COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT DURING COVID-19:

Experiences and Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, COVID-19 took center stage at international development organizations' meetings. Ensuing conversations have focused on how organizations can best support vulnerable communities in terms of health and non-health concerns. While discussions focused on health concerns considered how to protect people against contracting the virus,[1] and, if infected, how to provide access to health care facilities, non-health-related discussions have focused on the negative impact of international lockdowns and travel restrictions on people's socio-economic realities.[2] Such non-health related concerns have included a rise in gender-based violence,[3] gender inequity,[4] food insecurity,[5] and income instability, with people working within migrant, informal, and wage economies the most vulnerable.[6] In combination, these concerns contribute to rising global poverty figures, with researchers estimating that the pandemic will generate an additional 176-177 million people living in extreme poverty.[7] Considering these grave realities, the international development community has encouraged ongoing conversations to share strategies on how organizations can help alleviate the dismal socio economic circumstances accompanying COVID-19.[8]

At Outreach International (OI), COVID-19-related concerns have also been at the forefront of our conversations, as well as our eleven international Program Partners, and their 113 community-based partner organizations (CBOs).[9] Since the start of the pandemic, many CBOs have been identifying COVID-19 as their communities' most-pressing concern, prioritizing challenges around food security and livelihoods.[10] Our program partner staff were not surprised by these priorities, since most CBOs represent communities whose household incomes and subsequent access to food are highly dependent on informal, migrant, and wage labor economies. As such, throughout 2020, CBOs have responded to the pandemic's local impact by implementing projects ranging from accessing sanitation provisions to more long-term solutions to address food insecurity and limited household income.

As per their usual role, program partners' staff have been supporting CBOs as best they can in seeking out, and implementing, solutions that can offer a measure of relief from the pandemic's health and socio-economic challenges to local households. Similar to nearly all other forms of work during the COVID-19 crisis, practitioners' typical workflow changed following their respective governments' pandemic-related mobility restrictions and safety regulations. For example, in regions where governments implemented lockdowns, practitioners could no longer travel to communities and facilitate meetings.

Staying true to their commitment to support community-led teams, program partners sought adjustments to their usual activities. Such adjusted actions, all in line with respective governments' national COVID-19 restrictions, ensured that practitioners could continue furnishing support to local CBOs. What were these adjustments? Moreover, what do these adjustments and practitioners' continued support to communities during the pandemic reveal about their interventions and the communities they support? How can such reflections inform future interventions?

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[1] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (July, 2020).
[2] World Bank (June 8, 2020).
[3] UN Women, (2020).
[4] Bahn, K. ; Cohen, J., et al, (2020)
[5] Laborde et al. (2020).
[6] ILO (2020).
[7] World Bank (2020).
[8] See for example the Movement for Community-led Development's (MCLD) initiative in sharing such strategies inter-organizationally.
[9] In October 2020, this number decreased to nine program partners, following internal partnership evaluation and available revenue.
[10] OI and its program partners' community-led development methodology is called Participatory Human Development (PHD). Drawing from Arlinksy's community organizing traditions and Paulo Freire's principles of praxis, PHD processes include issue identification and prioritization, the groundworking of community members toward consensus, role-playing to increase people's comfort levels, mobilizations to resource institutions to obtain the resources needed to implement the identified solution, and evaluation and reflection meetings that allow for community-wide feedback.

To answer these questions, we conducted a basic qualitative inquiry[11] in June 2020 to document practitioners' adjustments to, experiences with, and observations of community-led development initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of our study was twofold:

1) To consider how program partners' COVID-19-related experiences and observations can inform future interventions,

2) To contribute to industry-wide interests in community-led approaches, particularly during a pandemic.

METHOD

This report draws from two sets of data.

The first set comes from an internal survey, distributed to all program partners, with questions focused on country-specific contexts, including support from local authorities, work-related restrictions, and program partners' corresponding work adjustments. We administered a survey to each program partner (11 in total), asking that they complete it with input from all staff members. The surveys provided immediate information on program partners' work-related adjustments. Our preliminary analysis of the survey data also provided the basis for follow-up conversations. We were especially interested in learning more about the experiences and observations mentioned in the survey's open-ended questions.

