Civil Society Leader Perceptions and Experiences during COVID 19

Rapid Survey of Civil Society Organisations (May 3rd to May 10th, 2020)

SUMMARY:

A survey of over 65 civil society leaders, between 3rd to 10th May 2020 points to the urgent need for greater coordination between government(s) and civil society. Conducted to gauge their experiences and perceptions about their on-going work to combat the Covid 19 crisis, the survey includes leaders from organisations of varying sizes and working in diverse geographies across India. In reaction to the results, Professors Madhukar Shukla and MS Sriram -- actively engaged researcher scholars of civil society -- emphasize ways for civil society to reconfigure it’s strategies and practices in these unprecedented times.

Drawing on these we would like to call for (a) greater collaboration among civil society actors, including funders and (b) moving away from transaction-based models to trust based ones, which provide greater autonomy and freedom to those working on the ground and thereby promote greater responsiveness to communities.

The exemplary work of voluntary actors at this time emphasizes the value of a strong civil society and the significant role it will have to play as we negotiate a way out of the multi-dimensional crisis we face today.

KEY INSIGHTS/FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY:

• **Communities have not been able to access their entitlements and not all know what precautions to take:** More than 40% found that most households in the communities they are serving are not being able to access their entitlements and more than 20% found that communities were not aware of precautions required. It is even higher among smaller organisations.

• **Organisations have not been able to partner with the government productively:** Almost half the leaders did not find relevant government functionaries they need to work with on the ground, to be accessible. More than two-thirds felt that those making policies were not very receptive to their inputs. Accessibility to government officials was even lower for those working in only rural areas and for smaller organisations.

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1 The report was prepared by Prof. Ankur Sarin along with a team of researchers associated with IIM Ahmedabad- Bianca Shah, Ishu Gupta, Karan Singhal and Shraddha Upadhyay. We are grateful to Priyanka Sahoo for assisting with data analysis and visualization. We like to extend our gratitude to more than 65 leaders from civil society organisations for their time and providing their expertise to inform this study, and Prof. Madhukar Shukla and Prof, M.S. Sriram for their extremely valuable inputs.
Responses of only around 10% of organisations indicate that they’re involved in efforts directly with the government and more than 40% said coordinating with the government for their work was one of the biggest challenges they were facing.

- **Government notifications and directives have been confusing/difficult to understand:** Almost half the leaders have had difficulty navigating through government directives relevant for their work

- **Mobilising financial resources for relief efforts is taking up all their time:** Mobilising financial resources was found to be the most time-consuming activity and one the biggest challenges that most organisations reported to be facing. A significant share of these finances required might be for the independent relief efforts (without any help from the government) that half the organisations reported as taking up most of their time

- **Leaders worry about donors deprioritising other on-going long-term efforts:** Several leaders shared their anxieties about critical areas of interventions such as malnutrition, education, domestic violence, child abuse, and women’s rights issues being side-lined or at least deprioritised (by the government and donors). This, many felt, would undermine years of collective efforts and progress. Over a quarter reported that re-planning their activities, and coordination and communication with funders was taking up most of their time.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS (MADE BY LEADERS):**

- **Funding organisations**
  - More flexibility with deadlines, reporting standards and data requirements owing to the unprecedented challenges being faced by organisations currently
  - Guard against deprioritising other critical areas of intervention

- **For Government’s at different levels**
  - Involving local stakeholders such as local governments and community organisations to manage smaller geographies (like wards or zones in urban areas)
  - Extending financial and food related support to the affected (especially migrants and daily wagers) through universalisation of PDS, financial relief to small traders and farmers
  - Providing immediate employment to those in rural areas through MNREGA
  - Need for the government to consult local stakeholders such as civil society organisations and unions before planning lockdowns, and making notifications and rules easily available and accessible
CONTEXT OF THE SURVEY

A rapid survey was conducted between 3rd to 10th May 2020 to gather perceptions and experiences of civil society leaders working during this crisis, by a team of researchers at IIM Ahmedabad, led by Prof. Ankur Sarin.

