



COVID-19:

MEMBERS VIEWS ON CIVIL SOCIETY RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

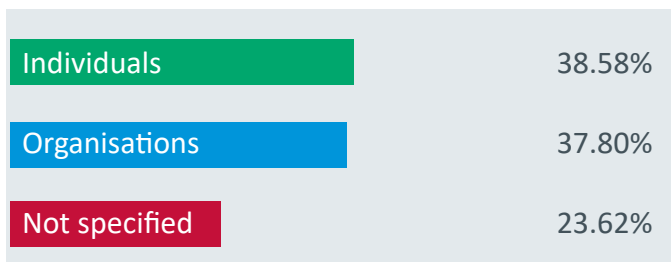
1 BACKGROUND

Through a recent survey of CIVICUS alliance members we sought to learn about the impact of COVID-19 on their realities. Amongst other questions, we asked how the current crisis is impacting on their relationships with donors and supporters and their ability to organise and mobilise the resources and support needed to sustain their work. **As of June 2020 we had received and analysed 127 responses from a range of members based in over 50 countries around the world.** This summary offers an analysis of their responses and identifies recurrent challenges, behaviours and innovations.

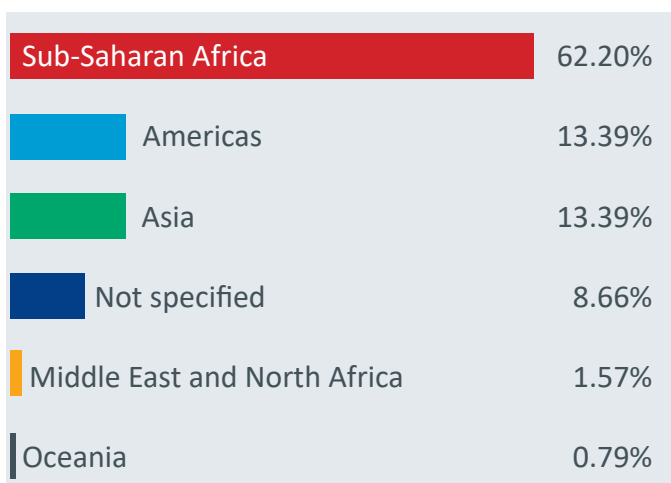
The survey also helped us sense-check the validity of CIVICUS’s advocacy with the donor community, particularly two open letters to donors published in [March](#) and [April](#) that called for more flexibility, certainty and stability towards grantee partners, and asked donors to prioritise solidarity for a lasting and stronger local civil society in the global south. It was very encouraging to hear that more than the half of respondents knew about the letters and found them very useful for their work.

CHARACTERISATION OF RESPONDENTS

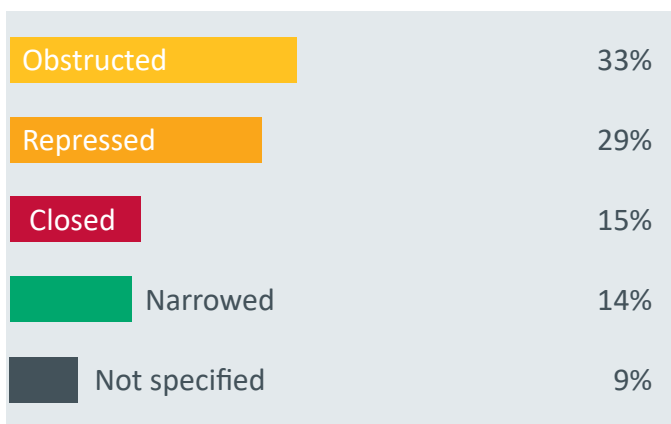
The majority of respondents are individual activists or represent small organisations operating at the grassroots level. More than half of respondents are from Africa, with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria being the most represented countries, and 44 per cent operate in countries where civic space is rated by the CIVICUS Monitor as being repressed or closed.



