

Lessons learned from a crisis: How the Covid-19 pandemic hit the poor



What happens in a family in a poor, rural village, when a major crisis hits the country, and the entire world comes to a halt? And what factors ensure household and community resilience in the face of a major shock?

KEY FINDINGS

- **Development challenges have been turned into a humanitarian crisis** as the pandemic pushed additional millions into extreme poverty.
- **Reduced food security and job/income losses force households to make use of negative or unsustainable ways of coping**, such as child marriages, child labour, selling/consuming important assets, exhausting savings or keeping children out of school.
- **Negative or unsustainable ways of coping** deplete household resources and make them more vulnerable in the face of recurrent shocks or crises.
- **Women and youth** are most affected by the economic crisis since they are more frequently informally employed.
- **Violence and abuse** levels have been high throughout the pandemic.
- **Closed schools** have led to substantial learning gaps, increased the risk of dropping out, and resulted in the loss of teachers, with the risk of a “lost generation” in education as a consequence.
- **Being part of strong civil society structures** and/or having access to one’s own food production leads to stronger resilience in the face of the crisis, providing better food security and an additional safety net for community members.

THE MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS ARE

REINFORCE FOOD SECURITY.

- To recover and emerge stronger from the pandemic, both in the short and long term, food security will be a crucial factor.
- Short term; humanitarian / development collaboration and mixed approaches will be necessary to achieve this, for example through school feeding programmes.
- Long term; boosting local food production through climate-adapted agriculture will be an important factor in preparing households and communities for the next crisis.

INVEST IN EDUCATION.

- To avoid a “lost generation” of school-age children, substantial investments are required.
- Initiatives should address both re-enrolment and the learning gap among students.
- Investments need to include school capacity, teacher training, psychosocial care and effective re-enrolment interventions.

PRIORITISE DISASTER RISK REDUCTION.

- Development approaches addressing the pandemic and its aftermath must focus on building resilient households and communities that are prepared for the next crisis.
- To achieve this, approaches need to be holistic and integrated. For example, effective educational programmes are highly dependent on a safe context for children, food security, and a predictable household economy.
- Humanitarian components in combination with long-term development initiatives will in many cases be necessary.

CONTINUE TO EMPOWER CIVIL SOCIETY.

- In a crisis, strong and mature civil society structures ensure both social action and an additional safety net, and therefore contribute to community resilience.
- To ensure effective community mobilisation in the future, approaches to strengthening civil society must be rights-based and empowering.
- The pandemic has confirmed the need to build upon communities’ own strengths to address risks and face recurrent crises.
- Ensuring sufficient space for a vibrant civil society is an important key to building strong and resilient communities.

About the report

During the first part of 2021, the Strømme Foundation (SF) conducted the “New Normal Community Mapping” in the West Africa Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali), East-Africa (South Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya), and to some extent in Asia (Nepal and Bangladesh). The methodology used was a mix of quantitative (household and student surveys), qualitative (focus groups and interviews) and secondary source review. The original purpose of the mapping was to provide operative data for

Strømme Foundation programs. However, for a broader audience, the report provides a valuable snapshot of community realities in some of the poorest countries in the world, throughout the pandemic.

New Normal Mapping (NNM) examines the real-life household situations in some of the most vulnerable communities in each country. Its focus also extends further into the broader context of the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, the findings and recommendations should be of interest to the

broader development context.

In brief, the findings confirm much of the analysis that has been carried out by global actors on the ripple effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, it also provides some valuable lessons learned for future crises and disaster preparedness. This short version only summarises the key findings and recommendations. For further detail and analysis, the main reports are available [here](http://strommestiftelsen.no) **strommestiftelsen.no**

Background: Covid-19 and global consequences

The world is still taking stock in terms of the impact of Covid-19 on global poverty. The pandemic is causing an unprecedented global socioeconomic crisis. Extreme poverty due to Covid-19 is projected to increase globally with up to 98 million people in 2021, and with sub-Saharan Africa taking one third of the brunt of this (World Bank 2021). In low-income countries, pandemic ripple effects are expected to be prolonged for several years. Decades of progress on poverty, education, employment, and gender equality is at high risk of being reversed:

”The crisis has demonstrated more clearly than ever the importance of disaster preparedness and robust social protection systems”

(UN SDG report 2021)

90%

of students worldwide have been affected by school closures, causing a substantial learning gap.
(UN DESA 2020)

AN EDUCATION CRISIS

Children in rural and vulnerable communities are least likely to benefit from alternative teaching methods, resulting in considerable learning gaps. The risk of many children not returning to school after they reopen is also considerable. A lack of qualified teachers will be a challenge as schools reopen. School and work closures have put vulnerable children, girls, and women at a higher risk of violence, abuse, and other human rights violations. UNICEF (2020) warns that progress made in the past decades, particularly in enrolment and learning outcomes for girls, is now at risk of being lost.

Jobs lost

The pandemic has caused a global loss of jobs equivalent to four times the number lost during the 2008 financial crisis.
(UN SDG report 2021)

A GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS

The informal service sector, which to a great extent employs women and young people, has been struck the hardest by lockdowns and other pandemic restrictions (ILO 2020). The pandemic has caused the worst global economic crisis in 150 years (World Bank 2020). The crisis has exacerbated the inequality gap between most and less vulnerable populations (World Bank 2021b).

60%

A child who goes hungry to bed has a 60% higher risk of being married away.
(World Vision 2021)

A WORSENING FOOD SECURITY SITUATION

Hunger is a powerful driving force for unsustainable coping strategies, such as selling productive assets (for example tools), exhausting savings and credit, eating next season's seeds or pulling children out of school. Child marriage is one of many common coping strategies for vulnerable households in the event of a crisis. In the West Africa Sahel region, the pandemic has reinforced an already deteriorating food security situation, originally caused by armed conflict and climate impacts, causing higher food prices and restrictions in food access (WFP 2021).

SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

A strong and empowered civil society is an important key to community resilience in a time of crisis. Paradoxically, there is a global concern that government imposed Covid-19 restrictions are being used to shrink the space and capability of civil society actors (ICNL 2020).

Key findings

Negative impacts: Reflecting the global crisis

Seen from a local household perspective, the findings of Strømme Foundation New Normal Mapping do to great extent reflect the global picture with regards to pandemic ripple effects:

FOOD CRISIS	EDUCATION CRISIS	ECONOMIC CRISIS	VIOLENCE AND ABUSE
<p>Food crisis in an already vulnerable context.</p> <p>Example WEST AFRICA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-covid: 75% ate 3 meals a day. Postcovid: 11% • More than 50% had cheaper/less nutritious food 	<p>High drop-out rate, learning gaps and unprepared schools.</p> <p>Example EAST AFRICA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 in 5 children not likely to return to school • Time spent on learning during lockdowns: 12% compared to normal 	<p>Increased vulnerability for future crisis.</p> <p>Example WEST AFRICA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 in 10 lost income • 1 in 4 sold productive assets and/or consumed next season's seeds 	<p>Vulnerable structures in communities leave individuals unprotected.</p> <p>Example EAST AFRICA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 in 5 children experienced sexual abuse. • Globally, hunger led to a 60% higher risk of child marriage (WV)

ECONOMY AND FOOD SECURITY: AN ACUTE CRISIS AND REDUCED LONG TERM RESILIENCE



Lost income

Households that lost income 9 months into pandemic: East Africa: 62%, West Africa: 69%

In East Africa, one third of respondents lost their jobs. The proportion of households reporting that they lost income was substantially higher, indicating a high proportion of informally employed. For people in income generating activities, reduced access to markets and raw materials were key challenges throughout the pandemic.



Fewer meals

Niger: 97% of households ate 2 or 3 meals per day before the pandemic. 9 months later, 57% ate only one meal.

We have also seen a rapid decline in the food security situation. In many communities, food security seems to be at a critical level. Reduction in food diversity, a coping strategy used by more than half of West African respondents to reduce food costs, is likely to negatively affect general nutrition.

Sold assets

West Africa: 27.4% of households sold one or more productive assets.

The effect of the livelihoods crisis is reflected in a high prevalence of negative coping strategies such as the selling of productive assets (tools, equipment etc), the consumption of next season's seeds, and the exhaustion of savings for food and consumption, all of which contribute to weaker household resilience to future shocks and crises.

EDUCATION: THE RISK OF A "LOST GENERATION"



1 in 5

Caretakers expressing that "It is unlikely or uncertain that my children will return to school after reopening"

Pupils have been forced to remain out of school for longer periods of time. This is particularly evident in East Africa, and most prominently in Uganda, where lockdowns were prolonged. The pandemic has led to substantially higher dropout risks. Important reasons for dropout include the higher prevalence of child labour, early pregnancies, and child marriages, as well as the fear of stigma for pupils repeating classes.



18%

Girls 6-12 in East Africa experiencing sexual abuse during lockdown

The prevalence of abuse peaked during the pandemic, reinforcing the education crisis, with nearly half of perpetrators being family members.

3.6 hours

Average time per week that primary school pupils spent on learning during lockdown.

The actual time spent on learning among students during lockdown was very low – as little as 12% compared to a normal school situation, creating substantial learning gaps. Even though alternative learning methods (paper-based, radio, digital, etc.) have been put in place, it seems evident that these measures were not sufficient to compensate for the loss of fully operational schools.



Teacher drop-out rates have risen during the pandemic. Reports from Bangladesh refers to high levels of teacher stress (as much as 70% in private schools) due to salary non-payment and potential job loss. The situation has led to many leaving the profession in search of work elsewhere, potentially leaving schools unprepared to address reenrolment needs and the increasing learning gap among students.

What makes a community resilient when facing a crisis? The New Normal Mapping has brought to light some valuable lessons learned in preparation for future crises.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG AND EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES

Being part of strong, empowered and well organised civil society structures is a considerable added strength for households and community members when facing a shock of this magnitude. Community groups and community-based organisations have ensured bottom-up support during the pandemic, as well as advice, pandemic sensitisation, financial means, protection, and in the form of organised community action and advocacy.

At their best, local structures have played mitigating and preliminary social protection roles where government actors have not had the capacity to uphold public services. Members of savings groups in West Africa, for example, express a strong sense of perceived resilience.

However, the presence of civil society structures is not in itself a “miracle medicine” for community resilience: their degree of effectiveness depends to a great extent upon their level of maturity, empowerment, and sense of purpose. In brief, groups formed with a technical core purpose (such as savings) have played less of a role as a community resilience factor when compared to groups formed with empowerment and rights foci as their core purposes.



24

Child marriages prevented by adolescent empowerment groups in the Rupandehi district of Nepal, April 2021

ACCESS TO FOOD PRODUCTION AND RESILIENT AGRICULTURE

Food security was a main concern for the target group of the mapping.

An acute and deteriorating food security situation is a barrier to education, as well as a driving force for child marriage and unsustainable coping strategies. Households with access to food production have proven to be more resilient throughout the crisis. However, the past two years have highlighted how an additional shock – in this case the pandemic - can aggravate an already fragile food security situation. There is a need to explore how local, resilient, and climate-adapted agriculture can reinforce food security in the face of a recurrent crisis.