Individuals, reached out through various networks of civil society organisations, were invited to share their current engagements with the crisis, details on the challenges faced by their beneficiary communities and geographies, and their engagement with government functionaries and donors, among other challenges faced by them and/or their organisations. Responses were collected telephonically and through an online form.

- **Number of organisations represented**: 64
- **Number of leaders represented**: 66
- **List of Organisations Represented (who gave their consent to be listed)**:

- **Geographies served/supported by the surveyed leaders and their organisations**: Almost all states and several districts within each state

- **Sector (Rural/Urban)**: Around 50% catering to rural, around 20% catering to urban areas, and around 30% catering to both rural and urban areas

- **Organisation size (number of full-time employees)**: Median employee strength is 60, with around 35% having more than 100 employees
RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Are communities they work with well informed about precautions they need to take?

More than 20% of leaders felt that very few people in the communities were aware of the precautions. While 24% of CSOs working exclusively in rural areas find “very few” people aware of the precautions they need to take, only 3% of CSOs working in urban areas find the same suggesting a need to focus on information dissemination more in rural areas.

![Pie chart showing survey results](chart1.png)

Have relevant government directives been clear and comprehensive for you to work effectively?

Around 45% of the leaders felt the relevant directives concerning their work and the communities they work with NOT clear and/or comprehensive, with no difference between those working in rural and urban areas.

![Pie chart showing survey results](chart2.png)
Have communities they work with been able to access their entitlements?

Over 40% of the leaders felt that only “very few” or “almost none” of the households in the communities were being able to access the entitlements. While around 30% of the large organisations (i.e. those with employee strength as median (60) or above) find a majority of the communities they work with unable to access entitlements, around 50% of the small organisations do so. A little above 45% CSOs working only in rural or urban areas find communities unable to access entitlements.

Relevant government functionaries they need to work with on ground accessible and open to suggestions?
Around 45% felt that “almost none” or “very few” government functionaries were accessible and open to suggestions; most others felt that only a “few” functionaries were accessible. While 60% of large organisations find few or no government functionaries accessible, around 30% of the smaller organisations responded the same. Out of the CSOs working in rural areas, 48% found “very few” or “almost none” government functionaries accessible while only around 20% of CSOs working exclusively in urban areas found the same.

Are relevant policy makers being open to your feedback and suggestions?

Over 70% felt that policymakers were “not at all” or “to a very limited extent” open to their feedback and suggestions during this time. Some (around 20%) of the leaders had not had a chance to interact with any government officials till now. Around 80% of the large organisations and around 60% of the small organisations found policymakers “not at all receptive” or “receptive to a limited extent”. While around 60% of CSOs working in urban areas found policymakers unreceptive, more than 75% of CSOs working in rural areas found the same.

What has taken up most of their time since the lockdown? (Leaders could mark/highlight maximum 3 challenges)

The most common activities the leaders report engaging in are mobilising financial resources (above 55%) and engaging in relief efforts independent of government programmes and schemes (around 50%). For smaller organisations, the most frequently reported activity is organising independent relief efforts (as cited by more than 50% of small organisations) while for larger organisations it is mobilizing financial resources (as cited by around 70% of large organisations).
Other activities included reaching out and communicating with communities they were working with (around 40%), coordination and communicating with funders (around 30%), replanning their priorities and activities (more than 25%), communicating with the government for better programmes and scheme implementation (around 20%), and data collection and research efforts (more than 15%), among others.

Issues which require cooperation between CSOs, and government are among themes which have taken up least time of the CSOs. This is consistent with relief efforts being largely independent of the government. One possible reason might be that coordinating with the government has been a significant challenge for the CSOs (also shown below).

![Graph showing challenges faced]

**Significant challenges faced on the ground? (Leaders could mark/highlight maximum 3 challenges)**

When asked about the most significant challenges faced on the ground, the most common issues highlighted were restrictions on mobility of their staff involved in relief efforts (over 60%) and raising financial resources (over 55%); followed by coordination with the government (over 45%), access to raw materials and grains (over 40%), and difficulties in managing ground operations (around 25%). While for larger organisations, restrictions on mobility of staff has been a significant challenge on ground (over 65% of the large organisations find it challenging), for smaller organizations raising financial resources has been a significant challenge on the ground (over 65%).
Other issues such as their staff being overworked, being unable to provide their staff with protective equipment, not being able to gather required data to report to funders, having difficulties coordinating with other civil society organisations and government, and their staff dealing with Covid related issues were also highlighted.