GRAPH 1. Type of respondents.



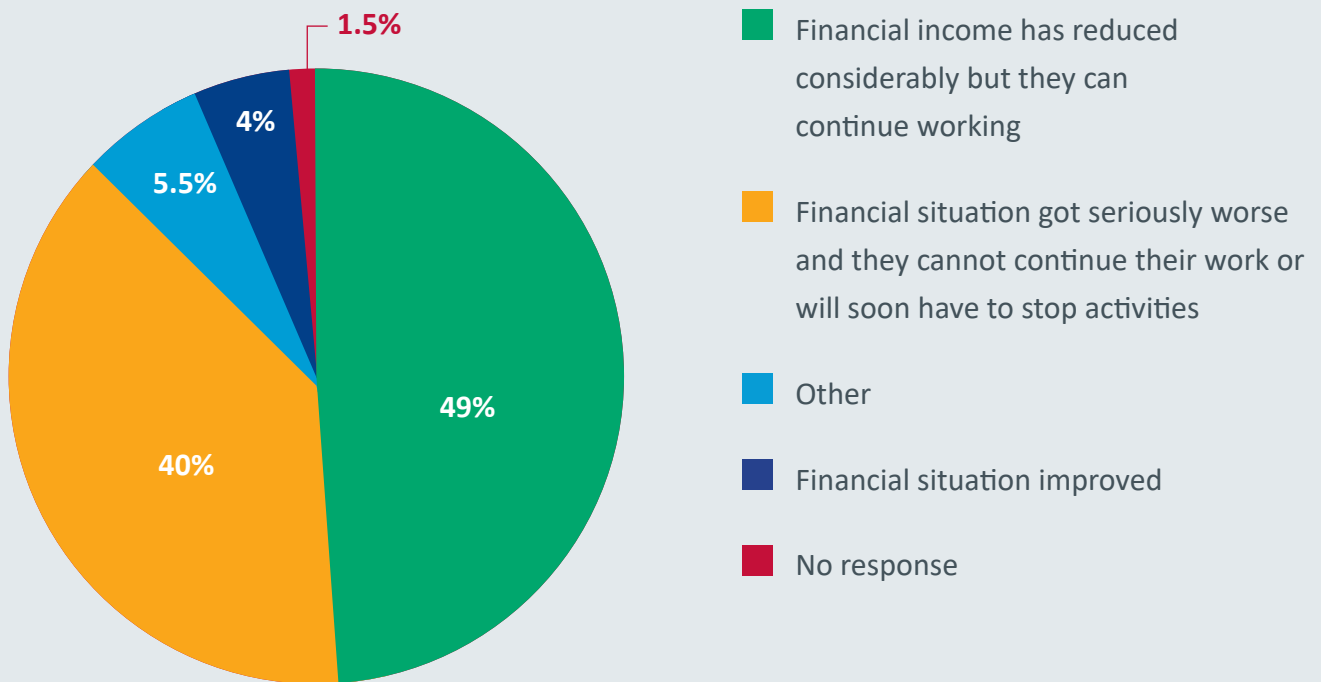
GRAPH 1.1. Regional distribution of the respondents.



GRAPH 1.2. Civic Space Rating in the countries where the respondents work, according to the CIVICUS Monitor.



2 HOW HAS THE COVID-19 CRISIS IMPACTED ON THE FINANCIAL/RESOURCING SITUATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS AND ACTIVISTS?



GRAPH 2. Financial impact of COVID-19 on respondents.

According to survey data, the pandemic has **negatively impacted on the financial situation of 89 per cent of respondents**. Of these, 49 per cent indicate that despite a significant income reduction they believe they can continue working in the medium term, but the remaining **40 per cent have been affected so severely that they expect to close down or stop activities in the near future**.

