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# **SOLIDARITY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19**

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, civil society stepped up to help. Civil society organisations (CSOs) made a difference to people and communities experiencing the impacts of both the pandemic and the emergency measures taken by states. CSOs worked not only as frontline responders, but also as defenders of human rights during the pandemic, including the rights of vulnerable and excluded groups. This report outlines some of the many civil society responses to the COVID-19 crisis. It sets out how CSOs provided help to people and communities, how CSOs defended rights and how civic action was sustained through new and alternate means. It complements CIVICUS's other **initiatives** to document and understand the multiple ways in which the pandemic affected civil society, including its impacts on **civic space** and civil society **resourcing**.

Our report showcases civil society actions and presents civil society voices. It draws from a range of sources, including a series of interviews with civil society leaders and activists, a survey of CIVICUS members, inputs from members of the **Affinity Group of National Associations** (AGNA, a network of national civil society associations and regional platforms), a variety of webinars and public discussions, **CIVICUS Monitor** posts and media reports.

Published at a time when the pandemic and its impacts were still affecting most societies, our report seeks to offer a snapshot of a diverse array of civil society activity, pointing to the vital contribution civil society is making in responding to the crisis and defending rights, and its role as a source of creativity and innovation. It draws some preliminary lessons and makes recommendations on how states and other stakeholders can enable and work with civil society, in pandemic response and recovery and in future emergency situations, so that civil society can address immediate needs and help tackle the underlying issues that crises expose.



People distribute food boxes outside Taqwa mosque in New York, USA.  
© Stephanie Keith/Getty Images



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Cover photo: Hospital nurse demands the provision of biosafety supplies at Los Andes Hospital in La Paz, Bolivia, on 16 June 2020.

Photo credit: Gaston Brito/Getty Images



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COVID-19 presented a new and alarming crisis for us all. As the pandemic spread, people rightly expected their countries' leaders to step up to the challenge and make sound choices to protect lives and livelihoods. They called on their leaders to strike difficult balances between preventing the spread of the virus, temporarily limiting freedoms and enabling people to fulfil their essential needs.

There were states where decision-makers made broadly sound choices that limited the transmission of the virus and the impacts of emergency measures. There were also examples of chaotic, corrupt and self-serving decision-making that cost lives, restricted rights and worsened impacts. In many cases states introduced excessive rights restrictions, and some clearly used the emergency as a pretext to centralise power and crack down on fundamental freedoms.

But while much attention has fallen on the actions of states, positive and negative, there has been far less acknowledgement of the vital role played by civil society. Even in difficult conditions of restricted civic space, there was a rapid and vital civil society response. Civil society met needs, defended rights and forged new paths for civic action. In country after country, a diverse range of civil society groups scrambled to meet the needs of communities most affected by the crisis. Often civil society stepped in where others failed to act, working to fill gaps left by states and businesses.

Much of civil society's responses focused on mitigating the impacts of state policies that imposed lockdowns and halted many aspects of daily life, which affected vulnerable and excluded groups first and worst. Lockdowns, curfews and other emergency restrictions were often imposed hurriedly, with little preparation and mostly with no consultation with civil society, and consequently had unforeseen impacts. While many states offered support in response to the dramatic

slowdown of economic activity, schemes were often inadequate, leaving many people still struggling. They often failed to take into account the needs of particular excluded groups. For example, many people working in the informal economy could not access support measures that only recognised formal labour; people lacking official identity documents, including undocumented migrants, often did not qualify for assistance; women, among others, were marginalised by support schemes that targeted men as heads of households. Civil society worked to compensate for these deficits by providing vital support and information.

Alongside responses to meet essential needs, civil society worked to defend the rights of those whose access to rights was further hampered. Among people affected were women who became much more exposed to **gender-based violence** (GBV) while locked down at home, ethnic, racial and religious minorities and LGBTQI+ people who were slurred as sources of contagion, and people living on the streets or in informal settlements, who were most at risk of both contagion and punishment for violating emergency regulations. Civil society worked to monitor and expose rights violations and campaign and advocate for policies that better served excluded groups. Civil society also sought to hold states accountable for decisions made in responding to the pandemic, including major but often opaque decisions on procurement and the use of resources.

Civil society responded even though the pandemic was also a crisis for civil society. CSOs were forced to postpone many scheduled activities, hold urgent conversations with donors and work to assure the **welfare** of their staff, as civil society's conventional resourcing and organising approaches were **challenged**. Civic space became more restricted in many contexts as a result of emergency measures. Where possible, civil society tried to partner with states as well as the private sector, although in many cases, states viewed CSOs as competitors for visibility



or resources, or as obstacles to their response. Many states worked to restrict the ability of CSOs to act, while privileging private sector allies.

But time and again, in the face of these challenges, civil society adopted a can-do mindset, mounting a positive response characterised by flexibility, creativity and innovation. CSOs redeployed staff and financial resources to serve urgent needs. CSOs that normally prioritise advocacy for rights rapidly reoriented to providing essential supplies and services, including food, healthcare and cash support, to help sustain communities. CSOs that normally work closely with communities found other ways of serving people who could no longer be physically reached. Everywhere, CSOs became trusted sources of information and enemies of misinformation. Alongside the redeployment of existing CSOs, numerous new neighbourhood-level mutual help groups quickly formed, tapping into and enabling local resilience. Protests for rights went online or found alternate ways of gathering that respected physical distancing and embraced creative means of expressing dissent.

The panoply of civil society response demonstrated again the essential and interconnected roles that civil society plays: as a trusted partner, enabler and defender of communities and excluded groups; as a valued source of support, advice and information; as an essential corrective to state and market failures; as a determined advocate for better policies that reach communities, meet people's needs and uphold rights; and as a vital source of accountability over state and private sector decisions and safeguard against corruption. There was never a greater need for civil society, and what was clear was that while physical distancing was needed, it could not be at the expense of social solidarity; solidarity was needed more than ever to help everyone get through this crisis and overcome its impacts.

This was a time when it should have been abundantly clear that no one



A student in Spain protests with a sign that reads 'whether online or in-person, we want quality education'. © Carlos Gil Andreu/Getty Images

had a monopoly on wisdom, including states and political leaders; the need was to recognise and respect the many sources of knowledge, creativity and innovation, including civil society and the local wisdom of communities. Difficult decisions had to be made, but more than one pandemic response was possible, and the response did not need to be one that extended and concentrated state power, punished people and repressed rights. No response was perfect, and the hard choices that had to be made inevitably had some negative impacts. But the states that fared best in responding to the pandemic, limiting its spread and minimising impacts, were those that recognised the need to balance emergency measures with respect for rights, demonstrated empathy, were guided by scientific advice, provided clear and accurate information, and respected civic space and recognised civil society as partners. Those

that did worse were those where ruling figures put partisan interests first, disregarded rights, disputed science, spread disinformation and treated civil society as enemies.

What should be clear is that in responding to the pandemic, and in all future responses to crises and emergencies, states should recognise the value of civil society and work to enable and partner with it, across a diverse range of civil society forms and responses. Doing so will lead to more joined-up and effective responses that respect rights. The hard lessons must be learned from the mistakes made under the COVID-19 pandemic to equip the world for the next series of challenges to come, including action on the climate crisis.



In India, Gram Bharati Samiti (Society for Rural Development) organise to support migrant families during the pandemic. © Ramchandra Saini



If the efforts of civil society are to be enabled, they first need to be better understood. Across multiple contexts and through a diversity of forms, some common types of response were seen. Key areas of responses identified in research are set out below. They indicate the existence of a treasure trove of experience, skills and capacities that were applied and honed in pandemic response and that can be drawn upon in responding to future emergencies.

While key types of responses are described below, it should be made clear that many of the CSOs whose work is described offered multiple forms of response simultaneously. They were effective precisely because they combined different responses, such as providing essential goods and services to communities, sharing information and advocating towards states for rights, and in connecting these responses, they used a variety of tactics.

The combination of strategies of public policy advocacy, court action on collective conflicts and community empowerment resulted in larger impacts than those that would have been obtained in the absence of this interconnection of strategies.

Sebastián Pilo, Civil Association for Equality and Justice, Argentina<sup>1</sup>

States, donors and policy-makers should therefore enable not only the different types of civil society responses set out below, but also connections between responses and civil society's ability to work across multiple fronts simultaneously. During emergencies, just as in other times, advocacy and scrutiny, for example, must be recognised as legitimate civil society roles, and civil society should not be limited solely to service delivery functions, important though these are.

## MEETING ESSENTIAL NEEDS

The pandemic and the emergency measures imposed in many societies saw rising need, particularly for excluded groups and people left without their regular incomes, at the same time that many services became unavailable, as institutions such as schools, day centres, shelters and community kitchens were shuttered. Emergency support schemes launched by states were often inadequate given the scale of the need, or failed to reach key vulnerable and excluded groups, while existing social safety nets could not hope to meet the sudden increase in demand as many people found themselves unable to pay for essentials.

Civil society stepped forward to meet this need, providing food, personal protective equipment (PPE) and essential sanitary items, offering financial aid and filling gaps in the provision of healthcare and psychological support. While civil society cooperated with states wherever possible, it did not wait for them to act, and often moved more rapidly than states could. Civil society took responsibility, showed leadership and modelled responses that could be scaled up. Time and again, this was not simply a case of doling out charity that positioned people as the recipients of aid, but rather of reaching out to communities who were struggling, hearing people's needs and working to meet those needs, in ways that upheld people's dignity and rights and recognised the long-term challenges and histories of exclusion that the pandemic patterned onto.

Very often civil society met the most urgent needs, for the basic goods and services required to sustain life, including food and healthcare. In **Malaysia**, a range of civil society bodies – including the pro-democracy Bersih coalition, the Malaysian Trade Union Congress and a range of migrant and refugee community groups – mobilised to provide food to migrant workers, many of whom lost their only source of income and

<sup>1</sup> All interviews quoted in this report are edited extracts. Full versions of interviews can be found on our website at <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-center/news/interviews>.

were left out of state support schemes, particularly when they lacked documentation. In doing so, civil society responded to needs identified and communicated by migrant workers. Beyond these immediate responses, civil society worked to develop longer-term support plans.

There were many other similar stories of civil society response. Across **Asia**, the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact and its members supplied food to Indigenous communities in need, including in India, where racism against Indigenous people intensified during the pandemic, leading to some people being thrown out of their homes and barred from public transport and grocery stores. The response in India also saw **hundreds** of CSOs, including **Goonj**, **Gram Bharati Samiti** and **Mahatma Gandhi Seva Ashram**, to name but few, mobilising to help migrants, informal workers and slum dwellers, providing food, masks, sanitiser and menstrual hygiene products. **Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action** provided food to healthcare workers, along with support to India's homeless people and slum dwellers. In neighbouring **Myanmar**, Soi Dog Foundation was among those that distributed food, reaching 172 families of migrant workers whose work in construction and leisure industries ground to a halt.

We intensified our work to support migrants, slum dwellers and daily wage earners. Staff, members and volunteers cooked food, stitched washable masks, produced sanitary napkins and prepared sanitiser. We supplied food packets and food grain kits to over 30,000 people, low-cost washable masks and sanitiser to 2,000 people and sanitary napkins to thousands of women and girls. We provided travel support to 60 migrant families trying to return to their home villages.

Bhawani Kusum, Gram Bharati Samiti, India

**Japan's** homeless population, who face considerable social stigma and are often invisible to policy-makers, saw the soup kitchens they usually rely on for food and the cybercafes they normally sleep in closed down. In response, the Moyai Support Centre for Independent Living worked with a fellow civil society group to set up a new soup kitchen, providing over 600 packages of food in April alone.

**Caminando Fronteras** (Walking Borders), a CSO that supports migrants in Morocco and Spain, worked with partners in major cities on both sides of the Mediterranean to provide essential supplies and health kits. Another CSO, Solidarity with Women in Distress, worked in **Morocco** to distribute food baskets to single mothers living in isolated districts of the cities of Casablanca and Marrakesh. In the townships of Cape Town, South Africa, **Ikamva Labantu** mobilised to provide food and hygiene parcels to over 1,000 older people. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), **BIFERD** (Bureau d'Informations, Formations, Échanges et Recherches pour le Développement), a national-level CSO, worked with partners to distribute food and masks.

Less than 50 per cent of people in the DRC have access to clean water and adequate sanitation infrastructure. We conducted an assessment in Goma City to understand people's COVID-19-related knowledge, attitudes and practices. Based on guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the ministry of health, we trained 50 volunteers and then educated more than 10,000 people. Our youth group made masks that they distributed to children and young people. We also collected and distributed food and hygiene products.

Staff member, BIFERD, DRC



In Cameroon, where the state made mask use compulsory but did not ensure a free supply, **Crusaders for Environmental Protection and Ozone Watch**, a CSO than usually campaigns on environmental issues, reoriented to distributing masks, producing sanitiser and installing buckets for hand washing. In the same country, the **Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa**, a CSO that normally dedicates its time to human rights advocacy and the promotion of democratic governance, did likewise, while **Local Youth Corner** brought together young scientists to manufacture and distribute free sanitiser to communities lacking access to clean water.

In **Italy**, thousands of Nigerian women who had been trafficked into sex work were simply abandoned during lockdown by the gangs who had profited from them. Due to their undocumented status they could not approach the state for help. Civil society groups stepped in, making regular food deliveries. In the city of Naples, a cooperative group, **Dedalus**, set up a crowdfunded initiative to provide food packages and other aid. Alongside this, civil society worked to assist the growing numbers of women coming forward seeking to break their ties with their traffickers, and provided psychological support, an area that was overlooked in state interventions in many countries, even though the pandemic was a time of rising mental health needs.