Issues which require cooperation from the government are among the most significant challenges faced by the CSOs namely “Coordinating with Government” (41%) and “Restrictions on mobility of staff by government authorities” (64%)
SUGGESTION FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND DONORS

Suggestion for the government

• At least temporary universalisation of PDS so that all the vulnerable population can be covered
• Consulting stakeholders like unions and civil society organisations prior to planning lockdowns or restricting movements of vulnerable populations (such as migrants) to better manage it
• Providing protective gear to all frontline staff such as ANMs, AWWs and ASHAs
• Making a central repository of all notifications and schemes at the local, state and central level which is easily accessible.
• Decentralisation and devolution: involving local governments and community organisations for management of smaller geographical areas (such as zones and wards)
• Keeping shops selling essentials for longer hours so that long queues can be avoided and adequate social distancing can be maintained
• Easing up on regulations on funding and assist with financial resources
• Providing relief to small businesses and farmers
• Providing more and immediate employment through MGNREGA in villages in the coming weeks/months (any past dues should also be immediately cleared)
• Having centralized information on available capacity in hospitals

Suggestion for the funding organisations/ donors:

• Easing up on their data and reporting standards
• Easing funding disbursements and providing flexibility with deadlines
• Supporting more community interventions fighting Covid, and not de-prioritising/ backing out of long-term projects (that may not necessarily directly relate to Covid)
“What is a prudent strategy forward for CSOs as a sector, knowing that coordination with Government is poor, funding is fragile, communities are bracing for harder survival challenges?”

“This is a bit of a disturbing report. Usually in times of crisis we see the convergence of forces to put things together and also a great sense of partnership and consultation. This report indicates a significant breakdown into three silos – donor agencies and their shifting priorities (possibly being under pressure to contribute to PM Cares than anything else); the government and its machinery and a standalone CSO which is neither getting financial support from the donors nor the administrative support from the state. It also shows how fragile the people who are at the top end of the bottom of the pyramid are and how slippery the slope is. This is time to remove definitions and make all facilities available on demand till a sense of normalcy comes in.”

Prof MS Sriram
Indian Institute of Management Bangalore

“1. It is important to recognise that what we are facing is an unprecedented situation with no earlier benchmarks to rely on. Unlike other disasters which were largely localised and didn't impact the other support systems (government, economy, funding organisations, demographics, etc.), this pandemic has impacted all systems - not only in India but across the globe. So instead of looking for support from the traditional sources (e.g., government, funders), this is also an opportunity - and necessity - for the NGOs/CSOs to build and work on collaborative platforms. Traditionally, CSOs work in limited geographies, even if they are large, and try to maintain their boundaries and identity by being selective in their partnerships. This can be counterproductive to address the issues which we are facing. Many 'local' problems now require collaborating across these boundaries. For example, even if an NGO/CSO is able to facilitate the reverse migration of a labour (arrange bus, get the tickets etc.) the migrant would still need an NOC from the district/ state (I have seen it happening between two CSOs/ NGOs - on in Aurangabad and the other in Lucknow - all through a network on social media (FB, in this case). The need to work on a collaborative platform - and therefore to go out of one's institutional boundaries is vital to solve problems now. One such platform which provides opportunities to collaborate regarding migrants:
https://dp.observatory.org.in/content/migration-route-covid-19

2. Most CSOs/ NGOs (and funding organisations and government) work on 'project mode" with well defined processes of planning and implementation. Given the nature of the issues one is trying to address, it is important to segment the problems which can be solved in "project mode" which require long term solutions, and one which require
responding in (for lack of better term) "ad hoc/ reactive mode"; problems such as feeding the poor, migrants, etc. have to be addressed immediately as the situation keeps changing (e.g., sudden flux of migrants on the road, an area one was serving gets declared a 'hot spot', changes in directives by the government, etc.). These things cannot be planned for in advance, and both the CSOs/NGOs and the funders need to recognise this reality.