Looking more closely at those who report that they still believe they will be able to sustain their work, respondents tend to be small-to-medium-

sized organisations whose COVID-related income contraction is making it particularly difficult to continue paying salaries, resulting in then making cuts in staff, placing salary payments on hold or staff and volunteers working without proper remuneration. Even if they foresee that they will continue some operations in the short and medium term, various respondents feel that cuts and reductions are placing their organisations in a position of fragility, which will probably impact their sustainability in the longer term.

“IN 2019 WE SUBMITTED A FUNDING PROPOSAL TO OUR DONORS, AND WE EXPECTED TO RECEIVE THE FUNDS IN JANUARY 2020, BUT THE DONORS CHANGED THEIR MINDS AND WILL NOT GIVE US FUNDS BECAUSE OF COVID-19.”

– EPHRAIM CHIMWAZA, CENTER FOR SOCIAL CONCERN AND DEVELOPMENT, MALAWI

FOUR MAIN REASONS HAVE BEEN CITED:

- 1) **Donor behaviour:** funding modalities and behaviour from institutional donors have been frequently mentioned as main challenges in the current context.
 - A. There is a general unavailability of flexible, **unrestricted funding** that can be quickly redirected to address needs when they arise, including to cover various organisational costs, purchase essential COVID-19 protection supplies, such as water, soap and sanitisers, or deliver basic supplies for excluded and vulnerable groups served, such as sanitary pads for girls and women.
 - B. When grants offered are project-based, and with no activities taking place on the ground due to lockdowns, some **donors are no longer covering project expenses**, despite fixed costs having to be sustained while waiting for lockdown measures to be relaxed and activities to resume.
 - C. **Potential and prospective funding has abruptly stopped or changed**, with donors **no longer releasing funding for new projects or for new grantees**. In many instances donors have changed priorities and repurposed existing funding allocations towards COVID-19 emergency response. Further, new funding streams, when available, only support existing grantee partners.
- 2) The **sudden shutdown of country operations by large international civil society organisations** has reduced grant levels for local groups relying on their support.
- 3) **Lockdowns have impacted on corporate and individual donations as well as on revenue-generating activities and services**. Often these donors can no longer afford giving, while traditional fundraising events or door-to-door donation-seeking cannot take place due to lockdown measures. Lockdown measures also caused a significant slowdown on the pace of work for groups offering paid services, such as workshop facilitation and training, as a revenue-generation strategy.
- 4) Income from **endowments** – in the few cases where these exist – has reduced considerably due to poor market performance. This has had a very negative effect on reserves and the possibility of using unrestricted funds to face unexpected costs and adjustments.

“FUNDS FOR OUR USUAL OUTREACH WORK ARE REDUCED, AND NO ADDITIONAL FUNDS ARE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT COVID-19 RESPONSE EFFORTS. WE WILL HAVE TO SQUEEZE THE SAME WORKLOAD INTO A SMALLER BUDGET, WHILE ALSO INTEGRATING LOW-COST RESPONSES TO COVID-19, SUCH AS AWARENESS-RAISING AND THE PROVISION OF PROTECTION SUPPLIES.”

– JARAY NARAYAN PRASAD, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COORDINATION COMMITTEE, NEPAL

TABLE 1. Respondents most affected by the loss of income and how.

GROUPS MOST NEGATIVELY AFFECTED AMONGST RESPONDENTS	REASONS GIVEN	IMPLICATIONS
Individual activists	Lockdown measures reduced or paused services offered to sustain livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of income, including in investments made in initiatives that began at the start of the year and were suddenly halted • Funding used to fight pandemic drained funding needed to continue mission-critical work • Loss of independence as now many of these groups are turning to more traditional donors for help
Recently established youth-led organisations	Not having previous relationships and credibility with potential donors	
Community-based and community-resourced groups	Donations and fundraising halted due to lockdown or because donor priorities shifted to support government efforts to address the pandemic	
Social enterprises	Lockdown measures reduced or paused services offered	
Small and informal groups that cannot access international and domestic donors	Donor eligibility thresholds are restricted to big and established organisations	