Among those facing increased mental health challenges were many young **LGBTQI+ people**, forced into family homes and effectively back into closets by emergency measures, with many having to submerge their identities and cut off from their usual support networks. In the Philippines, **Youth Voices Count** helped respond to this need by distributing LGBTQI+ care packs, including to people living with HIV/AIDS. Humanity and Inclusion provided personal psychological support to **Rohingya** refugees from Myanmar living in Bangladesh, alongside hygiene awareness-raising sessions and medical referrals. In **Lebanon**,



Staff members of the CSO Crusaders for Environmental Protection and Ozone Watch install a water station in a community in Cameroon. © Fontoh Desmond

the Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering provided psychological support as part of its range of responses to help women and girls experiencing violence during the pandemic.

Civil and women's rights organisations are playing vital roles mainly through providing psychosocial and legal support to women and girl survivors of GBV, raising awareness on the gendered impact of the current crisis, mainly through online and social media, advocating for better measures and commitment from the government and officials to protect women's rights, support in distributing and providing food assistance and in-kind or cash support to families and women in need.

Hayat Mirshad, Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering

Civil society also responded by providing essential health services. **Brazil's** Indigenous communities were particularly hard hit by COVID-19 and emergency measures, and state support was inadequate. In response, in the Amazon region, Brazilian CSO Health Expeditionaries set up temporary hospitals, so that people could be treated close to home rather than travel vast distances to city hospitals, while Indigenous groups worked with local officials to buy and distribute food parcels when state aid failed to arrive. In the USA, **Direct Relief** also supplemented official health provision, supplying equipment and tents so that triage of patients could be done outside hospitals to help prevent contagion. In **Chile**, Movimiento Salud en Resistencia (Health Movement in Resistance), founded during 2019's **extensive protests** and a persistent critic of the country's healthcare system, focused on conducting health training sessions and sanitising public spaces, alongside educating the public on COVID-19, assessing that the state was failing to do all of these adequately. Similarly in **Algeria**, the Hirak protest movement,

which in **2019** forced out long-time president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and was continuing to demand greater political change when the pandemic broke out, reorganised to provide PPE to hospitals, partnering with local authorities where possible, as well as providing food supplies.

Diaspora groups often played a key role in mobilising essential help: a US-based diaspora group, We Are All Dominican, provided support that enabled 250 families in the **Dominican Republic** to receive essential food and other supplies for three months. In the conflict-torn context of **Yemen**, the Food4Humanity Foundation, one of Yemen's first women-led CSOs, channelled funding from the Yemeni diaspora to support the training of around 200 young medical workers, bypassing the corruption often associated with support through official channels. **Remittances** from migrant workers back to families at home were another essential source of support in many global south communities.

Faith institutions could also play an important part. In the USA, **United Sikhs** tapped into faith practices, repurposing the large communal kitchens of Sikh temples to provide essential meals to those in need, including older people shielding at home and those unable to afford food, with people able to request help through a dedicated hotline and website. Sikh temples also **provided** food and water to people taking part in Black Lives Matter protests, connecting with churches to do so.

To continue reaching communities physically, CSOs developed and embraced new protection protocols, investing in PPE and implementing distancing measures to minimise risk to the people they serve. In **Mexico**, for example, shelters for women forced to leave their homes due to domestic violence continued to provide in-person care after putting in place enhanced safety measures. In **Jamaica**, 11 CSOs undertook training with the Pan-American Health Organization so they could be sure they would not spread the virus among the communities they work with.





Japan's Moyai Support Centre seeks alternatives for homeless people after internet cafes and other gathering places close due to the pandemic. © Carl Court/Getty Images

## SHARING INFORMATION

As well as providing life-sustaining food in the soup kitchen it established, Japan's Moyai Support Centre for Independent Living realised that its facility came to serve as a vital hub for the sharing of information about COVID-19 and ways to reduce infection risk. This was a crucial role, as many homeless people were not able to access this information by conventional means.

The current situation reveals that soup kitchens and other voluntary activities played a vital role as an information centre for homeless people, and especially for rough sleepers. People in that situation have scarce access to important information about COVID-19 and related policies and services. Some of them gain information from radio and newspapers but these media are not available to all rough sleepers. Thus, for many of them, voluntary activities are almost the only source of accurate information.

**Tsubasa Yuki**, Moyai Support Centre for Independent Living,  
Japan

This role, of civil society acting as a hub to disseminate accurate information, was a common one, seen in countries around the world. In meeting this need, civil society identified and responded to some major problems: many people found it hard to access accurate information in languages and formats they could understand; some groups, because they are excluded from access to rights and power, were not adequately reached by state information; and the circulation of misinformation was a pandemic all of its own. Misinformation, both intentionally and unintentionally produced and shared, often encouraged unsafe behaviours or the targeting of excluded groups.

In working to spread accurate information and combat misinformation, civil society often faced attempts by states to control narratives and flows of information. Many political leaders sought to position themselves in a positive light as leaders of effective response, and many states worked to censor or discredit other sources of information, even when they were credible. As journalists sought to report independently and people criticised state responses to outbreaks, crackdowns on the freedom of expression came in response from numerous countries around the world, including in **Cambodia**, **Cuba** and **Niger**, among many others. Newly introduced laws and punishments for spreading alleged ‘fake news’, including in **Bulgaria**, **Egypt** and **Kyrgyzstan**, were the tools of choice of many states. States also often moved to prevent critical and independent media from participating or asking questions in media conferences, including in **Albania**, **El Salvador** and **Serbia**. At the same time, independent media in many contexts struggled to sustain a service as income collapsed during the sudden economic downturn.

In the face of these challenges, civil society did what it could to get the message out. Information developed and shared by civil society sought to help people understand how they could avoid infection and seek treatment if experiencing symptoms. It also set out the support schemes available and people’s social, political and economic rights, and ways of defending these under emergency measures. CSOs worked to provide clear and accurate information in a range of languages and formats, including many languages that official sources failed to use, tailoring information to meet the needs and capabilities of excluded groups, and often drawing on **storytelling** skills in doing so.

In the **UK**, Doctors of the World translated COVID-19 guidance, including in audio and video form, into over 60 languages, to make up for the limited range of languages in which the state provided up-to-date advice; by July, its translated guidance had been downloaded over 60,000

times. In **Malaysia**, the North South Initiative turned information from credible sources into infographics in a range of languages for migrant workers and refugees. Similarly, the **Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations** spearheaded the translation and distribution of key information on the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the state of emergency took us all by surprise, as we were not prepared. But we reacted quickly and produced informational materials in nine local languages, which we distributed to all Ethiopian regions. We also mobilised resources for advocacy using radio and TV and reached out to partners for additional support.

Mesud Gebeyehu Reta, Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations



South Korean environmental activists take part in a COVID-19 prevention campaign in Seoul on 30 March 2020. © Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images



Cameroon's Crusaders for Environmental Protection and Ozone Watch distributed flyers and used radio spots and social media to share information, particularly targeting people affected by conflict in the country's **Anglophone region**. Also in Cameroon, alongside work to distribute masks to people in jails, **Local Youth Corner** offered sessions with prisoners to raise their awareness of the virus and counter misinformation. BIFERD educated over 10,000 people about COVID-19 in the DRC, while in Liberia, **Youth Alliance for Rural Development in Liberia** built awareness through community workshops.

We redirected our efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and brought our sensitisation efforts deep into the interior communities hit by the secessionist crisis, most of whom believed the virus was a myth. We combined traditional media such as radio with social media, door-to-door campaigning and flyer distribution. We emphasised the need to respect WHO and government guidelines.

Fontoh Desmond Abinwi, Crusaders for Environmental Protection and Ozone Watch, Cameroon

Our organisation was among the first CSOs in Liberia to create awareness among local communities about COVID-19 and its prevention. We used paper, markers, microphones and other materials we had to inform people. Donors came later and found out that locals already had some knowledge about COVID-19.

Foeday Zinnah, Youth Alliance for Rural Development in Liberia

The **Centre for Social Concern and Development** in Malawi was unable to conduct physical meetings with the girls it seeks to protect from GBV

and child marriage, or to distribute condoms and contraceptives as usual. It switched to using a combination of online and offline means to share messages with girls and young women about strategies to protect themselves from GBV under lockdowns and ways to report violence. Working in a range of languages, including sign language, the Centre for Social Concern and Development used social media, WhatsApp, a podcast and community radio and TV appearances. Alongside this, it distributed flyers and brochures at key locations, such as shops and



BIFERD in the DRC trains educators to raise awareness of COVID-19 and disseminate prevention measures among the population. © BIFERD

water coolers, and used a loudspeaker vehicle to tour villages at a safe distance. The Centre also pushed for the inclusion of information on preventing GBV into materials on COVID-19 prevention prepared by healthcare providers.

We have identified low-cost tools to keep girls engaged and have continued to empower them during the pandemic. We have done this both by using new technologies where available and accessible, and by reaching out in other ways to girls in communities with no access to social media.

Ephraim Chimwaza, Centre for Social Concern and Development, Malawi

In **Turkey**, Mor Çatı, a CSO that works to end violence against women, realised that the state was failing in its duty to communicate the fact that women experiencing domestic violence could still go to the police and that shelters were still open under the emergency; the police were giving women false information. So Mor Çatı took to social media to fill the gap left by the state and communicate this vital message.

Social media has become a great tool for us. We used to make use of it a lot before, but during the pandemic we used it more. We used it to provide information to women, to let them know about their rights.

The government was responsible for communicating to women that one of the exemptions regarded violence against women: in case of violence they could still go to a police station. But they didn't make such announcement, so we had to provide this information.

Elif Ege, Mor Çatı, Turkey

Civil society also provided information on protection strategies for women at risk of violence in **Mexico**, working in several languages, including Indigenous languages and sign language. **Controla tu Gobierno** was one Mexican CSO that embraced the digital sphere: it provided a personalised service to help people overcome lack of knowledge or worries about online activity, including by working with children as often the most tech-aware members of households, providing equipment where required, and set up video calls to enable communities experiencing isolation to connect with policy-makers to inform them of their domestic, digital and security needs.

Online space was key in **Argentina**, where civil society developed a web platform that geo-referenced local resources for inhabitants of slums and informal neighbourhoods, and enabled them to identify their needs, backed by a virtual assistant to answer questions from people in those neighbourhoods, and communication through community WhatsApp and Facebook groups. Civil society in Argentina also disseminated legal information on the scope and impacts of emergency regulations.



Street art is used to educate people about COVID-19 in the Mathare Informal Settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. © Alissa Everett/Getty Images

## ARTS AGAINST THE VIRUS: CREATIVE WAYS OF SHARING THE MESSAGE

In challenging times, cultural and creative figures can make a great difference. Artists and performers can connect with people, win their trust, share information in ways that resonate with them and mobilise them. In numerous countries, artists and performers played a key role in getting information out and encouraging safer behaviours. In South Africa, the **Ndlovu Youth Choir** worked to dispel myths and misunderstandings about COVID-19 and share basic health guidelines through their music. In the UK, **grime and drill performers**, often stigmatised by the authorities as associated with crime, used their platform to urge their predominantly Black listeners, at increased risk of both infection and police harassment and ill served by official information campaigns, to follow safety measures.

Musicians in Somalia released numerous songs promoting social distancing, mask use and hand washing. Young Somali painter **Nujuum Hashi Ahmed**, who contracted COVID-19, also observed that many people were not complying with preventative measures and lacked information on the disease, with high levels of illiteracy a challenge. So she started using her paintings to spread awareness and share messages about safer behaviours. In Accra, Ghana's capital, the **Ghana Graffiti Collective** partnered with the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, European Union (EU) and International Organization

for Migration (IOM) to use street art to create awareness about COVID-19 and encourage solidarity with migrants. **Graffiti artists** in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, also used their art to encourage people to wear masks and stay safe. **Baadal Nanjundaswam**, an artist in Bangalore, India, drew images of the virus, masks, social distancing and hand sanitisation along with movie characters on the walls and roads of his city.

Artists used their talents to support emergency response. In Uruguay, **more than 60 artists** donated works for online sale to raise funds for the National Emergency System, and specifically to buy medical supplies. Award-winning Indian advertising director **Prasoon Pandey** mobilised celebrities from across India who shot home footage for a campaign film that both encouraged people to stay safe and supported a fund-raising campaign to help daily wage earners who lost their incomes due to lockdown measures. Cult Ugandan film-maker **Isaac Nabwana** picked up his camera for a new cause, switching from making action movies to shooting videos to promote a crowdfunding appeal, supporting small enterprise development in a rural community hit hard by the economic repercussions of lockdown. All of these showed the power of creative voices to connect with audiences for good.





Street artist No More Lies works on a large mural honouring healthcare workers in Istanbul, Turkey, on 30 July 2020. © Chris McGrath/Getty Images



To combat misinformation, CSOs called for government transparency and responsible journalism, and sought to expose the sources and mechanisms of deliberate disinformation. In **Argentina**, 27 media outlets from across the country started the Federal Network Against Disinformation, a collaborative journalistic project to produce and disseminate verified COVID-19-related content, expose disinformation and train journalists in the use of tools to verify information. At the regional level, the fact-checking LatamChequea network launched a Coronavirus Project that brought together around 40 Latin American media outlets, along with some from Portugal and Spain. The project developed a **website** that was constantly updated with newly debunked pieces of misinformation to help journalists provide accurate coverage of the pandemic.

