MORGANA WINGARD FOR USAID

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT DURING COVID-19:
REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS' PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this report, "Knowledge Management During COVID-19: Review of Development Organizations' Practices and Experiences" was to gather and share knowledge around how various development donors and other organizations are applying Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning (KMOL) tools during the time of COVID-19. In accordance with USAID's mission of supporting countries affected by COVID-19, the Agency's KMOL team is seeking to understand how development organizations are using their knowledge management and organizational learning functions to support their response to COVID-19, both to inform USAID's COVID-19 response and to inform similar efforts around the world. This review seeks to provide a glimpse into the work that multilateral and bilateral donors and local organizations working in the development sector are doing to manage knowledge and strengthen organizational learning in their response to COVID-19. This executive report summarizes the relevant findings from these discussions and highlights key takeaways.

Using qualitative tools to gather data for this report, the research team explored four overarching themes:

1. Managing emergent information
2. Brokering and incorporating local & organizational knowledge
3. Lessons learned — from the pandemic & other crises
4. Looking Ahead to Future Crises

FINDINGS

MANAGING EMERGENT INFORMATION

This section addresses the "infodemic" organizations are facing, spurred by the rapid and evolving nature of information released during this pandemic. Organizations are turning to the voices of those affected most and those working on the frontlines to ensure the most effective COVID-19 response. In order to access and utilize information from local communities, both remote and in-person infrastructure has been adapted and/or built up. Additionally, the emphasis on effective communication extends to response efforts against the spread of COVID-19 disinformation. Organizations are working to address disinformation efficiently, and to identify possible program bias from preconceived notions around what constitutes an appropriate response strategy.

BROKERING AND INCORPORATING KNOWLEDGE

This section discusses the impact of the greater dependence on maintaining a virtual connection and utilizing online tools to conduct work across the globe despite the limited access to such amenities in developing nations. However, despite the challenges faced by organizations, many have adapted their data collection tools and other methods in order to engage those in the field. Beyond making changes to incorporate local information into their response efforts, organizations have also taken advantage of online platforms by participating in conferences and consortia in order to meaningfully engage with donors and stakeholders on a broader level. Many have emphasized that the reliance on virtual connections has fostered a greater need for collaboration and an integrated approach to COVID-19 response efforts.

LESSONS LEARNED

This section addresses how organizations utilized lessons learned in relation to COVID-19 response efforts. We sought to understand how organizations reflected on learning from previous crisis response efforts and interventions to adapt existing knowledge bases and processes. Doing so allowed organizations to build on previous and current efforts in the field, helping them navigate the ongoing pandemic and deliver aid more effectively. Furthermore, we examined how organizations shaped and developed learning agendas to capture and share knowledge efficiently, considering shifting operational and programmatic needs. Through these learning agendas, important information was obtained and synthesized into working knowledge to be applied and adapted into programs and interventions inadvertently impacted by COVID-19.

METHODS

Prior to organizational outreach, a set of research questions was developed to serve as a framework for collecting and synthesizing insights and lessons learned from interviewees. Through an open call for interviewees on the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community of practice, as well as through outreach via team members' professional networks, the team identified 13 respondents to interview from a range of development organizations and also reviewed materials they shared (many of which are linked in this report). A questionnaire structured around the research questions and open-ended discussions guided the interview process. Findings are shared in this report and in a webinar that took place on May 12, 2021 (the recording is available [here](#)).

FINAL THOUGHTS & MOVING BEYOND THIS INITIATIVE

It is evident that organizations will continue to leverage and utilize knowledge-sharing processes to ensure more efficient adaptations in the event of rapidly evolving environmental conditions or other crises of this scale. A primary goal of many knowledge brokers is to continue the development of organizational learning and virtual communication infrastructure and apply findings to future global crises. This review can be adapted and replicated in later stages of the COVID-19 crisis and can help gather and provide evidence to support the evolving nature of learning during the pandemic. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt for years to come. If anything is clear, it is the necessity to continue strengthening knowledge, learning infrastructure, and capability to build on prior lessons and leverage our collective knowledge to address current and future crises.

