musicians and artists.

This shows the necessity to learn constantly, as implementing actors, how to recognize opportunities and innovation while keeping risks clearly in view.

Research topics – suggested by respondents:

- The effects of COVID-19 on the informal sector of the economy in ARC respective countries.
- Understanding the resilience and coping strategies of rural households in the context of COVID-19.
- Socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 by beneficiary's vulnerability and social strata.
- The impact on COVID-19 on livelihood of communities near the borders (between Rwanda, DR Congo and Tanzania).

Undeniably, COVID-19 forces us to reflect further beyond emergency responses and dig deep into long term impact on the said measures on communities, economies, governance. It is therefore crucial to invest in research and learning questions to feed into November 16, 2020 a research agenda for future programming and policy influencing.

Information – as shared by respondents:

- ARC consortia members should support disadvantaged groups by supplying preventative materials.
- Clarity of communication from the political leadership is a must during emergencies for the citizens to adopt protective measures.
- Working from home through digital means was not as possible as it appeared during normal circumstances (esp. beneficiaries) when they have the right access to information and guidance.
- Organizing virtual meetings among the consortia members to share experiences in the threatening situation of COVID-19

This speaks about the importance of strengthening the collaborative process within consortia and organizations in order to systematically engage on reflection about what COVID-19 (or any other crisis) means for project goals as well as countries/regions of implementation. Such a continuous reflection is critical to any attempt to rethinking and adapt project's approaches.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has significantly affected countries where ARC programs are being implemented and their respective projects and beneficiaries. The pandemic has considerably and negatively affected the socio-economic stability of the area where beneficiaries are residing with few positive developments that capitalized on the situation. The pandemic has also moderately affected the ability of the community to better protect, respect and fulfil their rights in the area where ARC beneficiaries currently live.

Recommendations

It is undeniable that COVID-19 is impacting both working approaches and content of programs, but also the life of communities within which the said programs are being implemented. Hence the need to remain abreast of local trends (in their very specific nature) and the relevance and progress of our adaptive responses. In this regard, it is therefore crucial to:

- Conduct rapid assessments to monitor changes in the needs of the beneficiaries, paying particular attention to potential discrimination in regard to specific status of people at stake;
- Consider (on an ongoing basis) need to adapt to meet immediate needs linked to the crisis/revise plans as needs rapidly change;
- Update communication and feedback channels between different program's stakeholders (at various levels); The flexibility that is being offered by ARC seems not well understood by all grantees, thus it should be communicated well;
- Follow up through survey on whether the adaptations made during COVID lead to more effective programming than seen previously;
- Deepen analysis and understanding of what the COVID 19 adaptation means and for WHOM e.g. for men, women, elderly, youth, migrants, local authorities etc;
- Engage in research activities that address and tackle both short and long term impact of the pandemic on programs;
- Do no harm principles: pay attention that programs don't create further harm (through increasing stigma and discrimination) while trying to respond to crisis related needs;
- Suggest and lead joint assessments trainings and evaluations across organizations, consortia and other stakeholders to ensure a more coherent approach;
- Follow up on the level of digital innovation for adaptive programming in order to understand to what extent did digitization also increase effectiveness and actually lead to more innovative programming thus capitalizing on new spaces created by COVID;

- Encourage positive developments and good practices that capitalize on the current situation and urge all ARC implementing projects to follow suit.



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