In **Czechia**, where the circulation of pro-Russian disinformation is a growing problem that intensified during the pandemic, PR professionals set up an organisation called Nelez ('do not lie') that worked with major companies to prevent their online adverts appearing on sites that were spreading COVID-19 disinformation and conspiracy theories; in doing so, they sought to starve disinformation sites of funding. In **North Macedonia**, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia took the initiative, developing guidelines for safe and responsible pandemic reporting.

**Georgian** civil society platform No Phobia was active in denouncing hate speech that blamed the country's ethnic Azeri population for the spread of the virus. Disinformation and hate speech that added further fuel to ongoing religious and communal violence during the pandemic was also a problem in **Bangladesh**; in response, around 150 students from the Students Against Violence Everywhere Network took part in a series of training webinars to help them develop the skills to challenge these. At the international level, **IREX** partnered with the Great Courses, a leading



A Mexican wrestler helps promote mask use in Mexico City on 10 September 2020.  
© Héctor Alfaro/Agencia Press South via Getty Images



online course provider, to launch a new course on digital media literacy as a key tool in understanding misinformation in the context of the pandemic. from Portugal and Spain. The project developed a **website** that was constantly updated with newly debunked pieces of misinformation to help journalists provide accurate coverage of the pandemic.

## PROVIDING SERVICES REMOTELY

As several examples above suggest, the digital sphere was used for much more than sharing information and combatting misinformation. Online platforms became a more important means of providing services. Many CSOs that normally work with communities faced new challenges, because they could no longer work in their normal ways without putting community members and their staff at risk. While CSOs strived to introduce and observe new protection protocols, PPE supplies that might have helped mitigate risks were often scarce or inadequate. In addition, new restrictions on movement often made it impossible to travel to connect with communities in person. In response, many CSOs quickly switched to expanding their provision of online and phone support, doing remotely what they could no longer do in person. These actions pointed to the growing use of online space by civil society to serve needs and deliver services directly.

For some CSOs, the pandemic meant quickly learning, embracing and rolling out new online-first forms of organising and mobilising, particularly as many CSO staff switched to working from home for prolonged periods. This could mean more than just the adoption of online meeting and webinar platforms. As work transferred to online spaces, it potentially opened up new channels for CSOs to engage and listen, which had the potential to challenge conventional ways of working and thinking.

In some cases, the pandemic has accelerated the experience of virtual organising – over Zoom or other internet platforms. And that technology has in some cases led union organisers to change their point of view, from explaining the benefits of membership to listening to what potential members want. Again, this just accelerated a trend, from offering people a model that solves their problems to letting workers define what works for them. As one Australian union leader put it, “finally we started contacting our members the way they wanted to be contacted.”

Owen Tudor, International Trade Union Confederation

To meet increasing need, **Mexico’s** National Network of Shelters both expanded the staffing of its 24-hour helpline and provided enhanced assistance through social media, including through a new WhatsApp service. In **Argentina**, abortion rights activists mobilised over 500 network members to provide an around-the-clock advice and support service. Nigeria’s **Citizens’ Gavel**, a civic tech organisation that supports access to justice, also increased its provision of remote legal support to women experiencing GBV. **Malawi’s** Centre for Social Concern and Development launched a mobile-to-mobile check-in service to allow girls at risk to stay in contact with them.

The **Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering** developed an interactive online training session on women’s and girls’ rights, while another Lebanese CSO, **ABAAD – Resource Centre for Gender Equality** used both online and offline means to encourage women at risk of domestic abuse to use its helpline.



People in Lebanon share ABAAD's hotline number from their balconies to encourage women experiencing domestic violence to seek help. © Diaa Molaeb/ABAAD

Most victims of domestic violence were unaware that they could seek help under lockdown. On 16 April, we launched our #LockdownNotLockup campaign, asking people to share our hotline from their windows and balconies. We also launched 'camouflage videos' featuring influencers and celebrities, secretly embedding a number in tutorials and with subtitles, so that more women could safely watch while confined with their abusers. The number of calls we received in April was up 280 per cent compared to March.

Ghida Anani, Resource Centre for Gender Equality, Lebanon

Providing online training on a different subject was Kids Who Farm, a CSO in the Philippines that aims to educate young people about food issues. Awareness of questions of food supply and scarcity increased under emergency conditions, particularly when panic-buying saw shops emptied; to capitalise on the heightened levels of awareness, Kids Who Farm launched an online urban farming class.

During the pandemic, we provided a modified learning experience through an online platform and focused on the basics of urban container farming so they could grow their own food even under lockdown. We collaborated with school-based youth organisations and like-minded actors in the government and the private sector and over a one-month period we trained 120 people.

Moncini Hinay, Kids Who Farm, Philippines





In the Philippines, Kids Who Farm teaches an online course to train young people in urban farming during the pandemic. © Moncini Hinay

Civil society in Argentina used online space to help people with disabilities to claim their rights, which emergency measures further impacted upon, creating a new **platform** that consolidated information on all the rights, services and benefits available, and provided guidance on how to access these. Developed through a process of participation and testing by people with disabilities and their families, the platform offered 120 document templates that people could use to contact the relevant authorities and demand their rights.

The **Homeschool Association of Trinidad and Tobago** developed Facebook resources on how to provide home schooling, helping to support the continuity of education. In **Mexico**, social media became a space for feminist organisations to exchange and share services with each other, offering a social market that created opportunities to tap into professional services, including those of doctors, psychologists and lawyers.

At the same time, these actions had to confront long-running challenges that continued and in some cases worsened during the pandemic, including inadequate digital infrastructure and equipment, exclusion of some groups in the digital sphere and state-driven censorship and internet restriction. The implication is that civil society's growing use of online space to meet needs and deliver services, as accelerated during the pandemic, should also be accompanied by an advocacy agenda that focuses on the defence and expansion of rights to internet access and internet freedoms.

## JOINING THE DOTS: A CONNECTED RESPONSE AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN MEXICO

The National Network of Shelters, a Mexican CSO that brings together 69 centres dedicated to the prevention, care and protection of victims of GBV and family violence, showed the value of approaches that combine a range of response methods and tactics. Its director, **Wendy Figueroa**, explains how existing and enhanced activities and new interventions worked together to offer help under the pandemic.

*First, the Network has a telephone helpline operating 24 hours a day throughout the year, and we also provide assistance through social media. We have strengthened these, increasing the number of professionals who provide care through these two communication spaces. We also implemented a WhatsApp number as we have seen that when more time is spent in lockdown, women in situations of abuse have fewer possibilities to make external contact. So, text or social media messages have become an extremely important vehicle for women to send us a message whenever they get the chance. In several cases, these messages have resulted in rescue operations. In just two months we have carried out 19 rescues, compared with just around one per month during the equivalent months in 2019.*

*Second, our information, awareness and prevention campaigns have focused on three moments that women who experience abuse go through, in order to share strategies of what to do before, during and after a violent event. We also share strategies to reduce risk situations with children at home and to establish*

*safety plans. We have carried out an inclusive and multicultural campaign, with messages in sign language for deaf women, and messages for Indigenous women in three languages: Mayan, Náhuatl and Zapotec. We have also created material aimed at society at large so that people can denounce situations of violence and participate in the construction of a zero-tolerance culture.*

*Third, we have carried out the 'isolation without violence' campaign, aimed at the government, underscoring the urgency and necessity of creating cross-sectional, resourced public policies that address the consequences and impact of COVID-19 for women from gender, human rights and multicultural perspectives. As the quarantine is lifted, these policies must guarantee access to justice, health services and financial compensation, among other rights.*

*Fourth, we have carried out specific actions within the shelters, emergency centres, transition houses and external centres that make up the Network, implementing protocols to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infection. We have used our creativity to provide assistance through various digital platforms to keep accompanying all the women who take part in our comprehensive programmes. Attention hours within these spaces have been staggered and quarantine rooms established so that we can continue to take in the women and children who require support without any obstacle or discrimination due to COVID-19, as for us it is extremely important to put human rights at the core of our actions.*





A member of the Colombian LGBTQI+ community participates in a protest against the murders of six trans women on 3 July 2020 in Bogotá.

© Leonardo Munoz/VIEWpress via Getty Images

## MONITORING AND DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

Though essential under the pandemic, providing services could never be enough when rights were being denied. Rights violations flourished under emergency conditions. In several countries, including **India**, **Kenya** and the **Philippines**, punishments for breaching emergency regulations were severe and brutal, patterning onto existing practices of repression. In **Nigeria** and **Rwanda**, lockdown enforcement was associated with an increase in police brutality, including cases of assault, GBV, torture and murder. In **Peru** a law was passed to exempt police and military officers from any criminal responsibility for deaths and injuries they might cause while enforcing emergency measures.

Some states used emergency measures as a cover to attack excluded groups, including **LGBTQI+ people**, **migrants and refugees** and environmental and **land rights defenders**, and roll back protections for sexual and reproductive rights, including in several conservative-led **US states**. Some states passed **new laws** criminalising protests.

Alongside restrictions on the freedom of expression introduced in many countries, the growing use of technology to **track** the virus also offered potential to lead to a massive and lasting increase in surveillance, and not only in countries known for spying on their people, such as **China** and **Turkey**, but also in ostensibly more democratic countries such as **Australia** and the **UK**. Ominously, some of the digital surveillance apps that were deployed were being developed before the virus was known about.

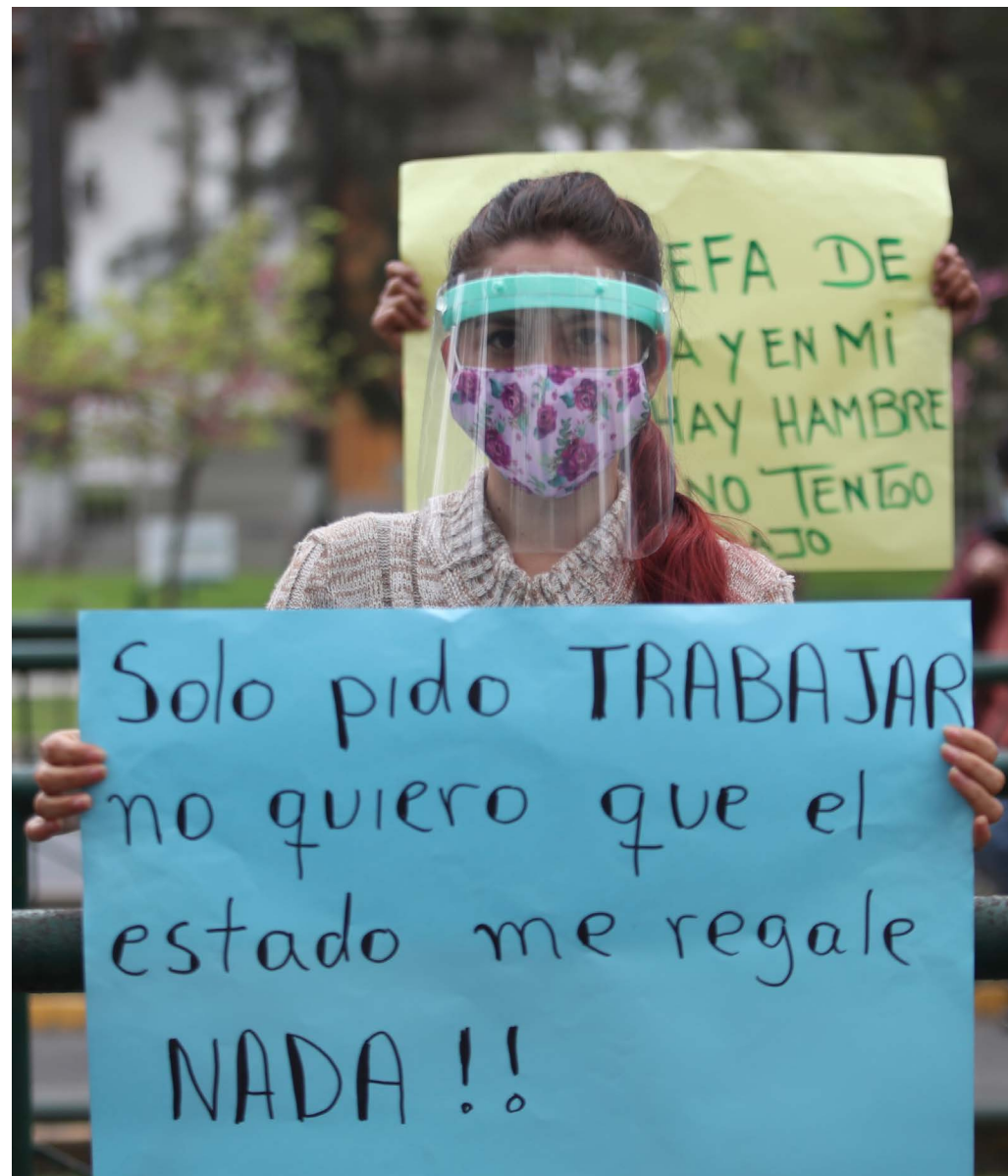
A further challenge came in the new and vast opportunities for corruption created in the rush to response, as states and sub-national governments made rapid and opaque decisions about the procurement of PPE,

medicines and medical equipment. These and the establishment and distribution of new public support schemes created many opportunities for embezzlement, favouritism and patronage.

States were not the only offenders. Numerous private sector employers seized on the slowdown of economic activity to claw back labour rights, including in **Cambodia**, where unionised garment-trade workers faced intimidation and union leaders were targeted for dismissal and arrested for criticising lay-offs. Almost **5,000 job losses**, in Cambodia and Bangladesh, India and Myanmar, were assessed as being linked to an employee's union status. In the USA, several corporations **cracked down** on unionisation efforts as workers tried to organise and raise concerns about workplace safety during the emergency.