II. RESULTS AND THEMES

MANAGING EMERGENT INFORMATION

COLLECTING INFORMATION IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

How do we as practitioners engage local communities effectively, to gain an understanding of what is working and what isn't? Interviewees suggested that the answer to this question needs to emphasize local knowledge sources and speed. Emergent information in the COVID-19 era is ever-adapting, globally developing, and continually flowing. As indicated in many of our interviews, gathering local information and engaging affected communities often leads to an enhanced understanding of the most effective on-the-ground strategy for response. To ensure development organizations are appropriately responding to the impacts of the virus given the most current information, the voices of those affected most and those working on the frontlines are prioritized for knowledge collection among the organizations interviewed for this report. The importance of collecting and synthesizing information rapidly during a crisis is explored in a World Bank [blog post] on learning fast, rethinking, and adapting practices to gather knowledge for an effective COVID-19 response. This blog post describes the World Bank's four-step emergent learning strategy to ensure their response is both appropriate and effective in light of emergent information. Though nearly all organizations use emergent information, they vary in terms of their methods for collecting it and their timeframes for using it.

Data collection in local communities faces the challenge felt across the globe—**how do you connect with local communities without risk of contracting or spreading the virus?** Standard health practices recommended for in-person contact included the use of N95 masks coupled with social distancing, were first introduced on the ground. In areas where in-person contact is possible, organizations have relied on various strategies to undertake data collection, such as United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) [ethical considerations for evidence generation], Oxfam's [community perception tracking], and CARE International's [gender analyses] to obtain data on populations most susceptible to both health impacts and social setbacks. The reported impacts among vulnerable populations include [education, health and literacy gaps] among children; [increases in wealth and health inequalities], especially by gender and race; reduced access to reproductive healthcare; and [increased vulnerability] to gender-based violence among women and gender minorities. Our interviews with a variety of organizations indicated that nearly all of them emphasized getting a better understanding of the challenges facing vulnerable populations, such as women and children, during the pandemic. Evidence to inform programs that emphasize these vulnerable populations comes from research, such as UNICEF's [rapid research response agenda] focusing on the impact of COVID-19 among children and young people. One [research brief] suggests that the risks stemming from the virus affect minorities and ethnic groups disproportionately. Research to evaluate the effect of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations is critical for organizations to understand the communities in which they work, and the challenges that people are facing. This approach evaluates not only the direct effects of COVID-19, but also how specific social conditions can exacerbate the pandemic's impact. Further, the ability to appropriately respond to emerging trends is aided by the information collected in the field.

To prioritize the poorest and most vulnerable communities, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) undertook massive rapid perception surveying to inform COVID-19 response. Reaching 64 districts, the survey was able to inform the situation of economic stability, personal safety, and food security—allowing for policy implementation designed along with the needs of the community. The information collected in the survey enabled new financing strategies to support struggling communities and declining economies (for additional information, see the final [Multi-Sectoral Anticipatory Impact and Needs Analysis report]). CARE International's [insight blog] of the multi-sector impact study provides a synopsis of the key findings from the GOB survey report, highlighting areas to learn from and how the involved parties are utilizing the knowledge collected from the study. The Bangladesh case sets a high standard for outreach capacity—specifically, capacity that has been built up over years of investment in critical infrastructure to address disaster and crises. As discussed below, the adaptation of existing program infrastructure is the key to smooth and speedy response strategies.

In areas where in-person contact is not viable, **building up the virtual and/or technological infrastructure has been critical to continuing operations in the field.** Remote networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Google Suite, and Zoom appear to be the primary resources employed. Online questionnaires, such as Google Forms, are utilized at both the government and citizen level to gather near-real-time aggregate data. The International Fund for Agricultural

Development (IFAD) [blog post](#) on maintaining critical extension services exemplifies the use of remote tools to engage beneficiaries and stakeholders and facilitate effective communication.

On the other hand, the use of internet-dependent platforms limits contact with low-access rural communities, and incomplete contact information hinders the ability to reach a broad network. Telecommunications are a valuable resource in regions where in-person contact is not possible and internet access is low; organizations are increasingly turning to provide citizens with access to either cost-free internet bandwidth or mobile credit and data. CARE International saw increased access to food, clean water, and information when [employing these in-kind and cash transfers](#), with significant impact at low cost. The use of mobile surveying, as exemplified in [research](#) conducted by the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), can allow organizations to track resource flows and other challenges affecting respondents. This effort employs high-frequency telephone interviewing to collect data to inform policies on food distribution and nutritional security. The callers asked respondents the basic question: *"What challenges are you facing because of the COVID-19 pandemic?"* This research initiative provides valuable information for the organizations' mission on food security and system flows, as respondents touch on issues ranging from conflict to unemployment, allowing for programming to be adapted specifically for issues unique to call regions.