“OUR INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITY IS TRAINING YOUNG PEOPLE IN BASIC COMPUTER SKILLS AT A SMALL FEE. THIS WAS HALTED BECAUSE OF THE RESTRICTIONS INTRODUCED AS PART OF THE COVID-19 PREVENTIVE MEASURES THAT STOPPED ACTIVITIES GATHERING PEOPLE. THIS IS THE INCOME WE USE TO PAY OFFICE RENTALS AND UTILITIES AND STIPENDS FOR OUR VOLUNTEERS AND INTERNS. NOW WITHOUT THAT INCOME AND EXTERNAL FUNDING WE CAN NO LONGER MAINTAIN THEM AND KEEP ON WITH OUR ACTIVITIES.”

– MSISKA TIZGOWERE, REVOLUTION HUMAN AID AND TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE, MALAWI

Looking more closely at the realities of those respondents who believe they will soon have to close down or stop operations, these are largely individual activists sustaining themselves through income-generating activities, such as providing training or facilitation, and small groups relying on community donations, donations gathered from faith congratulations, or on experts’ voluntary support, such as from lawyers, social workers, accountants and media experts.

All these sources of income and support have been negatively affected by lockdown measures and by the personal constraints that supporters have faced. Only a few respondents from this group have been relying on traditional grants, but they mentioned the unavailability of new funding from their donors. The very few respondents reporting a positive financial impact during the pandemic (4 per cent) refer to international funding that was accessed

“EVEN IF WE ASKED [OUR DONORS] TO RECONSIDER THEIR PRIORITIES, THE ‘PRE-CORONA’ THINKING IS STILL DOMINANT: INTERNATIONAL AND BRAZILIAN PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS HAVE NOT REDESIGNED THEIR PRIORITIES, PROCESSES AND ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS TO MEET THIS NEW SOCIOECONOMIC GLOBAL SCENARIO.” – JORGE LAFFITE, INSTITUTO DA INFANCIA, BRAZIL