These and many other abuses meant that, alongside providing services and information, just as vital was civil society's work to scrutinise government decisions and spending choices, monitor, document and call out rights violations, and enable people to report on abuses they experienced and seek redress. CSOs worked to promote awareness of and action on the human rights dimensions of the crisis, and to hold states and the private sector to account on active and passive failures. The message was that times of crisis do not mean there should be less accountability, but rather that scrutiny becomes more essential. CSOs therefore continued their existing work to hold decision-makers accountable, and established new structures to monitor the rights impacts of the pandemic and emergency measures.

In many countries, civil society came together to call on states to uphold human rights standards. In Myanmar, 97 CSOs published a **joint statement** voicing their concern about the way the state was handling the crisis, and its neglect of human rights and democratic values. The Fiji NGO Coalition for Human Rights led a **call** for the state's responses to respect human rights, after the names and addresses of everyone who



A health worker in Lima, Peru, protests on 28 August 2020 with a banner that reads 'I just ask for work - I don't want handouts from the state'.

© Raúl Sifuentes/Getty Images



shared a flight with an infected person were disclosed by the ministry of health, breaching people's right to privacy and potentially opening them up to hostility. Civil society in **Argentina** called attention to arbitrary detentions and harassment under emergency measures targeted at young and homeless people and people living in informal settlements in the capital, Buenos Aires.

Key professions came together to urge states to respect human rights. In Guatemala, over 100 journalists combined to publish a **statement** criticising repeated hostility by the president and officials during the crisis. Over 500 health professionals in **Nicaragua** supported a call that the state provide transparent information, adequate medical equipment and virus prevention measures, even though doing so put them at risk of harassment or dismissal.

To enable greater accountability under the pandemic, new monitoring initiatives were established. In **Nepal**, led by the National Human Rights Commission, a multi-stakeholder human rights monitoring network was established to monitor the human rights situation during the crisis, working at provincial, district and national levels. Its first report focused on the human rights impact of the emergency on women. In **France**, human rights bodies set up citizen monitoring groups to track and report on abuses. The North South Initiative in **Malaysia** worked to monitor private sector employers and expose attempts to take advantage of the virus to impinge on labour rights.

Nigerian CSO Spaces for Change applied its existing approaches to tracking and defending civic space to focus on **monitoring** the human rights impacts of the state's emergency measures. It established a tracking team to map and monitor restrictions in an online database, enabling it to report on a range of rights violations, including state violence. As part of this, it set up a helpline to provide free legal services to people experiencing rights violations.



A woman holds a sign that reads 'Medical solution, not militarised lockdown' during a silent protest to mark Labour Day in Quezon City, Philippines.

© Jes Aznar/Getty Images

## TAKING IT TO THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Civil society efforts to assert accountability over rights also took place at the international level. After a period of postponement, the mechanisms of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council came back to life with an emphasis on online participation. Civil society adapted to **engaging** remotely with the Council, working to scrutinise states on their human rights records and monitor rights violations. At the same time, civil society sought to test the **potential** for the sudden shift towards online engagement to bring in a more diverse range of civil society. Ahead of the July UN High Level Political Forum, which reviews the progress made by states on the Sustainable Development Goals, **460 CSOs** from 115 countries joined together to call on states to urge that civil society voices be included in the online discussions. In response, **61 states** signed a pledge to enable effective civil society virtual participation. Civil society made similar efforts towards other global and regional rights mechanisms.

It became more important than ever for civil society voices to be heard at the international level when they were under renewed restriction at home. Groups whose rights were attacked under the cover of emergency measures had limited recourse to some of the means through which they might normally fight back, such as mass protests; international human rights mechanisms could offer an alternative focus. Hungary's transgender community was **targeted** by a law hastily passed at the peak of the pandemic and accordingly subjected to little scrutiny, which recognised only a person's sex as assigned at birth, preventing transgender people from legally changing their gender and obtaining new documentation.

Engagement with European and global institutions, and solidarity with European civil society networks, provided a vital alternative means of highlighting the injustice.

We represent a minority group and cannot fight this government alone. But international institutions do sometimes influence the government's actions. We called on international actors to raise their voices publicly and to engage in multilateral dialogue with our government on this issue. We have 23 cases before the European Court of Human Rights. We also continue to engage with EU human rights mechanisms, the Council of Europe and the UN. We got CSOs to sign a statement to put pressure on the European Commission.

Krisztina Kolos Orbán, Transvanilla Transgender Association,  
Hungary

Brazilian Indigenous communities also engaged with international institutions. In **June**, the first international protective measures recognising the risks the pandemic posed for Indigenous people were issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. This followed a campaign launched by Indigenous Yanomami communities, who were exposed to risk of infection by the movement of illegal goldminers onto their lands.

At the same time, new global-level civil society initiatives were created to monitor rights. The International Center for Not-for-Profit



Law launched its **COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker**, monitoring state responses to the pandemic that affected human rights and civic freedoms; at the time of writing, measures that impact on the freedom of expression, for example, were reported in 42 countries. In June, around 100 CSOs from all over the world, led

by International IDEA, as well as almost 500 prominent individuals who included several Nobel laureates and former heads of state and government, endorsed a public **Call to Defend Democracy**. Shortly after, a **Global Monitor** of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights was established.

Civil society worked to assert accountability over the decisions taken in crisis response. In **Tunisia**, bloggers and social media activists used their platforms to criticise the state's handling of the crisis and alleged corruption in the distribution of emergency supplies, risking arrest for doing so. Similar complaints were made in **Ecuador** and **India**, while in **Zimbabwe**, the health minister was sacked and arrested following the exposure of alleged corruption in the awarding of a large contract for the supply of medical and testing equipment. In countries including **Kenya** and **Papua New Guinea**, the domestic chapters of Transparency International worked to track state financial commitments made in response to COVID-19 with the aim of assessing whether funds were correctly and efficiently allocated.

In **Nigeria**, Connected Development urged transparency from the state and invited citizens to use its social accountability platform, [www.ifollowthemoney.org](http://www.ifollowthemoney.org), to monitor spending and advocate for improved healthcare facilities. In **South Africa**, the national branch of the International Budget Partnership and its partner CSOs supported informal settlement residents to monitor and report on failures in the delivery of critical hygiene services, as a way of encouraging oversight of state budgeting and spending decisions. **Chile's** Fiscal Observatory Foundation (Fundación Observatorio Fiscal) reviewed state contracts and purchase orders and demanded accountability where established procedures were not properly followed.

In **Mexico**, the Centre for Economic and Budgetary Research (Centro de Investigación Económica y Presupuestaria) attempted to gauge the budgetary impact of the state's social and employment programmes announced in response to the pandemic, but reported that a lack of transparency and public information prevented it from doing so. Challenges such as these pointed to an ongoing need for civil society to try to engage with states, with the aim of influencing public policies, not least to make them more accountable.

## INFLUENCING AND ENGAGING WITH STATES

To encourage greater accountability, defend human rights and pursue redress for violations, civil society worked to engage with and influence state institutions, seeking to build relationships for policy change. In the light of emergency measures, civil society endeavoured to remind states of the need to uphold constitutional guarantees of rights and make any restrictions on freedoms legal, evidence-based, proportionate, non-discriminatory, time-bound and solely for the purposes of protecting public health. Civil society strived to resist state power grabs, crackdowns on rights and restrictions that targeted the rights of particular groups, and to ensure that states respected and upheld the rights of excluded groups.

Where possible, civil society worked to forge constructive relationships with states, seeking to encourage and be part of a joined-up pandemic response. For example, in Somalia, **Action Against Hunger** was able to partner with the ministry of health to seek to overcome the lack of awareness about the virus, providing information on COVID-19 prevention through a range of communication channels to reach vulnerable and excluded groups, along with supporting the introduction of safety measures in healthcare. Civil society also developed many valuable collaborations at the local government level, with municipal agencies and civil society often playing complementary roles in helping communities and delivering services, as in Uganda, where **Community Transformation Foundation Network** cooperated with local government taskforces to support health provision.

We supplemented government interventions by reaching further, where the state could not. We used our reserve funds to hire and fuel a four-wheel-drive vehicle that was used to continue providing community services when other forms of circulation were not allowed. We played a supportive role in slowing down the spread of COVID-19 in Greater Masaka, monitoring the situation of out-of-school children and their families, and responding to health emergencies concerning pregnant women, children and older people.

Kayinga Mudu Yisito, Community Transformation Foundation Network, Uganda

Beyond these important collaborations on service delivery, CSOs tried to assert influence on policy. The policy-influencing role of civil society was highlighted in Brazil, where **Social Good Brasil** connected data scientists with public officials to encourage officials to follow data and evidence in pandemic decision-making.



A volunteer from the BCS Community Alliance collects information from a woman receiving food aid in La Paz, Mexico, on 26 May 2020. © Alfredo Martinez/Getty Images





Temperature checking at a temporary hand-washing station set up by Shining Hope for Communities in the Kibera informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya.  
© Patrick Meinhardt/Bloomberg via Getty Images

In response to misinformation and misleading government instructions to reopen the economy despite astronomical rates of contagion and death, we created a data bank, advocated the use of open data and engaged academics, data scientists and public managers to promote evidence-based decision-making in the state of Santa Catarina. Although the state used to be one of the least transparent in the country, it subsequently placed third in Open Knowledge's ranking of public transparency during the COVID-19 crisis.

Ana Addobbati, Social Good Brasil

Civil society also sought to influence policy by seeking representation in coordination bodies such as advisory councils and task forces. CSOs were represented on **Malawi's** national COVID-19 task force, while in **Chile**, civil society's Now It's Our Time to Participate platform was brought into official forums to help plan processes for the country's upcoming plebiscite on a new constitution, enabling it to advise on ways of ensuring safety while also promoting participation. At the local level, Youth Alliance for Rural Development in **Liberia** successfully advocated towards local government bodies to include CSOs as partners.

In **Latvia**, CSOs reported that constructive dialogue existed between the state and CSOs about how best they could be supported to play their roles during and after the crisis. Ecuador's government created an **COVID-19 portal** that shared information about civil society's initiatives, while Paraguay's government set up a **website** to enable dialogue and accountability, giving people an opportunity to monitor public spending on COVID-19 response and engage directly with officials.

None of these initiatives were without criticisms. Women's groups in Malawi pointed out that only **19 per cent** of COVID-19 task force

members, who were appointed by the president, were women, and called for equal representation; while welcoming the processes of dialogue, Latvian civil society pointed to a lack of direct government financial support for CSOs. And positive examples seemed the exception rather than the norm. **AGNA** members reported that in general, states were not engaging with CSOs in consultative or decision-making forums, and failed to acknowledge the role of CSOs as fundamental stakeholders in COVID-19 response. They pointed to a dominant narrative that positioned the private sector as a preeminent partner, and the deployment of military forces in humanitarian response and service delivery, in ways that failed to capitalise on the ability of CSOs to reach and mobilise vulnerable and excluded groups. Likewise, several CIVICUS member **survey** respondents complained that states were not including CSOs in pandemic response plans.

Nevertheless, where possible, civil society continued to engage to try to improve on and expand spaces of dialogue and cooperation. Alongside this, there were several examples of successful advocacy that changed government policy, as well as advocacy that continues to press for change. In several countries, CSOs were active in **calling** on the authorities to release prisoners and detainees from jails, including detained civil society activists, journalists and opposition politicians, drawing attention to the often crowded jail conditions that made it easy for the virus to spread. **Several states**, including Bahrain, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Iran and Turkey, responded by releasing at least some prisoners early, among them some prominent civil society activists such as Bahrain's **Nabeel Rajab**. Civil society continued to call for further releases in all instances. **Unions** engaged with states and employers on every inhabited continent to defend labour rights, insist on safe workplaces and defend jobs. In Argentina, for example, unions negotiated a new law with the state that will empower many people to keep working from home.

Civil society advocacy won a crucial lifeline for women at risk of domestic violence in **Tunisia**. Most court proceedings were suspended during lockdown, with only those deemed as emergency cases being heard. Women experiencing violence faced a long wait for justice, exposing them to continuing danger. In response, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women successfully lobbied for cases of violence against women to be classed as among the cases courts could hear.

Also in defence of women's rights, in **Chile**, Coordinadora Feminista released a Feminist Emergency Plan that combined demands towards the state, including for access to medical help and paid medical leave and financial relief measures, with self-care and mutual protection strategies. In **Liberia**, several CSOs joined together to call on the state to take a gender-based approach in its pandemic response and ensure transparency and accountability.

To help defend migrants' rights, alongside its work to deliver essential supplies, **Caminando Fronteras** advocated towards the Moroccan government to issue permits to migrants so they could obtain food and water, and towards the Spanish government to end deportations and release migrants held in crowded detention centres at high risk of infection. Civil society in **Oman**, meanwhile, called on the state to end its long-running ban on major online voice and video call platforms, given the need for more online communication and working under emergency measures.

Civil society policy engagement in **Argentina** included the development of a comprehensive proposal for a national emergency plan on housing, which saw advocacy for a ban on evictions, support for people struggling to pay rent and mortgages and protection of women and other excluded groups. Advocacy also focused on the need for



assistance for people with disabilities, along with a campaign to show the impacts of lockdowns on people in mental hospitals. Along with other CSOs in Latin America, advocacy further addressed the need to

make taxation more progressive in order to support a more socially just post-pandemic recovery.