ADDRESSING DISINFORMATION

What can be done to address disinformation? Specifically, how can we combat the volume and speed of its spread? An issue that many international development organizations are facing is the need to combat COVID-19 disinformation in light of the increasing amount of emergent information and the demand for accurate data in order to control the pandemic. With the rapid spread of information and news coverage of COVID-19 around the globe, organizations are seeking to ensure that they share the most accurate information available and in rapid time before disinformation could fill the void in the communities with which they work. The biggest hurdle mentioned by interviewees is the role of the internet as a source of disinformation that is being used to spread inaccurate data and conspiracies that often discredit what the science community puts forth regarding COVID-19. In order to counter the mass disinformation present in the field, some of the organizations included in this study have undertaken initiatives and have facilitated conversations with experts on ways to address the spread of inaccurate information and minimize its spread via the internet.

Through an in-depth [webinar](#) discussion with experts as part of a broader Leading Minds Online and COVID-19 thought leadership [series](#), UNICEF sought to address disinformation by seeking to understand who is most exposed to [fake news](#) and how to mitigate the "digital dilemma" present in local communities. Experts defined disinformation as "information that is spread with the deliberate intent to influence and deceive someone," including online COVID-19 conspiracy theories. UNICEF further explores the social, political, and individual consequences of spreading disinformation about COVID-19 and how to recognize and prevent it. Some solutions listed in a UNICEF Q&A segment with disinformation expert Renee DiResta, "[Online Misinformation and Disinformation in the Age of COVID-19](#)", include monitoring the content that is being shared online and on social platforms, making accurate information more accessible to the general public, and promoting media literacy. Similarly, CARE International published an interview with Salah Hamwi on [fighting COVID-19 disinformation and rumors](#) as part of their "[Failing Forward](#)" podcast initiative, which focuses on creating a space for dialogue on the successes and failures of programs and how to learn from past mistakes. In the segment, Hamwi shares the lessons learned from Turkey in addressing disinformation about COVID-19 within the community. He emphasizes the need for a rapid response to combat disinformation because people need to be informed and up-to-date in learning the emergent information being shared before false rumors could take hold in the community. The key takeaway from the interview in preventing the spread of disinformation is addressing the existing gap in information as quickly as possible through "digital platforms, getting leaders involved, and using evidence" before disinformation could take hold. Most importantly, Hamwi highlights that this approach may vary from community to community because there is no "one size fits all" solution; but rather, every community requires a unique approach that considers where the gaps and limitations exist to dismantle the disinformation present.

How can preconceived notions, based in disinformation, contribute to ineffective response strategies? Disinformation can bleed into an organization's response strategy, where preconceived notions about a community or

population take precedence over actual data from the field. Multiple interviewees emphasized how preconceived ideas and long-held perspectives perpetuated COVID-19 disinformation and expressed the need to debunk "myths and assumptions" held by decision-makers. One person from Global Affairs Canada (GAC) expressed concern over a two-fold problem that may perpetuate disinformation. On the one hand, personnel working in headquarters are not always aware of the situation in developing communities, which can leave unchallenged preconceived notions about how things are supposed to operate in the field. For example, one "myth" held by senior management and personnel was that programming was being conducted only in the health sector amid the pandemic, although evidence showed that all other sectors remained active. On the other hand, decision-makers are not necessarily experts on public health and epidemiology, which makes it difficult to act on emergent information such as community transmission and vaccination. The interviewee noted that effectively addressing these gaps in knowledge would positively impact the ability of development organizations and partners to make decisions using the best available information around programming and interventions that cost millions of dollars. Furthermore, the interviewee expressed that gathering and analyzing funding data, conducting surveys, and constantly communicating with partners on their activities in the field played a key role in combating pervading myths and assumptions. Similarly, these underlying issues pose a challenge for USAID and are being addressed through promoting the use and incorporation of local knowledge, as well as locally led work.

The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT recently completed a case study in Vietnam investigating the social aspects of policies around food systems and the role of decision-making based on evidence instead of political or professional agendas. The study highlights the challenges Vietnam faced about the notion that COVID-19 started in wet markets. It also describes how leaders framed their push for wet market closures due to the perceived pandemic-related "risk" despite the limited information available confirming the link between COVID-19 and wet markets. Thus, the food system in the country was faced with challenges where the stakeholders did not allow for evidence to be the driver of decision-making, putting populations and food systems at risk. Overall, the authors advocate for stakeholders to utilize scientific data in making decisions and the significance of focusing on implementing policies that are sustainable in order to address the gaps in food safety.