The second dataset comprises interview data, collected via 10 group interviews and 29 total participants. At least two practitioners per program partner participated in the follow-up conversations. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours each, and were conducted either via Zoom, WhatsApp, or Facebook Messenger. The sessions were transcribed verbatim to allow for close analysis. Unfortunately, five conversations could not be transcribed due to technical issues. For these discussions, we relied on interview notes taken during the discussion. We used MAXQDA 2020[12] as a data-management platform for both datasets.

Our analysis process started with an initial readthrough of all texts to familiarize ourselves with the content. One team member then manually coded 20% of the data, looking for segments which reflected structural and conceptual content. Whereas structural codes respond to overarching research questions and assist the researcher in compiling certain topical lists, conceptual codes reflect broader meso- and macro level meaning embedded in the data.[13] The same team member then compiled the resulting codes into a codebook. Team members sought intercoder agreement on the codebook, making the necessary adjustments and additions where applicable. The first team member then used the adjusted codebook to code the remaining data. The finalized codes were collapsed into subcategories, which produced three overarching categories or themes: *Adjustments; Challenges & Strengths; and Toward the Future.*

RESULTS

Adjustments

With the ensuing socio-economic challenges presented by the pandemic, OI-affiliated program partners and their staff have felt more compelled to sustain their support for local communities. To continue such support amidst the travel and work restrictions related to the pandemic, practitioners found it necessary to make adjustments to their typical intervention strategies.

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[11] Merriam and Tisdell, (2016).
[12] VERBI Software, (2019).
[13] Saldaña, Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 2016.

ADJUSTMENTS	Table 1: A summary of the adjustments practitioners made to continue their work amid travel restrictions
Adjusting team's workflow	Strategic team planning & schedule adjustments
	Focusing on most pertinent projects and activities
	Seeking tools to improve community support
	Arranging community meetings in team's office
	Continuing community-level engagement[14] with community members
Focusing on networking	Investigating potential resource networks
	Sustaining existing connections with resource institutions
	Strategizing networking efforts (increasing scope of network)
Using technology	Conducting online team meetings
	Staying connected with communities
	Developing online learning group
Keeping safe (sanitation)	Remaining vigilant around sanitation
	Continuously sharing information (practitioners to community leadership)
Adjusting facilitation	Using technology during facilitation
	Meeting in small groups
	Adjusting meeting format (relay & clustering)
Relying on leaders	Remain in contact to share and collect information
	Continuing activities with leaders, acting as consultants rather than facilitators

Adjusting team's workflow:

Program partners had to adapt their usual workflow, because of different quarantine levels and travel restrictions. An immediate first adjustment was to **rearrange work schedules** to correspond with teams' national contexts. Naturally, teams also had to include more **strategic meetings,** to discuss how best to mediate the socio-economic changes brought on by the pandemic. For example, as one practitioner from the DR Congo team shared, their team addressed issues of COVID-19 at two levels: First, a focus on prevention with information about the pandemic and handwashing stations; second, addressing effects like famine, considering rising food prices and ensuing food shortages. Since community leaders' involvement in

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[14] Practitioners commonly refer to such engagement as "groundworking.".

such discussions is crucial, they have been included in all strategic discussions about community facilitation and response. Where possible, staff made their offices available to leaders to continue strategic talks, training, and finalizing urgent project-related management matters.

Teams have also prioritized their support to local communities by **focusing on CBOs' most-pressing concerns.** As staff from Nicaragua shared:

> "We will review the most important situation in the community [...] We will see which activity or which issue is the most important for the [practitioner] to continue facilitating. So, at the end of the month, we will have progress in that community."

Teams have also **conducted ongoing research on tools and technologies** to strengthen communities' initiatives amid COVID-19 conditions. This has ranged from how to make hand sanitizers, to introducing fast-growing vegetables for backyard or community gardens. A final adjustment involves **continuous community-level engagement, whether in person, via phone, or through social media.** Such engagement happens on a granular level, with practitioners keeping contact with individual community members to talk about their poverty-related issues and how they can be solved. The main reason for continuing such engagement is to ensure community members remain motivated to participate in collective action, both during, and after the pandemic.