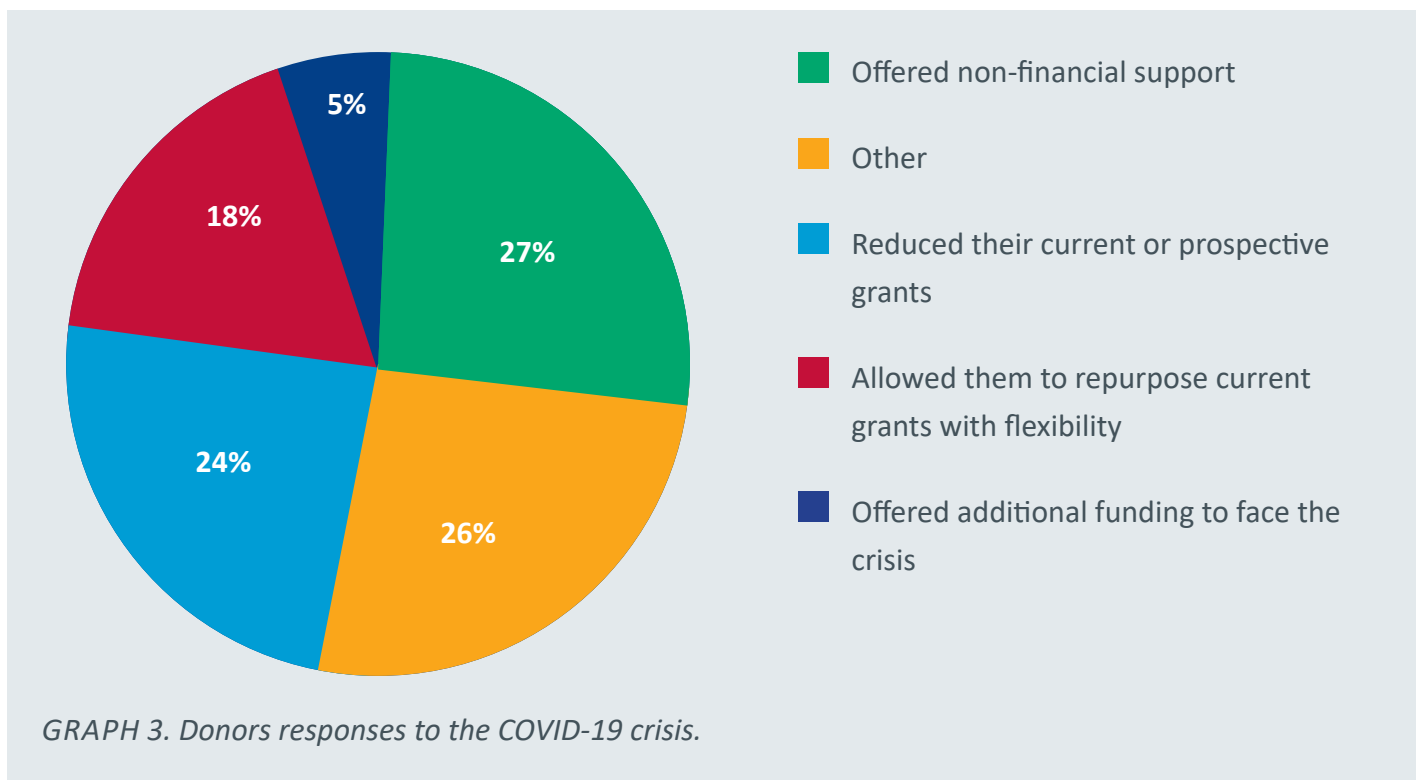
or rapidly repurposed flexibly, although in one case this funding had not yet been received at the time of responding to the survey. It was striking to note that all these respondents operate in countries with repressed civic space ratings, where resourcing – especially foreign funding – is typically a challenge.

Respondents who chose the option ‘other’ (5.5 per cent) are mostly groups that have never received grants and have no prior experience with institutional donors. Some of these respondents identify as new or informal movements and

report issues of recognition and registration that challenge the possibility of accessing financial support, as well as tensions with their funding intermediaries and donors due to the types of information and documents they required.

Other respondents in this group represent poor and traditionally excluded groups, such as sex workers in East Africa and migrants in South East Asia who are finding it very difficult to work and sustain themselves during lockdown measures and who experience harsher consequences of the restrictions due to their specific realities.

3 WHAT HAS BEEN THE RESPONSE FROM YOUR CURRENT FUNDERS/DONORS?



“CIVICUS UNLIKE OTHERS OFFERED A WINDOW FOR ADDITIONAL FUNDING, PLUS ALLOWED US TO REPURPOSE CURRENT GRANT WITH FLEXIBILITY – THUMB UP CIVICUS!” – STAFF MEMBER, CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT, MALAWI

Twenty-four per cent of respondents report that donors have reduced or suddenly halted their current or prospective support, while 18 per cent indicate that donors had allowed for the repurposing of existing grants, although mostly to be redirected towards COVID-19 responses rather than covering operational costs. Only 5 per cent were offered additional funds, although most of these were waiting to receive the funds at the time of responding to the survey.

Across the examples of donors allowing the repurposing of grants there is a range of situations, although, also in this case, many respondents were still waiting to hear back from donors on final decisions. Most respondents note some degree of flexibility from donors in allowing for the redirection of a small percentage of funds towards COVID-19 activities, such as the purchase of protective equipment for staff, donations to health centres and radio spots to provide COVID-19 information. Few report greater flexibility in allowing budgets to be changed to meet new demands and see projects to completion. There are challenges in repurposing existing grants: a respondent mentioned that budget allocated for research, training and advocacy had been diverted to emergency projects, using up the organisation’s budget.