BROKERING AND INCORPORATING KNOWLEDGE

DISSEMINATING INFORMATION WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION

Strategic response efforts by an organization have been bolstered by the confluence of information collection and efficient circulation of knowledge products during the pandemic. Circulation of information, occurring both within the organization and in the communities in which it works, is fraught with new challenges from the lack of in-person contact including connectivity, time management, and team building. The use of online meeting platforms such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom, and others come with a unique set of challenges—from connectivity interruptions to unorthodox working environments. Tips and guidelines to address teleworking challenges include building strong relationships and effective engagement, as seen in USAID's remote working tip sheet and Deloitte's remote collaboration presentation.

The IFAD emphasized the advantages and disadvantages of online meeting structures in a session of their learning notes series; the learning notes are byproducts of a series of online discussions to promote exchange, learning from experience and adaptation through IFAD's COVID-19 response. The Learning from Remote Supervision COVID-19 learning note was aimed at addressing areas in which they can facilitate easier communication and more meaningful collaboration. The learning note touches on the inclusion of senior staff and the subsequent loss of informality among coworkers. Senior officials have an increased ability to attend meetings that would have been otherwise improbable in an in-person setting, allowing for greater participation across all levels of a project. At the same time, however, influences from time pressures and increased senior staff attendance can suppress informal discussions. Furthermore, teleworking and in-person restrictions have decreased opportunities for informal social interaction, such as "water cooler" chats. This lack of socially informal settings for conversations about programming has contributed to a significant reduction of information integration across teams and programs. Suggestions for adapting to the loss of informal meetings includes keeping platforms open so that sub-teams can meet at their leisure and creating agendas that keep discussions at the forefront of each meeting.

The current state of COVID-19 information has been described as the "infodemic": the sheer amount of information emerging through the course of the pandemic is overwhelming and can be unwieldy at an organizational level. The World Health Organization defines an [infodemic](#) as an overabundance of information, both online and offline, which includes deliberate attempts to spread disinformation in order to subvert the public health response and push alternative agendas. Content sharing platforms such as Google Suite and Microsoft Sharepoint have allowed organizations to manage and distribute the massive amount of information. Organizations are turning to unique ways to distribute information beyond the standard team meeting, utilizing attention-grabbing infographics and short informational campaigns. CARE International's "[5 minutes of inspiration](#)" blog series and Oxfam's "[Power in the Pandemic](#)" podcast are examples of using different mediums to grab the audience's attention. Providing short blog posts and audio formats allows for lower time commitments and a higher likelihood of reaching the target audience. Additionally, as mentioned by an interviewee, people consume information differently, so providing various forms of knowledge products allows for greater inclusion of team members with diverse learning styles.

Digital knowledge hubs are another resource heavily utilized by many organizations. These "hubs" are repositories of knowledge products (such as reports, webinars and press releases) put out by the organization. These hubs are not new, but their importance has increased significantly as organizations struggle to manage the ever-increasing stock of COVID-19 information. The hubs allow users the ability to gain information on various response strategies by the organization. The hubs are online resources often denoted by the organization's URL and an iteration of the words COVID-19, learning, and hub (i.e., "[/covid-19](#)" or "[/covidhub](#)"). In partnership with [COVID-END](#), the Africa Center for Evidence has [compiled a resource](#) to pool a wide range of COVID-19 knowledge hubs. At the time of this publication, 213 hubs were included. [Southern Voice](#), an organization that seeks to address the existing "knowledge asymmetry" and "participation deficit" in the dialogue on development, utilizes its [COVID-19 Digital Knowledge Hub](#) to publish reports and knowledge products from its 51 partner think tanks operating in the Global South. Through its hub, Southern Voice compiles and shares relevant research surrounding the impact of the pandemic in Global South countries and how the crisis has affected progress towards achieving the UN 2030 Agenda. The organization sees its hub as an important tool in brokering knowledge, as it contributes to increased traffic to websites and resources offered by Southern Voice's partners within its network.

Table 1 below presents a list of media sources from international development organizations on their COVID-19 response strategies, lessons learned, and feedback from the communities they serve. These resources include discussion-based podcasts aimed specifically at knowledge management practitioners, as well as findings from surveys and adaptive programming in the field. The resources focusing on local experiences are especially insightful to how information collected can be used for adaptive strategies and effective programming.