3. Lastly, my understanding is that even when/if the pandemic gets over, things will never be 'back to normal' - at least not in the foreseeable future. Therefore, it would be important for the civil society organisations to reimagine the future and the issues they may have to address (which can be planned in a "project mode" if they start now). For instance, my understanding is a significant number of reverse-migrants will not go back to the same metro cities or better-off states for livelihoods; they may still migrate (since rural areas don't have opportunities) but will do that in nearby towns, cities and blocks. If that happens, there will be an oversupply of semi-skilled labour in these places (with little options for utilising those skills - we may have too many rickshaw puller, vendors, brick-kiln workers etc., leading to low earnings, and exploitation) and a dearth of labour where opportunities traditionally existed (e.g. farm labour in Punjab etc.). I think that the landscape of livelihoods will undergo a complete change, and the CSOs/NGOs need to start working on these kinds of future scenarios to continue to deliver value and remain relevant.”

Prof Madhukar Shukla
XLRI - Xavier School of Management
LEADERS SPEAK
1. Perceptions on Overall Management (Coordination and Collaboration)

- “There has to be better instructions from the State level to see that the administration facilitates CSOs to work with the local administration.” - Liby Johnson, Gram Vikas

- “(Government should) Officially recognise NGOs as equal partners in operationalising state and non-state covid response efforts…. This is huge multiyear disaster from a medical and economic perspective. State and civil society need to proactively join hands and listen to each other's ideas” - Apoorva Oza, AKRSP India

- “Before any policy announcement, the government must consult diverse stakeholders. The issue of migrant workers would not have arisen had the government spoken to the trade unions and CSOs.” - Binoy Acharya, UNNATI

- “Establishing effective coordination with Civil Society Organizations by the state and district level Government authorities for immediate actions to support the vulnerable people.” - O.P. Kulhar, CULP

- “I think the government at all levels should work closely with civil society---consult, partner, take help on monitoring, fostering dialogue between the working poor and government organisations. Especially should take help on clear and simple messaging. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are close to people at the grassroot level and enjoy their trust.” - Rajesh Singh, Ibtada

- “Trust and involve CSOs in the relief and rehabilitation work. Support and cooperate with us. Communicate to us” - Mukti Bosco, Healing Fields Foundation

2. Perceptions on Government (Policy and Implementation)

Management of Crisis

- “Lockdown has to be planned examining the public health concerns, not as an imposition of curfew. The few hours of relaxation made in the earlier days caused much damage as a large number of people came out at the same time to purchase essential items. It is not a law and order situation. Open services for a longer time so that there will not be crowding at the point of the service.” - Binoy Acharya, UNNATI

- “Centralised information of all states, easily accessible eg. constantly changing schemes, helplines for various schemes etc” - Sandeep Sachdeva, Safe in India
• “..keep communities more informed/and involve local govt for micro management” - Upmanyu Patil, SSP India

• “Disband central services and let city government appoint and manage their own executive.”... “Build a trust between local elected representatives, governments and citizens. Pandemics or otherwise this trust and democratic accountability will lead to better services.” - Milind Mhaske, Praja Foundation

• “Local government needs to have a central site to locate an available bed for a patient who is unwell.. Currently in Mumbai it is a nightmare to locate a hospital bed in an emergency” - Anil Nair, St. Jude India Childcare

Food and Financial Relief

• “Free ration to all - ration card should not be mandatory for accessing food; 8% of the GDP should now be earmarked for rehabilitation and recovery” - Arun Kumar

• “For the centre to take leadership in putting out a sensitive and generous relief package for small and medium enterprises that includes support for informal sector labour. Such that the states can follow.” - Shrinivas Rao, Azad Foundation

• “Covering all workers in the informal sector in PDS with portability options when in a state of migration.”