People protest about the dire socioeconomic situation near the Seraleng mining community in Rustenburg, South Africa, on 18 May 2020. © Dino Lloyd/Gallo Images via Getty Images

## JOINING THE DOTS: A CONNECTED RESPONSE TO PROTECT WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN TUNISIA

The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), a CSO that promotes gender equality in all areas, from the political sphere to socio-economic rights, including women's sexual and reproductive rights, offered a range of responses. Its director, **Ramy Khouil**, explains how the ATFD adapted and scaled up its counselling services while also intensifying its advocacy towards and collaboration with the state, to identify and implement policy solutions.

*At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic the ATFD issued a warning to the Tunisian authorities stating our concerns about the period of lockdown, when many women would have to stay at home with their aggressors. We were right, as the number of instances of GBV kept rising under lockdown. The ministry of women affairs said that the amount of calls received through the emergency phone line set up by the government had multiplied fivefold. In our counselling centres we also witnessed a peak, as the number of women who were victims of violence and sought our help increased.*

*Most of the courts were also closed during lockdown and we had to lobby with the high council of the judicial system and the minister of justice to include cases of violence against women amongst the emergency cases they were tackling during lockdown. Fortunately, they accepted.*

*Access to sexual and reproductive health services was also affected because women could not get out and seek these services for fear of the virus. We had to collaborate with the minister of health*

*and women affairs to find solutions for this situation and we are now trying to find a way to ensure the continuity of reproductive health services.*

*In addition, the socio-economic rights of women have been further impacted upon. Due to the economic crisis that came with the pandemic, many women lost their jobs, or are not getting paid. Many women in Tunisia work in the informal sector so they could not continue their work and were left without any income. This is affecting their ability to take care of themselves and their families. We have been working with a group of women domestic workers on a study about the situation of domestic workers in Tunisia.*

*We have done a lot of advocacy with the authorities because the official response has failed to consider the gendered aspects of the pandemic. We have worked with most ministries. We met with most ministerial departments to raise awareness. We sent policy papers and open letters. We continued to deliver services in our counselling centres, which are still operating. We also adapted these services to be delivered by phone. We launched a campaign on violence against women during the pandemic, which was followed by thousands of people and was a big success. As a result, the Middle East and North Africa region department of Facebook got in touch with us and now we are working in partnership with them to increase audiences for future campaigns. We will also establish communication channels with Facebook to report violence and hatred on social media.*



## USING THE LEGAL SYSTEM

In contexts where it operates relatively free from executive interference, the legal system sometimes provided an effective route for civil society to seek redress and ensure that constitutional rights protections were upheld. As part of its advocacy towards states, civil society achieved some notable victories during the pandemic by using the legal levers available.

When education went online under lockdown in Argentina, this reinforced existing inequalities in educational access, privileging children from wealthier families who could take the provision of devices and stable internet connections for granted, but threatening to lock less privileged students without these out of education. Civil society swung into action and successfully filed a lawsuit to prevent this happening. The ruling civil society obtained obliged the government of Buenos Aires to provide a laptop, notebook, or tablet to any student in the public education system in receipt of welfare, subsidies, or scholarship, or living in a slum. The city government was also obliged to install wifi in slums and informal settlement areas or provide students with mobile data. This was not just a breakthrough for the students involved; it established an important precedent for rights.

This measure is key because not only does it seek to reverse the existing inequality in terms of access to educational equipment, but it also recognises internet access as a fundamental right that is instrumental – and, in this context, essential – for the exercise of other rights such as rights to education, health, information or access to justice.

Sebastián Pilo, Civil Association for Equality and Justice,  
Argentina



Residents of Villa 21-24 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, were among the beneficiaries of the court ruling that obliged the city government to provide the means for underprivileged children to receive online education. © Marcelo Endelli/Getty Images

**Germany's** constitutional court upheld the right to protest under the pandemic, ruling that political protests could take place if distancing was respected, following a complaint brought by a group of young activists who felt that emergency rules were being applied excessively to make even gatherings that took proper safety precautions impossible. In **Zimbabwe**, an urgent legal complaint brought by Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights won a ruling ordering state security forces to respect human rights and refrain from assaulting people during lockdown; another ruling ordered the state to provide all medical staff with PPE. Kenyan CSO Muslims for Human Rights was another that took to the courts, **suing** the government to challenge the practice of making people quarantined in public hospitals pay for their own food and accommodation, which penalised poorer people and potentially made them less likely to come forward with symptoms. Here, there was no need to wait for a legal decision; when the case came to court, the public outcry it created forced the government to back down.

When **Croatia's** June parliamentary elections were approaching, civil society complained that people in hospitals receiving COVID-19 treatment would be denied a vote, compared to those self-isolating at home, who could still vote. Following the legal complaint, the constitutional court ruled that those in hospital would be able to vote by proxy, enabling them to have the same say as everyone else.

In **Malawi**, civil society took legal action to delay the state's imposition of a lockdown. The move was motivated by concern that inadequate provision had been made for informal workers, who would be deprived of their livelihoods, as well as fear that the ruling party would use lockdown as an excuse to delay the imminent election, which it went on to lose.

The civil society challenge came after thousands of informal traders in the cities of Blantyre and Mzuzu and in districts like Thyolo had taken to the streets to protest against the lockdown with placards that read, 'We'd rather die of corona than die of hunger'. Many of these vendors are daily wage earners and a lockdown could have badly affected them. There was also growing suspicion among civil society and the citizenry that the government was trying to use the lockdown to justify the cancellation or postponement of the elections.

Michael Kaiyatsa, Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, Malawi



Fridays for the Future's Global Day of Action takes place on 25 September 2020 in Berlin, Germany, after the courts uphold the right to protest under the pandemic.  
© Omer Messinger/Getty Images



## ELECTIONS UNDER THE PANDEMIC

Croatia and Malawi were only two among a swathe of countries to hold elections under pandemic conditions, which included several elections that were **rescheduled** from periods of strict lockdowns that still took place under pandemic conditions. **South Korea** was the first country to hold a national election during the pandemic. Against all expectations, turnout in the country's April legislative election was up compared to the previous election, possibly reflecting public confidence in the state's response to the pandemic and the comprehensive sanitary measures put in place for voters. The election saw a record number of women elected to the country's parliament.

However, in several countries, incumbent governments tried to use emergency restrictions either to postpone elections for long spells and thereby consolidate their power, as civil society complained was the case in **Bolivia** and **Hong Kong**, or hold elections under conditions that gave them an advantage, by privileging their control of state media, applying restrictions selectively and limiting opposition campaigning and election observation, as alerted by civil society in **Burundi**, **Serbia** and **Sri Lanka**.

But in some instances, while it was often impossible for civil society to perform conventional functions around elections, such as voter education and election monitoring, civil society was able to play a pivotal role in pushing back against ruling party attempts to delay or distort elections. Such was the case in the **Dominican Republic**, where civil society made good use of its media contacts to insist that the elections postponed from May to July should not be

delayed again, and instead should take place with proper protective measures applied. Civil society urged that international guidance should be followed so that elections could be held safely and people could vote in confidence.

As civil society we tried to force the introduction of adequate sanitary measures. We urged the Central Electoral Board to follow the recommendations of the WHO and the Organization of American States to convey the certainty that the necessary measures would be taken and the elections would take place. It was a titanic effort, because we have not yet had an effective prevention and rapid testing policy in the Dominican Republic; however, it turned out to be possible to impose sanitary protocols, including disinfection and sanitation, the distribution of protective materials and physical distancing measures.

Hamilk Chahin, Citizen Manifesto for Electoral Transparency  
and Addys Then Marte, Alianza ONG, Dominican Republic

As a result of such campaigning, the election was held in July, and when voting went ahead it was with sanitation and disinfection protocols in place along with the use of PPE and physical distancing measures. The resulting change of government, a rarity in the Dominican Republic, may have explained the ruling party's reluctance to go ahead. Civil society also had to push back against a government campaign that seemed explicitly designed to scare

people into staying in their homes during the vote; civil society responded with its own campaign encouraging people to protect themselves and vote, and the outcry against the government's propaganda was so strong that it was quickly dropped.

An **emerging body of good practice** indicates that elections can be held safely under the pandemic, if states take proper precautions to enable safe voting and fair campaigning, and civil society can play a key role in pushing for the adoption of good practice.



Officials from the Central Election Management Committee and election observers count votes cast on 15 April 2020 in Seoul, South Korea.  
© Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images



## PUBLIC CAMPAIGNING

As many of the above examples indicate, CSOs often achieved success in policy engagement and legal actions when they connected with public concerns and mobilised support behind key asks. The mobilisation of public opinion could offer a powerful corrective to attempts by states to repress rights. In locked down and distanced societies, much of this mobilisation was done through social media; while it may have enabled the rapid spread of misinformation, social media also offered a crucial campaigning and coordination space that civil society was able to use to recruit support.

A major step forward was achieved in **Brazil**, where a coalition of over 160 CSOs campaigned for the introduction of an emergency **basic income** during the pandemic. Winning the support of over half a million people and recruiting key social media influencers, the campaign was a remarkable and rapid success. Within 10 days of the campaign's launch, a law approving the scheme was approved; a further 10 days later, people were receiving their first payments. Tens of millions of Brazilians received vital support as a result, and over half of Brazil's population was estimated to have directly or indirectly benefited from the scheme. The change showed the power of collective civil society action that resonates with the public imagination, and the potential for moments of crisis to also be moments of change, when bold ideas long nurtured and developed as policies by civil society – such as the notion of a universal basic income – can suddenly be advanced. Civil society will keep working to expand the footprint of the scheme and to enshrine it a precedent that establishes the right to a basic income in Brazil. A further Brazilian **campaign** was launched to demand paid quarantine for the many domestic workers – mostly Black women from poor backgrounds – who were no longer able to work in the houses of their wealthy employers. The campaign's petition had attracted over 130,000 signatures at the time of writing.

The **Tunisian Association of Democratic Women** also made effective use of social media, as its Facebook **campaign** about violence against women during the pandemic attracted thousands of followers and led to a new partnership with Facebook to increase audiences for future anti-violence campaigns. Public campaigning against GBV also took place in **Mexico** and **Lebanon**, where civil society was part of an awareness-raising campaign about violence against women, protection measures and the support services available.

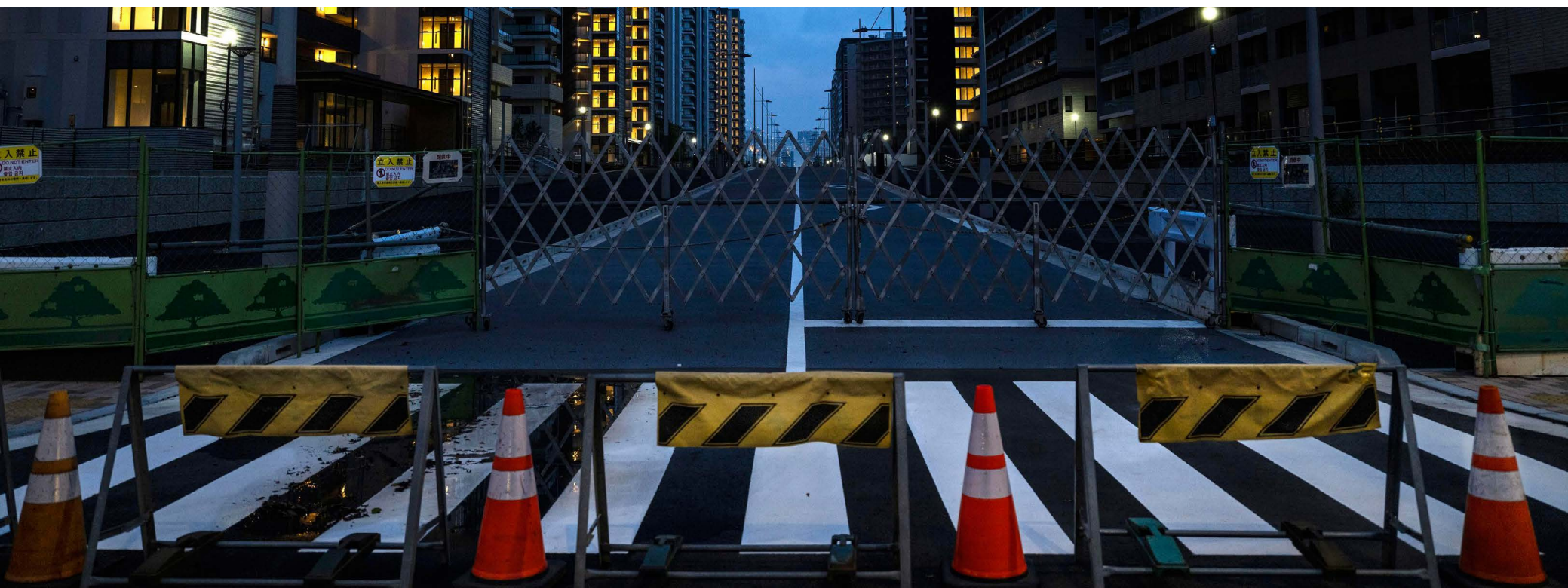


With **Japan's** Olympics postponed, the Moyai Support Centre for Independent Living made a connection between public concern about the impacts and legacy of hosting the Olympics with heightened awareness of the challenges homeless people faced during the pandemic, launching

a campaign to rehouse people in Tokyo's Olympic Village. By June, its petition had attracted over 50,000 signatures. Given this show of public support, the Centre was then able to call on candidates in city elections to make clear their views on support for homeless people in Tokyo.