TABLE 1: LIST OF AVAILABLE LEARNING RESOURCES FROM INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS			
	Organization	**Links**	**Descriptions**
Podcasts	CARE International	[Failing Forward Podcast](#)	Discussion-based development podcast, topics beyond COVID-19.
	Oxfam International	[Power in the Pandemic Podcast](#)	Addressing challenges under COVID-19, and how to respond.
Webinars & Video Shorts	World Bank	[Data-Sensing and Data Mapping Tools](#) – [[Synopsis]](#)	Webinar discussing how to collect and document data under COVID-19.
	UNICEF	[COVID-19, the Infodemic, & Fake News](#)	Webinar speaking to the value of information, and challenge of disinformation.

	Oxfam Kenya	[Surviving the Pandemic: Amina's Story](#)	Video short following the impact of COVID-19 on Local Kenyan Woman, Amina Muktar.
	African Development Bank	[Civil Society and Community Engagement 2020 Virtual Civil Society Forum](#)	Video short showing the response strategies in the Amos Youth Center.
Blog Posts & Series	CARE International	[5 minutes of inspiration](#)	Short-read series touching on learning during the pandemic, and wins on-the-ground.
	Oxfam International	[A Virus of Austerity?](#)	Blog post describing agreements on spending, accountability, and recovery measures between the IMF and governments.
		[A Locally Shaped Future for CVA](#)	Blog post detailing the rise and impact of cash voucher assistance programs.
Papers & Series	IFAD	[COVID-19 Learning Notes](#)	Discussion series to promote learning and information sharing.
	The Cash Learning Partnership	[Cash and Voucher Assistance & Partnership Toolkit](#)	Provides guidance for cash voucher assistance and localization.
Repositories	World Bank	[Lesson Library](#)	Library of evidence utilized by the World bank under COVID-19.
	UNICEF	[Children and COVID-19 Research Library](#)	Curated information library centered around global quality-assured evidence beyond UNICEF outputs.
		[COVID-19 Resources for Policy Makers and Practitioners](#)	Guidance and tools for decision-makers and front-line responders.
	African Center for Evidence	[Living Hub of COVID-19 Knowledge Hubs](#)	Resource that aggregated existing COVID-19 information hubs.
	CARE International	[COVID-19 Needs Assessments Repository](#)	Repository of CARE International's COVID-19 needs assessments.
		[Women Respond Dashboard](#)	Dashboard that compiles data across different needs assessments.
	Southern Voice	[COVID-19 Digital Knowledge Hub](#)	Compiles the research of 51 think tanks in Asia, Africa and Latin America on the impact of the pandemic in those regions.

INCORPORATING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

How can practitioners facilitate multi-directional information sharing—from headquarters to the field and vice versa, and with other actors? Incorporating lessons learned from the collection of information on the ground is a major tenet of many organizations' learning agendas. With respect to vulnerable populations, the incorporation of lessons learned from community surveying can be seen in examples mentioned in previous sections, such as the Alliance of Bioversity International's [research](#) in Nairobi slums, and CARE International's [Rapid Gender Study](#). Local feedback is critical to a project's success: this feedback allows for practitioners to understand what's working, what isn't, and what's

missing. The importance of local feedback is illustrated in the Movement for Community-led Development's "COVID-19 Call" event on [Reflecting on COVID-19 and Community Development](). The "COVID-19 Call" draws experiences and lessons from global practitioners on what has been done in the field and what needs to be improved. This call opened up a dialogue on topics ranging from cultivating community trust to on-the-ground awareness campaigns around standard COVID-19 health measures.

The [after action review]() (AAR) is an example of a process to turn learning into action, to improve and support strong programmatic impact. The AAR allows organizations to learn from prior programming and crises to identify best practices and identify weaknesses. (See the "Lessons Learned" section of this report for a discussion of utilization of these compiled lessons.) CARE International looks at the impact of AARs under COVID-19 using lessons learned from virtual AARs through their Cash and Markets team in this [blog post](). The lessons learned from this process highlight the importance of keeping narrowly focused agendas, while looking to address big picture issues and successes. This insight blog touches on the adaptations required under virtual settings, such as keeping information sharing light and quick.