Twenty-seven per cent of respondents report that funders were offering non-financial support,

but this is mostly in the form of solidarity statements and information-sharing, as opposed to psycho-social and legal support, which are the most commonly cited non-financial needs in the survey. The crisis is clearly impacting on mental health: isolation, social distancing and the stress of the crisis are contributing to increased mental health problems and trauma, which is particularly difficult for people already living in conflict-affected contexts, but support is largely not addressing this need.

Twenty-six per cent of **respondents selected ‘other’**, mostly with the argument that they do not have ‘donors’ as they understand the term. A few others cite here the lack of action taken by their current funders, which decided to freeze their grants during this period. The most striking comment under this group comes from an organisation that complained about pressure from some intermediary funders to disburse more grants to local groups and to provide more frequent reports, despite the constrained operational capacity caused by the pandemic impacts. The respondent suggests that the crisis might be positioning some funding intermediaries in a negative light with their donors if they cannot report that funds are being used, but feels that this shows that “their real interests are to stay in business at the cost of local civil society.”

4 ASPECTS OF RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION EMERGING FROM THE RESPONSES

A few respondents mention that lockdown measures have provided an **opportunity to experiment with new ways of working to pursue their mission**, such as testing ways of engaging their communities through social media networks, and also to **consolidate new areas of work that were accelerated by the pandemic**.

A couple of organisations mention that their **strong skills and internal capacity around information technology have become an asset**: they have had requests from other organisations, and donors, to help train grantees and staff on ‘remote working’.

All in all most groups showed **great resilience** in the face of the crisis. Despite limits due to funding constraints and lockdown measures restricting organising possibilities, they have been **playing a key role in delivering essential goods, such as food, sanitation items and protective equipment, and in raising awareness** about the virus, including on protection measures and government decisions. Some mention that these immediate responses were possible with very little financial resources, instead relying on strong networks of solidarity

through members, volunteers and supporters. **Connectedness with local communities** has been instrumental to ensuring a quick and effective response, and **an invaluable support for ensuring adherence to emergency measures** in the absence of government action and support. In some cases, respondents mention that their **governments did not approach communities soon enough or not at all and civil society groups were the only ones serving them**. Despite this great contribution, especially at the community level, some respondents indicate that **governments are not including civil society in overall pandemic response plans or rescue package**.