Focusing on networking:

Developing and sustaining connections with resource institutions is crucial to community-led development. It is through these networks that program and community partners access the resources needed for community-led projects. One objective of program partners is to introduce community members to such networks, and then to support them in developing and sustaining such connections. As expected, all program partners listed adjustments around network-building as necessary in maintaining their support to local communities. This includes **sustaining existing relationships** by providing resource institutions with updates on communities' conditions and how their resources are being used; and **establishing new connections,** especially considering evolving community needs amid COVID-19's challenges. For example, one program partner shared how they proactively sought support from local health offices to share accurate and up-to-date information with communities. Lastly, program partners shared how they have **increased the scope of their networking efforts.** Typically, program partners seek support from resource institutions at the local, and even national levels. Since the start of the pandemic, some program partners have widened their networking efforts to incorporate more international connections and grant opportunities.

Using technology:

Perhaps the most significant adjustment teams have made to their interventions involves technology. At a team level, this meant conducting all **staff meetings online.** On a community level, technology provided staff with the possibility to stay connected with communities, especially amid fluctuating travel restrictions. For example, OI's Zambia program partner established "phone-trees," a communication structure where each person receiving information will pass it onward to people within their assigned list of contacts.

Social media platforms have also provided staff with **connectivity and opportunities for information-sharing.** To ensure these ongoing learning opportunities, Nepal staff have created online learning groups where staff and community members can share information, ranging from formulas for organic pesticides to news on where they can access seeds and gardening materials. Ultimately, these "virtual chat groups function as learning platforms" (practitioner, Nepal) for both staff and community members.

Keeping safe:

Across the board, program partners listed sanitation as a necessary adjustment. In areas where staff can facilitate group meetings, they have remained diligent about wearing face-shields and masks, and using hand sanitizer when hand-washing is not an option. Keeping safe also means sharing some best practices on curtailing the spread of the virus with communities.

Adjusting facilitation:

During our interviews, practitioners confirmed how essential facilitation is to the community-led process. Facilitation commonly takes place in-person and during community meetings. In the case of community-led development, facilitators can be either practitioners or community members who guide, rather than dictate, conversations. They stimulate dialogue by asking community members questions about the issues they face, ideas for solutions to their issues, and considering necessary next steps to achieve their goals. Facilitation enables collective action planning, consensus-building, and decision-making processes that are collaborative and participatory, rather than top-down and authoritarian.

With in-person facilitation difficult or impossible in many areas, practitioners employed **technology to stay connected** to community teams. These meetings were mostly restricted to community leaders and those with access to the necessary information community technology (ICTs).

For practitioners still able to travel, but facing restrictions on mass meetings, **facilitating smaller meeting sizes** has been the most practical option. The downside of smaller meetings is that sharing information, reaching consensus, and agreeing on project-related planning takes much longer, since facilitators must repeat the same information to all the smaller groups. Some practitioners recommended **relay facilitation** to avoid repetition. This typically means that the people who attend an initial small meeting will then facilitate their own subsequent small meetings with new participants. **Clustering** was another strategy used by practitioners, particularly for reaching consensus on projects. This strategy has been beneficial in communities with household clusters. Each cluster had an assigned person representing them at a general, small-scale meeting, where practitioners and community leaders facilitated essential matters. "It's tiring for them, because they have to go house to house," a practitioner from the Philippines explained, "but it helps them to sustain the implementation of activities and projects during these past months."

Relying on community leaders:

With limited to no access to communities, program partner staff shared about their increased reliance on community leaders, both for sharing information, and for facilitation. By connecting with leaders via phone or social media, program partner staff functioned as consultants on what next steps communities could consider when implementing and managing local projects. Such consultation has been especially prevalent in implementing emergency projects such as food distribution and awareness programming, with community leaders facilitating most of the meetings accompanying these projects.

Observations | Strengths and Challenges

In reference to India's initial mobility restrictions, Arundhati Roy (2020)[15] shared that the lockdown "worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things." Similarly, we hold that COVID-19 reaffirmed the strengths inherent to community-led development practices, while also shedding light on how existing socioeconomic challenges continue to inhibit communities' efforts toward sustainable change. Such challenges have been especially prominent during the pandemic. Table 2 summarizes practitioners' observations in regard to respective community-level strengths and challenges.