Public backlash could offer an effective rebuke when states sought to abuse and overreach their emergency powers. Civil society in **Moldova** mobilised a campaign against harsh new state restrictions on the circulation of information during the crisis, making a joint public call for the regulations to be revoked; in response, the government quickly

annulled them. Similarly, a proposed law in **Paraguay** that would have excessively constrained the freedom of expression under the pandemic was dropped following extensive civil society criticism. The freedom of expression is under constant ruling party assault in **Bangladesh**, but even there, a plan to establish a body to monitor TV channels and assess whether they were deemed to be spreading COVID-19 misinformation provoked a public outcry, and the proposed body was quickly scrapped. All of these examples showed how, by working to channel and focus public concern, civil society could make a difference, even in the face of seemingly inflexible states.



Tokyo's Olympic Village sits empty after the postponement of the Olympic Games, prompting a civil society campaign to use it to rehouse homeless people.

© Kyodo News via Getty Images



## PROTESTING UNDER THE PANDEMIC

Under the pandemic, protest continued to be a vital means of articulating people's anger, making demands and calling on political decision-makers to commit to change. As described by the 2020 **State of Civil Society Report**, 2019 was a year of mass protests on every inhabited continent, as people mobilised to demand climate action, democratic freedoms, economic change and social justice. Many of these protests were continuing into 2020, until they had to be put on pause as the pandemic spread and emergency measures were enforced. Protesting within the law became impossible under many emergency regulations, while mobilising in large numbers remained difficult even after restrictions on movement and assembly began to be eased.

When protests went ahead under new restrictions, they often brought harsh repression. Live ammunition was used against protesters demanding economic support and the protection of their livelihoods in **Iraq** and **Uganda**. A protest to demand the resumption of economic activities in **Bolivia** was met with teargas and rubber bullets. Protesters against the state's handling of the pandemic in **Nepal** were beaten with batons. Protests sparked by the introduction of a fresh curfew in **Serbia** in July unleashed a violent response from security forces and associated groups in civilian clothes, which helped provoke further protests.

In some cases, notably in **Russia**, even people staging one-person protests were jailed under emergency regulations. And while young people had been at the forefront of many of 2019's most impressive mobilisations, in **some contexts**, including Colombia, France and Turkey, emergency powers explicitly imposed restrictions on the freedom of movement of people under 18 years old. But despite these major challenges, protests did not grind to a halt.

As several of the above examples suggest, many contexts saw fresh protests that focused on issues raised by the pandemic, with people protesting against the economic and human rights impacts of emergency measures, and against state failures to take proper steps to prevent the pandemic or provide adequate support to communities in need. In **Ecuador**, in the city of Guayaquil, which was overwhelmed by the outbreak, people protested about the government's lack of guidance for handling the bodies of people suspected to have died from COVID-19, the insufficiency of funding to address the pandemic and the budget cuts that worsened the pandemic's impacts. Palestinian people protested against police atrocities committed under emergency measures in **Israel**. Artists and cultural workers who had lost their incomes protested in **Uruguay**. Protests focused on dangerous overcrowding and insanitary conditions in refugee camps in **Greece** and **Rwanda** and in detention facilities for migrants in **Tunisia** and the **USA**.

In **Brazil**, Rio de Paz, a CSO, protested against the government's mishandling of the crisis and commemorated the many victims by **digging 100 graves** and sticking black crosses in the sand of Rio's Copacabana beach. Similarly, in the USA, people protested against the Trump administration's pandemic response by dumping fake body bags outside **New York's Trump International Hotel**, as well as near the White House in **Washington DC**, as part of a National Day of Mourning. A protest in **Ukraine**, with people wearing gas masks, called for parliament to be sent to quarantine rather than keep passing laws without adequate scrutiny. Even in the difficult civic space environment of pre-election **Belarus**, university students called a strike as a means of raising awareness among their community about COVID-19 risks and ways of minimising the chances of infection; with the state refusing to introduce emergency measures and providing little information, students took matters into their own hands.



Protesters from the CSO Rio De Paz dig shallow graves on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on 11 June 2020. © Andre Coelho/Getty Images



Among many protests by **health workers**, there were protests calling for better pay in recompense for vital medical work, including in **Kosovo**, and to demand PPE and adequate healthcare provision, including in **Mexico**, where health workers set up roadblocks to call attention to the lack of PPE, and in **Malaysia** and **Peru**. Peru was also the site of protests by **mine workers**, demanding safer working conditions and the temporary closure of mines, one of many protests around the world by people forced to work in unsafe conditions. Metalworkers in **Italy** called for their workplaces to be temporarily shut down and the country's Amazon workers went on strike over the lack of protection. In the USA, people designated as '**essential workers**' demanded safer working conditions and better pay: **retail and warehouse workers** called in sick en masse, truck drivers joined protest convoys, fast-food workers organised walkouts and one-day strikes and **teachers** in multiple cities protested against the reopening of schools. Food delivery workers organised strike days in **Brazil**. Bus drivers threatened to **strike** over the issue of mask use in Sydney, Australia, leading to fresh negotiations.

Workers also protested at loss of pay and threats to their jobs. Workers at a Chinese garment factory in **Laos** protested that the company had both violated emergency regulations and failed to pay them. Shop workers held a socially distanced protest against store closures and to demand full redundancy pay in **Ireland**. A sit-in by port workers in **Belize** drew attention to the fact that most people made redundant in response to the pandemic were union members. At multiple General Electric plants across the USA, workers **demand**ed to be put to work making ventilators rather than laid off.

What these protests showed is that there were profound state and market failures in pandemic response that could only be addressed through civic action, with protests communicating urgent demands. At the same time, there were of course mobilisations of extremist groups against emergency

measures and in support of conspiracy theories. But alongside these responses to the pandemic, other protests insisted that profound issues of injustice – climate change, racism, denial of democratic freedoms – remained, and in some cases intensified under the pandemic, and must not be ignored. There was a need to keep articulating demands and putting pressure on those in power, even if protest tactics needed to be altered.

Under emergency conditions, many protests mobilised in public space by embracing physical distancing and mask use, and by making connections between small-scale symbolic actions and mass online activity. These included mobilisations by protest movements that were active before the pandemic. Protests for political and economic change in **Lebanon**, continuing from the mass protests of **2019**, saw people form distanced human chains wearing masks and gloves.



People demonstrate against the government near the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem, Israel, on 8 August 2020. © Guy Prives/Getty Images

Similarly, protests against corruption and in defence of democratic institutions in **Israel** carried on from those that mobilised against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in **2019**, but this time they were distanced and extended to the establishment of a **protest camp** outside the prime minister's residence; **motivated** by the state's pandemic failings, people joined in who had not taken part in protests before.

There were numerous distanced May Day protests in support of workers' rights, including in **Chile**, **Greece** and the **Philippines**, among many others. June then saw Black Lives Matter protests erupt in the USA and ripple across the world. People protested in solidarity with Black Americans and because the killing of George Floyd resonated at home. Such was the case in Nigeria, where the focus of Black Lives Matter protests was police brutality, as further demonstrated by the harsh policing of pandemic measures.

As the pandemic started there was an increase in police brutality related to the enforcement of lockdown measures and compliance with sanitary protocols. Interactions between citizens and police officers increased and resulted in more complaints against police officers. By April, it appeared that police officers had killed more people than COVID-19. The global protests triggered by the death of George Floyd renewed the call for police accountability in Nigeria and people started sharing stories of their encounters with police officers. Coupled with pre-existing local issues, the US incident that resonated globally enhanced the local voices who were speaking up against police brutality.

Nelson Olanipekun, Citizens' Gavel, Nigeria



After the killing of George Floyd, protesters demonstrate against police brutality outside the Justice Center and City Hall in St Louis, Missouri, USA, on 1 June 2020.  
© Michael B. Thomas/Getty Images



In several countries, protests were shaped around the need to keep numbers down and ensure distancing. A Black Lives Matter protest in **Finland** dispersed after an hour and broke into smaller groups who marched under police supervision to respect emergency regulations, while a similar protest in **Latvia** was limited to a small number of participants to enable distancing. Online Black Lives Matter protests in **Sweden** included a mass Facebook check-in at the US embassy in which over 40,000 people virtually participated. In the **Dominican Republic**, a small-scale symbolic commemoration was organised to communicate solidarity with US Black Lives Matter protests and anger at domestic racism.

In reaction to events in the USA, we joined other CSOs to organise a commemoration. It was not strictly a protest demonstration, as restrictions on public gatherings had been imposed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we respected the mandated quarantine. And it was not only a demonstration of solidarity either, as George Floyd's death had resonated in our context, where we have experienced similar situations of police abuse. Along with other CSOs we organised an activity in memory of George Floyd. The idea was to make a ritual gesture, a collective wreath. Our convening slogan was 'A Flower for Floyd', and it was a call for each person to bring, whenever possible, a flower and place it as part of the offering. Our account of Floyd's death also made reference to police and institutional violence many black people, both migrants and Dominicans, experience in the Dominican Republic.

Elena Lorac, Reconoci.do, Dominican Republic

Alongside these mobilisations, many other movements found new and creative ways to sustain protest during the crisis. Novel protest methods were embraced in **Germany**, where migrant solidarity group Seebrücke called on people to show their solidarity with migrants and refugees stuck in camps in Greece by painting their **footprints** or leaving shoes in front of state institutions. People also performed solo protests and formed a two-metre-distanced human chain.

Young climate activists found creative ways of maintaining the momentum of the protests that achieved such impact in **2019**. When plans for a global climate strike in April had to change, Germany's climate movement collected over 1,000 climate strike **placards** from across the country and laid them out in front of Germany's federal parliament. Tens of thousands of people also added their voices in an online protest. In the **Netherlands**, Extinction Rebellion activists, unable to stage their planned actions, collected over a thousand shoes from around the country and placed them outside the country's parliament. Greta Thunberg, who sparked the FridaysForFuture climate strike movement, took an alternative route when weekly strikes could no longer be held, launching a series of Friday **webinars**, 'talks for future', while also using her platform to encourage young people to take safety precautions. The **USA's** young climate activists switched to working through one-to-one connections, using phone banks and social media organising to encourage young people to vote, and to vote for candidates committed to **climate action**, in the November elections. The USA's weekly **Fire Drill Fridays** protests moved online, with actor **Jane Fonda** repurposing her 1980s workout routines via TikTok to recruit support for climate action.

Italy's '**sardines**' movement rose to prominence in **2019** to fight back against the tide of right-wing populism, racism and xenophobia, with a tactic of cramming people into public squares to make the point that it was not only the far right who could mobilise mass numbers. Under

lockdown, such a tactic became impossible, and alternative means to keep up the struggle needed to be found. In the city of **Bologna**, the movement filled the public square not with people but with 6,000 pots of herbs, and then sold them online, safely delivering them to buyers by bicycle. The money raised went to help sustain local cultural industries under lockdown. The action kept up a symbolic protest presence while delivering practical community benefits. The sardines movement's

leaders were also part of **distanced protests** led by Aboubakar Soumahoro, a union organiser who fights for the rights of Italy's 200,000-plus migrant labourers, branded '**the Invisibles**'. Emergency restrictions exposed the dire situation in which migrant labourers live, but also the country's reliance on them for food production. Protests highlighted the rights denied to these essential workers, and other 'invisibles', such as health workers.



Extinction Rebellion places hundreds of shoes at Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Spain, to represent people who cannot protest due to the pandemic.

© Denis Doyle/Getty Images



An activist with Fridays for Future helps pin thousands of protest signs to the lawn in front of the Reichstag in Berlin, Germany.

© Sean Gallup/Getty Images



For the first time in decades, a march could not take place on 24 March to mark **Argentina's** National Day for Memory, Truth and Justice, commemorating the crimes committed under dictatorship. As an alternative, people were asked to show their support by draping white headscarves from balconies and windows, and they did so in their thousands, sharing images on social media, while human rights organisations posted online broadcasts. Similar tactics were embraced in neighbouring **Uruguay** when the Silence March, which normally takes place every 20 May to demand justice for those detained and disappeared during the dictatorship, could not go ahead: people hung photos, images and messages outside their windows, and **photos** of hundreds of the disappeared were put on prominent display in green areas throughout the capital city. On the night of the commemoration, the organisation **Vecinas en los Muros** (Neighbours on Walls) projected giant images of the disappeared on the walls of buildings.

Around the world, balconies became key spaces for communicating protest solidarity, as well as appreciation for frontline workers, a practice that began in **Spain** and spread across the world. In **Serbia**, what started in March as a nightly cheer for health workers became an anti-authoritarian protest in April; on the day that postponed elections would have been held, people stayed at their windows five minutes longer in a distanced protest under the motto 'Raise your voice: Noise against dictatorship'.

Regular pot-banging protests, a traditional expression of dissent in many Latin American countries, were held in numerous countries, and not only in **Chile** and **Colombia**, but also in **Palestine**, where a pot-banging protest demanded protection for women after cases of femicide and domestic violence soared under lockdown. Among other venues for pot-banging protests were **Kosovo** and Zagreb, capital of **Croatia**, where people stood at their doors and windows banging pots and blowing whistles to



Labourers led by trade unionist Aboubakar Soumahoro demand rights and the regularisation of migrant workers in Rome, Italy, on 5 July 2020.

© Antonio Masiello/Getty Images





Protesters demand the rights of LGBTQI+ people while complying with safety measures on 28 June 2020 in Palma de Mallorca, Spain.  
© Joan Amengual/VIEWpress via Getty Images

protest at the policies of the mayor, accompanied by distanced, masked protests.