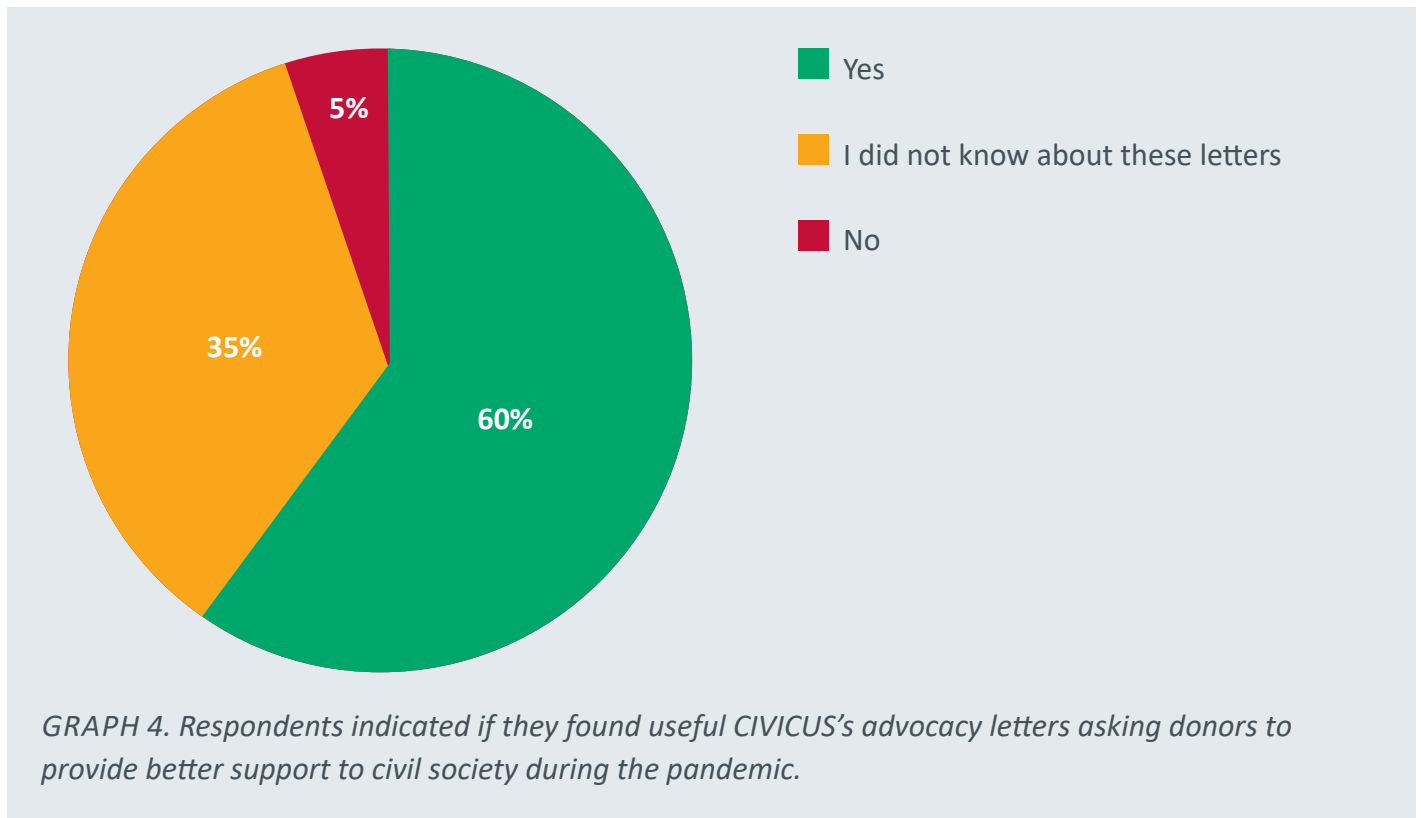
As for continued **mobilisation of their own resources**, many respondents mention that this is harder because they cannot mobilise or innovate given the lockdown. Some have tried online crowdsourcing but with little success, and some are securing small donations of funds or goods from their own members, partners, or the staff of other CSOs; one respondent said that being part of different platforms is what has allowed them to raise a little money, but it is still not easy.

“OUR ORGANISATION WAS AMONG THE FIRST CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS 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. PEOPLE RECOMMENDED OUR ORGANISATION TO THEM, AND WE WERE ABLE TO GET SOME FUNDING.

WE ALSO ADVOCATED WITH THE LOCAL COUNTY TO USE MONEY FROM THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM TO PROTECT PEOPLE’S HEALTH DURING THIS CRISIS AND REQUESTED TO INCLUDE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN THE RESPONSE EFFORTS. THEY HEARD US AND INCLUDED US AS ONE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERS, WHICH ALLOWED US TO ACCESS SOME FUNDS TO AMPLIFY OUR COVID-19 RESPONSE PROJECTS.”

– FOEDAY ZINNAH, YOUTH ALLIANCE FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN LIBERIA

5 SENSE-CHECKING THE VALIDITY OF CIVICUS ADVOCACY WITH THE DONOR COMMUNITY



We checked the validity of CIVICUS's advocacy with the donor community during the crisis, particularly the two open letters to donors published in [March](#) and [April](#) calling for more flexibility, certainty and stability towards grantee partners and asking donors to prioritise solidarity for a lasting and stronger local civil society in the global south.

Sixty per cent of respondents knew about the letters and found them useful for their work.

Some reported having shared these letters with their donors and used them in negotiations.