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[15] Roy, A. (2020).

OBSERVATIONS	**Table 2:** Program partners' observations following their interventions during COVID-19
Strengths	**Local Leaders' Centrality**
	Shifting in role
	Leading in initiating and sustaining change
	Communities Taking Action
	Sustaining networking efforts
	Continuing with their projects
	Using social media/ technology
	Sharing of resources
	Becoming vigilant about safety
	Strategizing around information sharing
Challenges	**Necessity of In-Person interaction**
	In-person meetings
	Face-to-face interaction
	Digital Divide
	Gender and ICTs
	Youth and ICTs
	ICTs are difficult to access and expensive
	Limiting Infrastructure (connectivity/ electricity)
	No digital literacy
	Politics of the Pandemic
	Fear, Distrust, Anger, and Confusion
	Mobility Issues
	Little to no mobility of the practitioners
	Travel restrictions of community members
	Absence of/ cost of transport
	Networking Challenges
	CBO cannot mobilize (offices are closed)
	CBOs cannot mobilize - travel restrictions/ limitations
	Resources are getting scarce/relocated

Strengths

The Centrality of Local Leadership:

Local leaders are essential to community engagement, and in the context of COVID-19, such leadership has become even more valued, as they have "[bridged] the gap in addressing needs, mitigating conflict, and managing projects and resources."[16] Across the board, OI program partners confirmed local leaders' centrality, sharing how they have worked closely with them in sharing information and continuing community-led work. Some practitioners even noted that they recognized **a shift in roles.** In the absence of practitioners, "leaders [are] now acting as the practitioners at the community level" (practitioner, Nepal).

Leaders were also the ones to **spearhead initiatives** to implement community-wide sanitation practices, access healthcare and community services, and gain much-needed resources. For example, leaders in the Philippines took to social media to solicit food donations for their community. As a local practitioner shared, "...the leaders crowd-sourced for additional food resources [...] They have links to the agriculture program, and they have continued networking."

Communities Taking Action:

Local communities' sustained, and in some cases even enhanced, their collective capacity in **managing their existing projects, using social media to access and distribute information, and leveraging their networks.** A practitioner from Nepal observed such agency in how a local community accessed and distributed a local resource:

> **"The [local government] had an opportunity for farmers. Fifty percent discount on seeds and fertilizer for their crops [...] this was posted on Facebook. [For] people who do not have access to the internet, the information has been conveyed through leaders... they call the members, they raise their voices."**

While some communities worked on accessing external resources, others have drawn on their own resources. This included food, seedlings, masks, and sanitizers. In some communities, CBOs used their organizational funds -- saved from previous projects -- toward establishing emergency food- and loan programs.

Many communities have also coordinated **vigilant efforts to keep their communities safe** from potential contamination. For example, some practitioners observed communities setting up mandatory hand-washing stations or blockades at their communities' entrances to ensure sanitation, and to monitor who enters and exits their area.

Lastly, communities' collective action manifested in their **information-sharing efforts,** ensuring that as many people as possible could stay informed on the pandemic itself, as well as potential resources such as food aid and cash distribution. To enable such sharing, community leaders would work collectively to either text or phone individual community members, who would then share such information with their immediate neighbors.

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[16] UNDP (June 4, 2020).

Challenges

Limited to No In-Person Interaction:

While communities have adapted to rely more heavily on local leadership, collective action, and technology to further affirm and motivate community engagement, restrictions on in-person interaction and meetings have made facilitation challenging. The work of the CBOs is dependent on consensus built through common understanding, sharing ideas and information, and collective decision-making. As one practitioner from Malawi shared, when the people are able to meet and discuss as a large group, "one group member can start, then… [this] also gives a clue to [another] member, who can answer from what a certain member has said," meaning, members can build on the discussion, broaden their understanding, and come up with effective plans for action when they are able to all work together again. **In-person meetings** are therefore important in the community-led process.