Many of the LGBTQI+ Pride marches scheduled for June had to be postponed, including in **Croatia**, where LGBTQI+ activists staged a symbolic event in which distanced people occupied the public squares on the route that many more had planned to march through, insisting on their visibility even in a time of crisis. In **Ukraine**, LGBTQI+ activists demanded recognition by using a drone to attach a giant rainbow flag to the Motherland Monument, a key national symbol. **Taiwan's** Pride march was one of the few that was able to go ahead in July, with many people wearing rainbow masks. Participants carried placards to honour the many cities around the world that were unable to hold Pride events in 2020.

In Poland, moves in recent years by the ruling party and conservative groups to introduce further restrictions on already tight abortion laws have been staunchly **resisted** by large-scale protests, including women's strikes. When the ruling party tried to **reintroduce** bills against abortion and sex education under cover of the pandemic, mass protests were no longer an option, but this did not stop women **mobilising**. Protest took the form of a distanced shop queue, an activity still permitted under lockdown rules, with masks added to renewed protest emblems, placards and the movement's black clothing. This mobilisation was accompanied by a traffic-blocking protest and a continuous eight-hour online '**protest without a break**' that reached over 100,000 people, enabling many to communicate their continued willingness to resist.



We organised protests, which was a slightly crazy thing to do, because how do you protest during a pandemic when you are not allowed to gather? That is why we got creative: we invented new forms of protest because we had to. We staged 'queueing protests', standing two metres apart in a queue outside a shop close to the parliament building, to comply with lockdown regulations, while holding signs and umbrellas. This happened in several cities, not just in the capital, Warsaw. As we were not allowed to walk freely, we also organised 'car protests'. We interrupted traffic and blocked Warsaw's main square for about an hour.

These protests were quite effective. The amendments did not proceed and are now 'frozen'. They were sent to a parliamentary commission, but the commission is not working on them. They have been neither rejected nor approved.

Klementyna Suchanow, Polish Women's Strike

In addition to the abortion rights protests, **Polish** business owners **sounded** car horns, blocked roads and camped outside the prime minister's office to call for greater support under lockdown. The use of vehicles as a means of protest was seen elsewhere, including in **Hungary**, where the state imposed one of the strictest series of restrictions on freedoms; people took to their cars weekly to protest at the health system's treatment of non-COVID-19 patients, risking heavy fines for doing so. In the USA, activists from the immigration justice group Unidad Latina en Acción and the Jewish political action organisation Never Again Action Boston **gathered** in their vehicles outside a detention centre in Massachusetts, sounding their car horns to support detained people's demands for better sanitation and the release of people with health

conditions. In **Mexico**, inverting the normal politics around migration, people blocked traffic in the border region on the USA's Independence Day holiday weekend, calling for stronger measures to screen people entering from the USA. Civil society groups in **Paraguay** organised a series of vehicle caravans to protest against alleged corruption in medical procurement. A protest against proposed judicial changes in **Samoa** took the form of a procession of vehicles from the airport to parliament.

Weekly anti-government protests in **Slovenia** mobilised thousands of people not in cars but on **bicycles**, accompanied by the sounding of horns and whistles; as in Paraguay, the protests were sparked by allegations of corruption in medical procurement. In the **USA** too, bicycles were the vehicle of choice of the 10,000 protesters who took part in a four-mile-long (6.5 km) 'justice ride' across Manhattan, New York, led by Street Riders NYC, a young, Black-led organisation mobilised against police brutality and systemic racism.

Often accompanying these real-world protests, the digital sphere also became a more important protest arena. **Turkey's** embattled journalists staged an online protest, sharing videos from their homes, calling for the release of their imprisoned colleagues and making the point that they would not be silenced even under lockdown. **Hong Kong's** annual commemoration of the Tiananmen Square massacre also turned into an online vigil, while small groups of people – only groups of up to eight were allowed to meet under emergency measures – lit candles in parks. Online protests in the **USA** included a virtual rally to call for a halt to evictions, foreclosures and utility cut-offs during lockdown. Protest art, a vital part of the ongoing protests for political and economic change in **Chile**, moved online, with the creation of a virtual protest mural, while protest images were projected onto buildings in the capital, Santiago. In the city of Rostov-on-Don in **Russia**, protesters exploited a feature that

allowed people to tag themselves on an online map, marking themselves as thronging public squares, even though in reality those squares remained empty. The tactic quickly spread to other Russian cities.

These protests, in all their forms, not only demanded rights and brought attention to pressing issues; they also pointed to a continuing human need for collective action and social solidarity, and a determination not to be rendered invisible by isolation. They were part of a **spectrum** that

included the many non-political expressions of communal belonging that encompassed solidarity signs in windows and on balconies, distanced musical performance and singing, and mass rounds of applause and commemoration. Part of what protests offered during these difficult times was a means of belonging and making human connections, which is why many protests, even if distanced or online, had a festive and celebratory tinge. Under the pandemic, people not only showed that protest was still possible: they proved that it was necessary.



Pro-choice activists protest in front of a supermarket at Krakow's Main Square on 15 April 2020, in reaction to the Polish government's legislative proposal to end legal abortion and criminalise sex education. © Omar Marques/Getty Images



## BUILDING COALITIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

The crisis called for new and intensified responses, and partnerships and connections to enable those responses. Many of the actions described in this report were underpinned by collaboration across civil society groups and organisations of different types working in diverse fields, drawing on existing networks and coalitions and forging new ones to respond to the pandemic. Civil society mobilised partnerships, including many that reached beyond borders and, where possible, with state and private sector bodies. In several contexts, networks and partnerships were formed to push for lasting change and recovery, motivated to build a **better post-pandemic world** that rights the injustices exposed and exacerbated by the emergency.

In Ethiopia, civil society formed a national ad hoc CSO response team, which helped raise funds for pandemic response. The **Tunisian Association of Democratic Women** worked to establish a coalition with the Tunisian League of Human Rights, the journalists' trade union and other organisations to help address the human rights impacts of the pandemic. Across Asia, the **Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact** reports, a regional network formed to coordinate COVID-19 response, assess needs and help meet the longer-term needs that will arise from this time.

Cooperation and partnership manifested in the form of joint platforms to enable better coordination. A new platform, **Solidarity for Action**, was launched in the Central African Republic to coordinate efforts to support people living with HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, LGBTQI+ people and sex workers during the

pandemic, encouraging a joined-up response. In **Malaysia**, online platforms emerged to connect people volunteering to help with community requests for help. New initiatives to share skills among civil society were also seen: CSOs with strong tech backgrounds **reported** that other CSOs had called on them to help develop the remote working skills needed under the pandemic.



### Open Source Community Fight Against COVID 19 - Malaysia

March 27 · 🌐

Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) just started their laser cutting. Targeting to produce 600 units. We will need some more 4m acrylics. Wonder where can we source them.

Can someone help?



Tech enthusiasts in Malaysia connect through a Facebook group to produce protective gear and ensure its timely delivery to those who need it the most.  
© Open Source Community Fight Against Covid-19/Facebook

In **Mexico**, partnerships with the private sector, particularly transport companies, were an important part of the response to meet the rising demand for the rescue of women experiencing domestic violence under lockdown. Alongside this valuable partnership, there was cross-civil society coordination, as over 40 feminist groups came together, backed by a petition signed by thousands of people, to call on the federal and state governments to guarantee the safety of women, girls and boys under the pandemic.

**Argentina** saw the launch of a new partnership spearheaded by civil society, working with women leaders in business and other spheres, committed to challenging the gender gap in employment. Because the gender gap widened under the pandemic, Agenda for Equality sees this as an essential time to challenge inequality and aims to ensure that the post-pandemic recovery promotes women's employment and rebalances unpaid care work. Since launch, 1,500 leaders have signed up to the initiative. It offered another example of how civil society's ideas could move forward rapidly and win support under crisis conditions.

The Agenda for Equality was launched on 30 July. It was initially supported by 200 women leaders from academia, civil society, unions and companies of all kinds, from multinationals to small and medium enterprises and cooperatives. Once the initiative was made public, it was opened for signature, and as of today it has been supported by 1,500 leaders, of various genders, from all over the country and from a variety of sectors.

The Agenda was put together very quickly: the whole process, from the start of conversations to the public launch of the initiative with its 12 proposals, took just about two weeks. Now we are thinking about how to organise around the initiative and create and generate synergies with other groups.

**Gala Díaz Langou**, Center for the Implementation of Public Policies for Equity and Growth, Argentina

## NURTURING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

The most important partnerships CSOs could have were with the communities directly affected by the crisis. In multiple contexts, CSOs understood that while they had a vital role to play in meeting needs and defending rights, responses would be more effective and better serve local needs if they involved and empowered community leaders and

volunteers. By investing in community leadership and volunteering, CSOs respected, applied and further enabled local knowledge and resilience. This approach could offer an essential counterbalance to methods adopted by states, which frequently failed to recognise and enable local leadership, instead often centralising and concentrating political power and adopting securitised and militarised approaches to enforcement with emergency rules.



In **Malaysia**, this meant coaching community leaders so they had the skills to connect with the platforms offering support and were able to articulate their communities' needs. In the DRC, BIFERD trained over 50 local volunteers to help lead the response, and **Active Vision** helped young leaders in neighbourhoods most affected by lockdown poverty to develop negotiation and advocacy strategies. Similarly, in **South Africa**, the Democracy Works Foundation trained community-based CSOs and assisted them in developing tools to better advocate for their concerns and those of the people they work with, while another CSO, **Grassroot**, focused on connecting and training community organisers on WhatsApp.

Lockdown measures in poor provinces created an unprecedented food crisis, and it was key for local communities to be able to negotiate containment measures and cooperate with the authorities so that people would be allowed to continue to work while staying safe. We trained young local leaders in poverty-stricken areas and equipped them with advocacy and negotiation strategies that they used to talk to and cooperate with the authorities to adapt containment measures to their context.

Gedeon Muzigirwa Cizungu, Active Vision, DRC

In **Argentina** too, several CSOs partnered to develop and provide training to over 90 community leaders. The training covered COVID-19 prevention, legal information on lockdown compliance, awareness of assistance programmes, violence prevention and guidance on soup kitchens. The aim was to recognise the key role of grassroots leaders and help them develop the knowledge they needed to lead response and spread awareness in their communities.

Civil society in Cameroon increased the effectiveness of messaging and community reach by recognising the important role played by faith leaders and working with them to foster community involvement, prevent stigma and discrimination and encourage respect for human rights.

We disseminated positive messaging to promote community involvement in the fight against COVID-19-related stigma and discrimination. Multi-stakeholder dialogues were established, bringing together all religious denominations, to prevent human rights violations resulting from the quarantine measures applied to infected persons. Religious leaders were decisive in raising awareness during funeral rites, conducted following national guidelines and allowing communities to bury their dead with dignity.

Pierre Fridolin Beng Sanding, Cameroon

These and many other examples pointed to an important lesson: to trust and enable people.

The potential impact was looking grim, and had we not put our trust in the people and the communities, the efforts we made would have been far less successful. Relief work had to be efficient and putting our trust in community volunteers to do the job was the key to success, for instance in Malaysia and Thailand. Whatever resources were generated were transferred to them and they reported back on the actions carried out through phone or other means available to them.

Gam Shimray, Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact

## JOINING THE DOTS: A CONNECTED RESPONSE TO PROTECT MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA

The North South Initiative, a CSO that helps build advocacy and leadership capacities among migrants, refugees and stateless persons in Malaysia, widened its range of interventions to help meet a range of needs under the pandemic. Its executive director, **Adrian Pereira**, explains how the organisation and other Malaysian CSOs combined tactics and supplemented each other's efforts to ensure that migrants and refugees were able to assert their rights.

*We are coaching migrant leaders to ensure their communities have access to networks that provide services and can provide accurate information about needs to those who are providing services. Some public networks, such as the 'Care Mongering Malaysia' group, are proving a platform for Malaysians to reach out to help migrants and refugees in need. This is an online platform that links those who need help with those who can afford to provide the service.*

*Sikh temples are providing groceries and packed lunches. Many other CSOs are working hard on the ground to provide groceries. Migrant workers can call them when they need assistance with food.*

*We are forming a network to ensure services can be delivered in the long term, as we foresee the problems continuing for many*

*months to come. Many migrant workers will remain and will need aid, so we are developing a supply chain to support them.*

*We are ensuring migrants receive accurate information from global bodies such as the IOM, UN Development Programme and UN Refugee Agency and also from the various government agencies related to health, labour, security and welfare. This includes providing information via infographics on counselling services and on health issues in different languages.*

*We are also fighting misinformation related to migrant workers and refugees. There has been a lot of fearmongering blaming them for the spread of the virus.*

*We are also encouraging migrants to seek medical treatment if they are sick and monitoring employers who are taking advantage of the current situation and committing labour offences, particularly as movement control orders have partly restricted lawyers from providing legal representation and legal aid.*

*Other CSOs are providing counselling, delivering groceries, doing fundraising, monitoring human trafficking, providing gender-sensitive and maternity-related services and catering to women's needs.*



## HELPING EACH OTHER

Time and again, the story above has been one of how CSOs repurposed themselves to provide rapid help, proving their worth. People turned to CSOs with an expectation that they would provide essential help and defend their rights. In some contexts, these expectations were reflected

in increased membership of civil society groups. Student associations in **the Netherlands** saw a sharp increase in new members, even though much student activity moved online during the pandemic. Several countries saw a growth in trade union membership, as people showed renewed interest in collective action to defend labour rights. In **Sweden**, in March alone, the commercial employees' union gained around 5,000 new members.