• “At the central level- Food security must be insured as per Right to Food Act and continuation of livelihood of poor and marginal people should be given the first preference.” - Sasanka Dev, DISHA

• “At the national level - temporarily universalise PDS, and consider PDS portability across states as an adopted policy.” - Sumitra Mishra, Mobile Creches

• “The generosity of the local communities has been fabulous. People who have little have shared with those who have nothing.” - Snorre Westgaard, Humana India
Economic Relief

• “At state level - State labour dept to consider all construction workers who have applied for registration under BOCW as registered workers and make payments from Building Cess Funds. Do not limit to only those who have online linked bank accounts, and exclude those who are registered by accounts not integrated in the epayment systems; and those applied through trade unions, CSO registration bureaus but their records not updated in labour department records” - Sumitra Mishra, Mobile Creches

• “building up institutions like tripartite boards with definite sources of revenue for all segments of unorganised sector is required to deal with regular social security and such emergencies” - Subhash Bhatnagar, Nirmana

• “Bring flexibility in MGNREGA for employment generation in rural areas and ensure 50-75 days of employment to each job card holder within next 3 months (May - July)” - Malika Srivastava, Centre for Microfinance

• “Provide support and work to all the migrant labours along with MNREGA” - Archana Dwivedi, Nirantar Trust

• “The government and RBI should also make some considerations in the existing policies keeping in mind non-profit MFIs (Section 8 co./NGO), as there are a large number of non-profit microfinance companies that are working with the underprivileged communities.” - Junesh Thomas, Shram Sarathi

• “Support creation of work opportunities closer to production clusters; decentralize work opportunities to ensure people have gainful employment closer to where they live”. - Tinni Sawhney, Aga Khan Foundation

Frontline workers

• “At least now recognise frontline workers ASHA, ANM, AWW as essential workers now, remunerate with decent wages, include social security provisions and provide COVID protection and hazard pay” - Sumitra Mishra, Mobile Creches

• “Make more protective gear available for waste/rag pickers, police and other non-health staff working on the ground.”
**Education, Nutrition, Violence**

- “While the economy will get hurt, we need to take **critical care on school reopenings and explore digital options** even post covid-19 and put more emphasis on remedial education than teaching at grade level.” - Ranjith Chandrashekhar

- “to come up with a **strategy/plan for the street children and Children with Special Needs (CWSN)** in areas of rehabilitation and access to all entitlements in this lockdown” - Subhadeep, CINI

- “I would like to suggest state government to **provide list of protection officers** and service providers who are appointed to provide **immediate relief to stop violence against women** with their phone number and area through print and electronic media.- Representative from AALI

- “Please do not stop the growth monitoring, nutrition (hot cooked and supplementary) and immunisation services for under 6 children and pregnant and lactating mothers. We are waiting for another disaster to happen - **malnutrition burden will increase**” - Sumitra Mishra, Mobile Creches

- “I think there is a huge risk right now in losing **out on decades of hard won gains on women's rights**. Women's **mobility, their decision making, ability to work, to resist violence - all of it is getting threatened** as the crisis deepens. They need to be at the forefront of all relief efforts. If we can reach poor, dalit, muslim, women (across all marginalised groups), we will be able to reach those who really need support and who can pivot things significantly on the ground.” - Shrinivas Rao, Azad Foundation

- “Provision of learning materials with para teachers for tribal areas”- Mahendra Kumar Joshi

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3. **Perceptions on Donors/Funding Organisations**
Programming

• “Please do not de-prioritise persistent systemic challenges related to health, education, livelihoods, farmers, dalit, peace work, gender etc. These must continue to remain CSR priorities in the post pandemic altered world.”- Sumitra Mishra, Mobile Creches

• “Listen to the voices from the field, Adapt and be flexible for immediate, medium term and long term shifts…”- Jacob Mathew, Industree

• “The crisis is yet to hit the rural sector. Please be more forward looking in your resource allocation decisions. Once the monsoon starts, the food and income insecurity will rise - no food stock, no income from selling labour in the summer etc.. The relief phase will need to extend till then.”- Lily Joshnson, Gram Vikas

Funder Processes

• “Revisit, refocus your data requirements from the donees; the need for evidence of utilization of resources cannot take away the right to privacy of the people in need”- Arun Kumar

• “A major chunk of funding should be diverted to initiating short term relief support followed by creation of livelihood opportunities for the lock down affected families through partners (CSOs) having good rapport with rural communities”- Debashish Sen, PSI

• “Be open and flexible to ground realities and cut down the long processes”- Sanjay Sharma, Manjari Foundation