This approach has its own, unique challenges. With people currently interacting primarily over the phone or social media, "it is not always clear whether the people understand what you are trying to communicate with them," (practitioner, Nepal). In many communities, this leads to delays or issues with community engagement. As one practitioner from Malawi shared,

> **"For example, I might […] be facilitating through [a] phone call to the leaders, [and] he or she may interpret it in another way. So, most of the time I am not sure if [the activity] is really going to be implemented as I planned, or in a different way."**

Face-to-face interaction is necessary for effective and productive community engagement. Without it, work moves more slowly, and there is a wider margin for miscommunication, misunderstanding, division, and overall unproductive outcomes.

Digital Divide:

Even though "internet access enables human rights to education, healthcare, religion, safety services, and livelihoods […] approximately half the world's population – 46% – is not connected to the internet," a divide that is most pronounced in the least developed countries.[17] During our discussions with practitioners, many confirmed this challenge by sharing that the internet is not available in communities unless members pay for expensive data packages they cannot afford.

In addition to issues with affordability or access to internet connectivity, further challenges exist — the types of devices available to communities; knowledge of smartphone technology, network stability, and availability of electricity. Specific populations are even more affected by the digital divide. In our interviews, we found that women and older generations had less access to, or knowledge of, the use of technology. A Bolivian practitioner shared, "Women do not have cell phones, or do not use them enough to understand how to use them effectively. So [we] sometimes have to communicate with men more than women." Similarly, with older members, "even if they have phones, they don't always know how to use it" (practitioner, Philippines).

Politics of the Pandemic:

Not all countries have had the same response to, or felt the same effects of the pandemic. In fact, in some countries, COVID-19 has been made into a political issue. This has taken many forms, including leaders making false claims about conspiracies, inaccurate or misleading information about who is affected by the virus and why, the proliferation and spread of misinformation, and groups with differing political

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[17] Human Rights Watch. (2020, October 28).

preferences adopting opposing and antagonistic stances on the virus. One practitioner[18] shared,

> **"[…] there was a political leader from the government who said that this virus is for the rich, that poor people are not affected. He was saying [this] in the media […] so that is what they are spreading to the people. They are not taking precautions or social distancing, because they say that [COVID-19] is for the people that are against the government."**

In another location, demonstrations led to events where "the majority of political leaders asked senior politicians to resign" due to widespread political frustration and disagreement with their government's inaction. These outcomes can lead to division among people, because some follow orders and uphold the current government's decisions, while others, "because of anger […] disobey the orders." Such tensions spread to a local level, complicating the work of local leaders, CBOs, and practitioners.

Fear, Distrust, Anger, and Confusion:

Major factors like incorrect information, a general lack of understanding of the pandemic, the inability to address basic needs due government-mandated lockdowns, and rapidly increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases continue to worry communities. Practitioners in many countries shared community members' fear of being infected with the virus, not finding work, food shortages, increasing food prices, and a feeling of helplessness in the face of mounting socioeconomic and health challenges.

In Bolivia, practitioners shared that "people are banding together and saying that people from the city cannot come to their community." Yet, due to a lack of understanding of COVID-19, the people are "not taking necessary precautions and not reporting cases." Practitioners in Nepal reported that there is "stress around limited access to food." Community members wonder "how the children will survive […] they are asking, 'when will the lockdown be over? If it is always [a] lockdown, how will we survive?' They are helpless." In Zambia, practitioners told us about the different beliefs around COVID-19. Due to rumors, "community members [are] not as accepting of the information and instruction given by the local leaders."

Mobility Issues:

Government restrictions to the pandemic have made mobility difficult, which in turn means, practitioners cannot reach communities and community members cannot travel to work, markets, or family members. One practitioner from the Philippines summarizes what such restrictions looked like during the height of the pandemic:

> **"[You] have to line up for hours […] plus, it is expensive. You have to pay for the medical document. [To obtain the] medical certificate, you have to pay for the x-ray and the other tests they have to conduct. I had a discussion with [another practitioner] just this morning, because according to [her], she will travel to another city in a different province. Once she gets back to her province, it is mandatory for her to be in quarantine and to take a swab test, and I think you have to pay for that […] then, when waiting for the result, you have to be quarantined. Those requirements will be shouldered by the person, the individual. So, it takes time, plus, it will be expensive."**

Networking Challenges:

Establishing, accessing, and maintaining networks is essential to the success of CBOs and their work in their communities. It is via these networks that communities access the resources needed to resolve their poverty-related issues. However, practitioners noted how communities find that they "cannot continue mobilization to look outside for more resources or contacts" (practitioner, Nicaragua). Since workers cannot be together and offices are closed, in many circumstances, "there will be no group mobilization to resource institutions. As a result, resources for resolution of issues will be limited" (practitioner, Zambia).