Volunteers from a food bank sort bags containing food for distribution at Springs Fresh Produce Market, east of Johannesburg, South Africa, on 21 May 2020.

© Waldo Swiegers/Bloomberg via Getty Images



Food is prepared and served through a protective curtain at a community kitchen in the Lo Hermida neighbourhood of Santiago, Chile.

© Tamara Merino/Bloomberg via Getty Images

In several countries, including those that have seen membership reductions in the recent past and those where membership is already strong, the key role played by unions in defending employment and wages and campaigning for decent health and safety at work has led to membership gains. Bluntly, working people have seen more clearly the importance of union membership to protect them against management inadequacies and violations of their most fundamental rights.

Owen Tudor, International Trade Union Confederation

But it wasn't only established CSOs that scrambled to provide help. The response to the pandemic saw new community-level mutual help initiatives **spring up** in numerous places, providing effective responses that undoubtedly saved lives and upheld rights. Like the continuing protests, these new initiatives spoke to a need for solidarity amidst crisis, and a willingness to foster that solidarity voluntarily. By placing an emphasis on mutual support, they challenged the power imbalances that can exist in relationships of charity. They showed that in the face of a crisis, communities can have considerable resilience and offer their own solutions.

In Melbourne, **Australia**, when a housing complex was placed under special lockdown following a localised outbreak, residents took it onto themselves to develop an online information sheet about the lockdown, translate it into 10 languages and distribute it around their estate by text messaging and social media – all within 24 hours. People came together to do a job that governmental bureaucracy would have found too complex, with the aims of fostering local compliance, building trust between residents and health workers, avoiding confrontation with the

security forces who had descended to enforce lockdown measures with little prior warning or explanation, and demonstrating that the complex's residents had their own sources of knowledge and resilience.

Indigenous people developed mutual aid groups in the **USA**, setting up alternate food hubs and supply lines as grocery stores were being emptied by panic buying, supported by rapid crowdfunding. The response also saw the development of community wash stations to facilitate basic hygiene for people without access to essential infrastructure, in a model that was developed and promoted across US territory.

As it became clear that help would not come from the government, residents of Brazil's favelas organised to provide for themselves. In **Paraisópolis**, São Paulo's largest slum, residents designated hundreds of 'street presidents', with the role of helping their neighbours secure food, aid and healthcare. In some of Brazil's hardest-hit neighbourhoods, community leaders hired their own ambulances, set up unemployment funds and built databases to track cases that would otherwise go unaccounted. Local residents formed a neighbourhood **solidarity network** in Lisbon, Portugal to use an unoccupied building to provide food, shelter and protection for people experiencing poverty, insecurity and homelessness; however, after a month they were **forcibly evicted**, leaving the building empty again.

Venezuela, experiencing overlapping economic, political, humanitarian and health crises before the pandemic, was badly hit. But even here, a voluntary response helped produce masks for health workers and collect unused medicines for hospitals short on supplies. Another Venezuelan initiative, the **Good Neighbour Programme**, was started by individuals to deliver food to older people in the capital, Caracas, many of whom live alone since their families have recently moved abroad to seek work. This new group established partnerships with local restaurants to distribute



the food they had been left unable to sell, and people with motorcycles volunteered to deliver food; the group then scaled up its programme of support by securing donations from CSOs and businesses, while its growing social media presence led to more offers of donations. Similar initiatives involving people buying food wholesale, cooking meals and distributing them to those in need sprang up across Latin America.

We appealed to people's generosity. With unused materials and fabrics and donations requested from private businesses, using the sewing machines available, our volunteers produced protective articles. Many people donated their leftover medicine, and we got donations for hospitals from private companies.

Magaly Eugenia Miliani, Unidos para Ayudas Médicas,  
Venezuela

Iran was also hard hit by the pandemic, with its impacts worsened by economic crisis, international sanctions and a government that is often **hostile** to people's demands. In the city of **Shiraz**, a voluntary effort formed to disinfect neighbourhoods and manufacture masks and sanitiser. In Lagos, Nigeria, **hundreds** of voluntary initiatives, many of them formed by young people, emerged to ensure that people got food, sanitary products and other essentials. In South Africa, under strict lockdown conditions, local people started the **Cape Town Together** initiative to encourage neighbourhoods to self-organise, bringing together people who had not previously cooperated to share their experiences and resources.

Individual initiative could make a difference. In the populous township of Chitungwiza, on the outskirts of Harare, **Zimbabwe**, Samantha Murozoki started a feeding programme after a neighbour told her that

her family had gone to bed hungry when all sources of income dried up during lockdown. With the help of volunteers, she started serving over 100 hot meals daily, and her response grew as she received support through **social media**.

Many communities took the initiative to apply their own lockdowns and restrictions on outside contact; people often took responsibility for quarantining and isolating themselves, even in the absence of official advice or orders. Some **communities** were able to use traditional and local medicines and health practices as a way of helping to prevent the spread of the virus. Communities, when they had food, contributed food support for those in need, and some set up local food-exchange schemes; some Indigenous communities, for example, had long-



Makeshift signs remind people to stay at home at a slum community in Manila, Philippines, during the government-mandated lockdown on 4 May 2020.

© Ezra Acayan/Getty Images

established food production and natural resource management systems that meant they did not need food deliveries. For them, the crisis was also an opportunity to promote the importance of local management of agricultural and natural resources.

These were stories to be inspired by, and they underlined the importance of enabling and nurturing local self-governance that can help build the skills that provide resilience in times of crisis. The burgeoning of new initiatives indicated that the potential for civic action always exists; even in apparently unpromising circumstances, it can be present, perhaps latent and waiting for an issue or event that activates it. The crisis was a reminder of our ability, as people connecting with other people, to open up local-level spaces and build constituencies, and of the need to look

beyond traditional organisational models in understanding what civil society is and how it is acting to sustain people and communities.

For established CSOs, the need was to seek to understand and enable practices and motivations of voluntary response, often embedded in local cultures and traditions, and always to be open to working with new allies and partners and in new ways. Responses to the pandemic also offered a reminder that each crisis can bring people into participation for the first time, and there is a corresponding need for CSOs to engage with freshly mobilised people and help nurture their participation confidence and competence. If as civil society we can do this, we will have the ability to better cope with and flourish after the current crisis, and then face the next crisis to come.



An emergency medical response team hired by the Union of Residents and Tradesmen of the Paraisópolis favela of Sao Paulo, Brazil, respond to an emergency on 15 April 2020. © Rodrigo Capote/Bloomberg via Getty Images



In Miami, Florida, USA, people place items into a community refrigerator so anyone who needs food can take it for free. © Joe Raedle/Getty Images



This report is a snapshot that comes at a time when many of us still live in conditions heavily shaped by the pandemic, and will continue to for some time. There is much still to learn about the impacts of the pandemic and the measures taken to address it, and what these say about how our societies are ordered. Some of this learning will only become apparent once the virus has been defeated and its consequences lived through. Nonetheless, some early lessons can be offered, based on the civil society response to the current crisis, that can help us all cope with the present situation better, improve the world we live in following the pandemic and become better equipped to encounter the next crisis.

## CIVIL SOCIETY

**Rights restrictions introduced during the pandemic must not become permanent, and the opportunities should not be missed in post-pandemic rebuilding to tackle the deep-rooted problems that the crisis revealed and exacerbated.**

Civil society should continue to work to ensure that human rights are placed at the centre of the ongoing pandemic response, and that all restrictions on civic space and human rights imposed under emergency conditions are rolled back as soon as possible.

Civil society should continue to seek to influence states to develop and implement policies, in response to the pandemic and for **post-pandemic recovery**, that protect vulnerable and excluded groups, uphold democratic freedoms and advance social, economic and climate justice. Policies that civil society could work to promote include those to:

- reverse restrictions on rights introduced under the emergency, backed through legal action where necessary and possible;
- develop strategies to combat disinformation, conspiracy theories

and hate speech, such as impartial fact-checking services, rapid rebuttals and reporting guidelines;

- promote better public health initiatives to combat a resurgence of the pandemic and other diseases, and encourage safer behaviours;
- provide public assistance for those who were already excluded and who suffered the worst effects of the pandemic;
- support people who have lost jobs and incomes, including informal and casual workers;
- recognise and reward frontline workers, such as health and care workers, sanitation workers, cleaners and those growing, producing and distributing food and other essentials;
- build on support schemes introduced during the pandemic to advance towards the establishment of permanent social safety nets, including universal healthcare, unemployment benefits and a universal basic income;
- target support to small businesses, start-ups and social enterprises, rather than giant corporations;
- link business support to improved labour and environmental practices;
- prevent pharmaceutical giants and other corporations from profiteering from the pandemic and its aftermath;
- take urgent action to address the ongoing climate crisis, including through 'green new deal' proposals that also promote sustainable post-pandemic recovery.

At the global level, civil society should engage with international institutions to promote greater collective action on challenges exposed by the pandemic, including responses to:

- increase aid for badly hit global south countries, and the continuance of aid from global north states at a time when it is under renewed threat;

- promote debt cancellation so that economically weaker countries can redirect resources towards addressing the pandemic and post-pandemic reconstruction;
- ensure fair access to treatment drugs and vaccines for all countries and populations, and prevent narrow national control of any vaccines that are developed.

Local knowledge, leadership and capacities made a vital difference in how people experienced and survived the crisis.

CSOs should continue to work to develop rapid-response skills and connections with local communities, leaders and sources of resilience, and strengthen links between high-level advocacy work and community engagement.

Civil society's experience showed that coalitions and partnerships can be effective, enable engagement on multiple fronts and unlock breakthroughs.

Civil society should continue to pursue network and coalition building and partnerships within and beyond civil society in order to develop crisis resilience, defend rights and demand a socially just and rights-based recovery. Potential partnerships include those with trade unions and newly mobilised professions such as health workers to defend labour rights; with tech companies to combat disinformation and enable social media to be used for social good; and with local government agencies to develop community-level crisis response capacities.



Protesters in Berlin, Germany, demand the immediate evacuation of Greek island refugee camps on 20 September 2020, following a fire at the Moria camp on Lesbos that left 13,000 refugees homeless. © Omer Messinger/Getty Images



## STATES

**States had a powerful role to play in addressing the crisis, and different experiences in different countries showed how important it was for states to make the right decisions, and the vital role partnership and engagement with civil society should play in shaping and assuring accountability over those decisions.**

States should enable open civic space, remove all new restrictions at the earliest opportunity and recognise all of civil society's multiple and connected roles – including service and information provision, monitoring of rights, advocacy and campaigning, mobilising and capacitating people and asserting accountability over decision-making – as an essential part of robust and inclusive crisis response. States should publicly acknowledge and recognise civil society's vital contributions to response and recovery. As part of that recognition, states should include civil society among recipients of relief and rebuilding measures, including through operational support, stimulus packages, wage subsidies and credit access schemes. States should target part of their emergency financial support to sustain and enable civil society, involve civil society in partnerships, national taskforces and advisory councils and share all relevant information with civil society.

## DONORS

**Donors can make a difference by recognising and nurturing civil society's essential roles and can help to enable and sustain a diverse range of civil society groups and actions.**

Donors should be flexible with their **support to civil society** during the current period and more generally in times of crisis, and enable the rapid deployment of CSO capacities to frontline response. This entails

orienting greater direct support towards global south CSOs, particularly those closest to communities, and providing core support. There is also a need to make available rapid and flexible funding lines, foster scalable global south civil society support structures, remove barriers to civil society fundraising and provide non-financial as well as financial support. Among other responses, donors should work to:

- remove restrictions and amplify the value of and contributions from civil society;
- support civil society to cover and reduce their operating costs;
- make regulatory requirements for CSOs receiving funding more flexible;
- include civil society in COVID-19 stimulus funds and subsidies;
- develop the longer-term infrastructure needed to scale up civil society efforts;
- empower civil society to develop sustainable alternatives to challenges exposed by the pandemic.

## THE MEDIA

**Accurate information, on how the virus worked, how to protect people and how to seek help for symptoms, was never more vital, but too often misinformation was its own pandemic.**

The media should work with civil society to help share accurate, verified information in ways that different population groups can easily understand, and to combat misinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech. Community leaders should be recognised as valuable sources of local knowledge and CSOs as reservoirs of expertise to complement the official views of state spokespeople. CSOs and the media should work together to share the many inspiring stories of civic action and local-level response in the midst of the crisis.

## INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

**The pandemic showed how major challenges can cross borders and go beyond the scope of what can be addressed by any one state. The case for international cooperation has been tested and proved, but the challenges in international cooperation have also been made clear.**

International institutions should work to **enable** full and diverse civil society participation in their processes, including through online means, and monitor and exercise accountability over states that have

excessively restricted rights during the pandemic. With the WHO under the spotlight, civil society should be fully engaged in helping to ensure that the lessons can be learned about where its response was successful and where it could have done better. International institutions should work more closely with civil society to promote the value of international cooperation and build greater support for the development of stronger, more effective and, crucially, more democratic international institutions, equipped to tackle the many problems that cannot be addressed by states.



Officials of the World Health Organization speak at a news conference in Geneva, Switzerland, shortly before the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic.  
© Stefan Wermuth/Bloomberg via Getty Images



## INTERVIEWS

- Hamilk Chahin and Addys Then Marte, 'Dominican Republic: The times ahead may bring positive change', 4 August 2020
- Ephraim Chimwaza, 'Malawi: Girls need protection against COVID-19, and against endemic violations of their rights', 22 June 2020
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