Respondents appreciated that the letters could open eyes among the donor community to challenges faced on the ground, especially by grassroots groups, and prompt funders to take action and apply more proactive measures when approaching civil society in situations like this. Some reported having gained more knowledge and confidence on how grantees and donors can be mutually accountable.

“THE RECOMMENDATIONS TO DONORS IN THESE LETTERS GAVE US THE COURAGE TO INCLUDE CERTAIN REQUESTS INCLUDING THE PURCHASE OF PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT FOR STAFF WHEN WE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEND A BUDGET AMENDMENT TO OUR DONORS, WHICH WAS APPROVED.” – PRISCILLA NYAABA, YOUTH

HARVEST FOUNDATION GHANA

CIVICUS PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS ON THESE SURVEY FINDINGS

Additional restrictions and limits in access to funding and other key resources occurring in light of COVID-19 could further undermine civil society's ability to exercise freedom of expression, assembly, and association. In this context, there is a widespread demand for additional funding and support to be made available by donors and governments to reach a broader range of civil society groups, especially traditionally excluded groups, youth-led and community-based groups, as well as less formal and newly established ones. This has become one of our priority requests to the donor community.

It is encouraging to see that many members of the alliance have found relevant and useful CIVICUS' advocacy actions directed to the donor community during this crisis. We will continue advocating with donors to allocate more and better resources for civil society, particularly for smaller and informal groups in the Global South. We will now move beyond donors' immediate responses to the COVID-19 crisis and focus on promoting systemic changes and strategies for the long-term sustainability of civil society, especially for the groups listed above.

We should consider within our resourcing strategies ways to better support and advocate for the needs of the significant number of members who do not rely on established donors and funding but instead depend on alternative income streams like membership fees, the sale of services and individual or community donations. CIVICUS released the [Rebuilding for Good](#) guidelines to support members' direct advocacy with their governments and other domestic stakeholders, and we should make sure that these contribute towards a more enabling environment for these specific groups.

Organisational resilience has traditionally been defined in financial terms. However, resilience seems to be also greatly determined by the breadth and depth of relationships between civil society actors and individuals, partners and other allies. The donor community could do a lot more to unleash non-financial support (beyond statements of solidarity and resources webpages). We will stress the need to prioritise support for non-strictly financial needs such as mental health care; access to safe and horizontal networks to share skills, know-how and resources; access to legal support; specific capacity-strengthening support in areas around civic space, resource mobilisation, working in the digital space and working offsite.

This analysis confirms the validity of CIVICUS decision to strengthen the CIVICUS Solidarity Fund to be able to support with flexible funding more of our members who can't access mainstream funding options and the flexible resources needed to cope with this crisis. We are investing in strengthening its infrastructure and recently launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise more resources to disburse through this fund.

Seeing that half of the responses to this survey came from individual activists brought additional evidence to the change in our active membership, largely made up by organisations. CIVICUS will continue to explore ways to be more relevant and accessible to these individual members, starting by testing new approaches that can inform our next strategic framework.

5 AREAS CIVICUS IS EXPLORING TO SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY

1

Supporting strategies and efforts that **enhance domestic and international recognition of civil society in these critical times** and demanding adequate government protections and support.

2

Continue advocating with relevant partners for the provision of **more relevant, accessible, and flexible funding and support**, especially for grassroots groups and movements. This includes exploring how to sustain positive and innovative responses led by civil society during this crisis while promoting the recovery and long-term sustainability of the sector.

3

Encouraging bolder, long-term investments and experiments aimed at **strengthening and diversifying local support infrastructure** and domestic funding for civil society, and seeding new structures where they don't exist.

4

Testing and learning from new financial and operational models supporting diverse forms of civil society to respond to complex, trans-local challenges. These models should focus on engaging local actors through co-creation and more participatory governance processes.

5

Weaving new connections and partnerships with a range of public and private actors exploring alternative or complementary ways to support and finance civil society.



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