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[18] Considering some countries' sensitivity toward political commentary, we refrain from listing these practitioners' nationality.

In addition to these communities' inability to mobilize to resource institutions, there is also uncertainty "if the [resource institutions] would have any resources" (practitioner, Philippines). According to another practitioner in the Philippines, "Most government resources have already been used during [the] early days of rations and emergency relief." Considering how vital resources are to the implementation and sustainability of communities' projects, mobility issues, closed offices, and scarcity of funds have been some of the most-challenging factors facing CBOs.

To the Future | Recommendations to Strengthen Future Interventions

For this study, we were interested in how practitioners adapted their community-led initiatives during COVID-19. This includes the numerous adjustments cited above to continue their support to local communities, despite looming challenges. While such adjustments can inform our understanding of current practices, they have the potential to also shape future interventions. **Strengthening for the future,** the third theme emerging from our data analysis, speaks specifically to future interventions.

STRENGTHENING FOR THE FUTURE	**Table 2:** Program partners' observations following their interventions during COVID-19
Learning from the Experience	
	Fragility
	"We are learning from this"
Preparing Disaster Risk and Reduction Management Structures	
	Having foresight
Implementing "Smart" Projects	
	Strong policies and procedures
Strengthening Organizational Structures	
	Clustering of homes as units
Increasing Health and Sanitation Awareness Practices	
Increasing ICT (Information and Communication Technology) Accessibility	
Adjusting the PHD Process	
	Accelerate consolidation of communities in ground-breaking phase
Prioritizing Leadership Development	
	Accelerate leadership training
	Increase ICT (Information and Communication Technology) training
	Focus on proposal writing/ and specific kind of meetings
	Awareness training with leaders
Networking Now, Benefits Later	
	Developing a resource network inventory

Both datasets reflect program partners' concerns over vulnerable communities, the **fragility** of their economic lives amid limited resources, ever-decreasing food resources, wages, and a dearth of employment opportunities. However, practitioners also recognize that the pandemic has forced them and their community partners to be creative, innovative, and adaptable. As a practitioner from Nepal shared:

> **"COVID is no good, but it is providing opportunities for [us and our community partners] to discover alternative ways of remaining interactive, access resources, relate with local organizations, and continue with their issue analysis planning."**

Practitioners from Cambodia shared the same sentiment, positing,

> **"The challenges the community members have been facing will become their lessons learned and their leading ways to set an action plan in their project management; getting ready to address similar issues during [future] periods like this."**

Program partners across the board recognized the need to better support communities' preparation for future emergencies and large-scale challenges. As a first step toward better preparedness, practitioners "should start with **a deep analysis and meaning-making[19]**" behind the causes and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (practitioner, Philippines). At least four additional strategies emerged from both survey and interview data.

1) Develop a contingency plan, such as a disaster-risk-and-reduction management plan
2) Implement and sustain "smart" projects
3) Strengthen existing organizational structures and develop new ones
4) Increase health and sanitation practices

Preparing Disaster Risk and Reduction Management (DRRM) Structures:

A practitioner from Nepal shared, "our thinking about COVID-19 developed into thinking more broadly about calamity." Similarly, other program partners recognized the need for foresight because no one is immune to future disasters. Part of this foresight is to have a contingency plan in place. For some program partners, such a plan takes the shape of a DRRM structure. Some communities may already have such plans, particularly those in the Philippines, where natural disasters frequently disrupt people's lives. But, as one practitioner mentioned, teams and communities can indeed spend more time strengthening such plans. Where plans do not exist, developing a community-wide, agreed-upon disaster plan can improve communities' preparedness for any future emergencies or disasters. A practitioner from the Philippines described their future strategy as follows:

> **"To prepare them for whatever pandemic or calamities may happen, some of them are already doing this, we call it the 'disastrous risk-reduction management' (DRRM), so it is good to have trainings related to DRRM for all communities, because before, only those that were affected by really strong typhoons had this series of training and planning, but [for areas] less prone to flash floods, the worry is lesser. But now, as we saw, nobody is excluded, anymore. Our team will be doing intensive DRRM training with the people [...] We will start with an overall assessment — following COVID-19 — and then, from there, develop a contingency plan for any calamity, and then maybe facilitate them to access training from the government in relation to this."**

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[19] The process of how people understand and make sense of large-scale events and their long-lasting impact on their lives.

Implementing "Smart" Projects:

During the pandemic, many households experienced how unemployment, combined with ever-decreasing savings resulted in food shortages. Governments and relief agencies have reacted to such needs through food distribution, and in some cases, unconditional cash transfer initiatives. While these efforts doubtlessly helped many households navigate their food shortages, they remain reactionary rather than proactive, and are not necessarily sustainable in the long-term. With this in mind, practitioners reflected on the need for community-led projects that are "smart," i.e., independent from external resources, income-generating, and including a food production component.

Some program partners also appreciate loan projects. In observing community partners who manage food and emergency loans, practitioners recognized how these projects had supported community members throughout the pandemic. There is potential in these projects: "Communities should therefore expand on them, gaining access to more capital, expanding their reach, so that more people can have access to those loans because they are very helpful in emergency situations" (practitioner, Philippines).

Strengthening Organizational Structures:

When considering how to support communities to become prepared for future emergencies, practitioners emphasized the importance of a robust **organizational structure,** which forms the foundation from which communities act together in addressing the challenges accompanying a pandemic. In the communities supported by OI and its program partners, such an organizational structure includes guiding principles and membership policies. These frameworks provide communities with the organizational infrastructure to manage their local projects, request support from government agencies and private enterprises, and, on a political level, collectively advocate for their community's needs. When anticipating future emergencies, strengthening local communities' organizational structures should be at the forefront of practitioners' minds.

Increasing Health and Sanitation Awareness Practices:

Conversations around sanitation have been an unavoidable reality of COVID-19. Some practitioners argued that such conversations should not stop in a post-COVID-19 future. Instead, program and community partners should continue their awareness programming around health and sanitation as a general effort to combat preventative illness.

Localizing Support:

Recently, the international development sector has reflected on the relationship between funding agencies and local nonprofits. This has included discussions about greater independence for local country offices and local nonprofits from their broader international "parent" organizations. Similar sentiments emerged from our interviews, with some practitioners arguing for more independence from Outreach International. In the event something were to happen to OI -- many program partners' primary source of revenue -- program partners would need organizational momentum to seek alternative support.

Increasing ICT accessibility (Information and Communication Technologies):

Despite the digital divide, practitioners recognize the value in ICTs in strengthening both their and community partners' community-led initiatives by enabling regular and reliable communication with community members, resource institutions, and practitioners. Increasing communities' access to, and use of ICTs, should therefore be included in future strategic discussions. For many communities, this means **advocating for the infrastructure needed to access reliable and affordable internet service.**

A common denominator among OI program partners is their application of Participatory Human Development (PHD). PHD is a community-led approach, inspired by Freirian democratic education and informed by Arleskian Community Organizing traditions. While PHD's ultimate goal is to empower locally owned and managed community development, the approach's processes do take time. The first 18-24 months -- called the "groundbreaking stage" -- can feel exceptionally long, since the practitioners need to first gain the trust of local community members before introducing them to the problem-solving process associated with PHD.

Practitioners shared their concerns over the time allotted to the groundbreaking phase. While they do not necessarily dispute the phase's importance, they also recognize how the phase's duration can postpone the development of local leaders and formation of local CBOs. One certainty of the upheaval caused by COVID-19 restrictions is that experienced CBOs and their leaders play an invaluable role in supporting their communities. **Future strategic discussions should include possible adjustments to the expectations of PHD's first phase to consider ways of accelerating this phase.**

Prioritizing Leadership Development:

Because of their instrumental role in community-led development, practitioners emphasized the importance of leadership development. For inexperienced leaders, responsibilities like organizing and facilitating meetings, as well as project management, might feel overwhelming. Leadership development is already a part of program partners' programming, but usually takes place later in their intervention. During our conversations, practitioners recommended that leadership development happen **earlier in their intervention** to provide emerging leaders with the tools they need to support their communities sooner, rather than later.

Practitioners shared that experienced leaders can also benefit from more leadership training. **Information and communication technologies (ICTs)- related training** further strengthens their capacity. As a practitioner from India explained:

> **"We have to train the leaders how they can do WhatsApp group chat or [Facebook] Messenger. So that if something happens, and field staff are not able to go to the field, they can have the WhatsApp group or in the Messenger if they have a smartphone, and through that, they can share things."**

ICT-related training is also needed to help community leaders access funding. During our conversations, practitioners noted the need for local leaders to engage electronically with potential donors, including the submission of online funding requests. However, as a practitioner from the Philippines shared, leaders are not yet ready for such submissions. To achieve this goal, leaders need to learn a variety of things, including how to navigate **online sites and funding portals,** how to "submit photo documentation," as well as the "dos and don'ts when communicating online with resource networks" (practitioner, Philippines). The content of funding proposals is equally important. In this regard, practitioners mentioned the need for **proposal-writing training.** Such training can help leaders increase the quality of their submissions, which in turn, can improve their chances of acquiring funding.

Networking Now, Benefiting Later:

Strong networks enable communities to access information and resources. By **establishing such networks in advance** of calamities, pandemics, and other crises, communities and their leaders will know whom to ask for help, and what resources are available. Proactive networking efforts might require additional training. Some practitioners mentioned a need for training to develop an inventory of organizations, agencies, and individuals whom communities can contact during precarious times.

GENERAL TAKEAWAYS

What can we learn from the adjustments OI practitioners have made to continue their support to local communities? What do their observations tell us about contexts in which practitioners employ community-led development? How can such observations inform our future work? Here are three takeaways from our findings, as well as a list of recommendations practitioners can consider when thinking about post-pandemic strategizing and interventions.

TAKEAWAY 1 | *Bolster Local Leadership*

Community-led interventions need local leadership in the best of times, but COVID-19 made local leadership's centrality especially prominent. Throughout the pandemic, practitioners looked to local leaders to sustain collective actions. These leaders also supported their communities and their efforts toward mediating the pandemic's challenges. Without specific individuals to represent their communities, initiating and sustaining collective action becomes challenging. Two recommendations we therefore must consider when looking toward the future are **strengthening existing leaders' capacity and developing leadership pipelines** to ensure ongoing leadership cultivation and development.

TAKEAWAY 2 | *Local Communities Have the Agency to do the Work*

COVID-19 made visible the inherent ability of local communities to act in their best interests. Examples include communities in Nepal putting up barriers to better regulate the movement of people between theirs and other communities; leaders in the Philippines proactively networking with government officials to identify resources needed in their communities; and communities in Nicaragua continuing collecting data needed to satisfy their funding requirements. The primary goal of social development should be to bolster — and if needed, inspire -- local agency. Personal agency is where the capacity to adapt and adjust to emergencies is situated, as the COVID-19 crisis has emphasized.

TAKEAWAY 3 | *Strengthening Interventions for Greater Future Preparedness*

When reflecting on the lessons learned during 2020, particularly those concerned with sustaining community-led development, another consideration is how such new lessons might inform new futures. Here follows a list of considerations organizations and their practitioners can consider when thinking about strengthening their support toward local communities.

1) Develop a contingency plan, such as a DRRM plan

2) Implement and sustain "smart" projects that ensure ongoing benefit to communities

3) Strengthen existing organizational structures, and develop new ones

4) Increase, improve, and normalize health and sanitation practices

5) Accelerate interventions, particularly initial integration and groundbreaking stages

6) Increase access to and training in ICT, particularly for leaders, minimizing disruption and sustaining community engagement

7) Prioritize and accelerate leadership development -- local leaders are valuable; invest more in them

8) Bolster communities' networking efforts to ensure their connectedness to more resources

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