Another strong example of both brokering and incorporating local knowledge comes from USAID Advancing Nutrition's [framework]() for Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting in the time of COVID- 19. The team with the Advanced Nutrition project at USAID created working groups under the framework to disseminate emerging information within the organization aimed at pausing, reflecting, and incorporating learning into the COVID-19 response. This strategy has allowed for country programs to adapt programming tailored specifically to the country-specific context. Furthermore, these teams have allowed for massive social mobilization in virtual and telecommunications.

Distribution of information at the local level, a major step for local uptake in development programming, is necessary to address concerns from people about their communities. The collection of information in local communities leads to different response strategies from organizations, such as remote connection and in-person distribution. Virtual meeting and video conferencing platforms, primarily used at the organizational level for team meetings and presentations, are not always viable in rural settings. Many organizations are returning to traditional forms of information sharing such as radio (as seen in IFAD's [Nepal response]()), television, and the distribution of hard copy pamphlets. Additionally, working alongside local governments has proven beneficial in connecting to communities. The benefit of local government participation can be seen in USAID/Governance for Local Development (GoLD)'s [Activity in Senegal](). The Senegal activity applied a [multi-sector approach]() to information sharing and implementation, beginning at the government level. Utilizing established networks, radio messaging aimed at spreading awareness while adhering to social distancing guidelines allowed for public health broadcasts in 77 communes. The Senegal initiative has [achieved major increases]() in communication (via radio) and efficiency in the health sector.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

Engaging stakeholders in a meaningful way, from donors to local partners, has been a prominent challenge for practitioners during the pandemic. Across the organizations that we interviewed, it was clear that [engaging stakeholders]() both locally and at the senior staff level are essential to program growth and implementation. Per GAC, local partners, stakeholders, and colleagues stationed in the field can provide vital analyses and important perspectives on situations happening on the ground. It is clear the pandemic has significantly impacted the way that stakeholders are engaged. From an increased reliance on technology to create and foster connections across organizations and stakeholders; to increased collaboration across various platforms, there is a need for an integrated approach in dealing with the impacts of the pandemic.

In light of the limited mobility caused by the pandemic, organizations have resorted to digital platforms to engage and continue the participation of stakeholders across organizations and communities. An example of utilization of existing platforms where various stakeholders are involved -- one that has resulted in a positive influence at the community level -- is the "[Food Systems Dialogues]()". Mentioned by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the initiative was established in 2018 by five partner organizations (the EAT, Food, and Land Use Coalition [FOLU], the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition [GAIN], World Economic Forum [WEF], and World Business Council for Sustainable Development [WBCSD]) and has so far engaged over 2,500 practitioners from various levels to collaborate in addressing the pandemic and its impacts.

While initially developed to address the food crisis present in many developing countries and to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the consortium has proven to be effective in engaging farmers, researchers, policymakers, and others in establishing sustainable food security systems as a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic. A unique aspect of this dialogue is that it convenes stakeholders from all sectors to participate in the summit and collaborate to find solutions and share the challenges that they face. Youth activists, indigenous leaders, smallholder farmers, heads of NGOs, scientists, and researchers are invited, and their inputs significantly contribute to identifying the gaps that exist and what needs to be done. As mentioned by many organizations, the pandemic has further exacerbated food system challenges in developing countries and the need for a greater focus on strengthening existing food systems that are in a fragile state is essential. Lastly, the organizations we interviewed state that this consortium and others like it have led to organizations being more intentional in utilizing their platforms in order to learn from each other and build well-rounded and sustainable solutions to address gaps.

LESSONS LEARNED

PREVIOUS CRISIS EFFORTS AND INTERVENTIONS

To ensure that their knowledge bases and processes were robust in responding to major crises such as the ongoing pandemic, knowledge and learning experts in development organizations looked to lessons they could use from past crises. Even when not directly related or attributed to pandemics, organizations and practitioners aimed to use any available knowledge to adapt in response to programmatic and operational considerations brought about by COVID-19. For example, the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) at the World Bank collated lessons learned from prior crises in a resource containing pertinent reports that could be referenced in adapting programming and activities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The IEG developed a similar resource outlining key lessons in the context of Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) areas, which are likely to experience disparate impact from the pandemic.

CARE International, for example, looked to their past efforts in providing assistance to communities in Africa and the Middle East impacted by human-made disasters such as armed conflict and domestic violence, as well as natural disasters such as flooding. The organization aimed to determine best practices for providing relief, especially when mobility is restricted as it is with COVID-19. Furthermore, the organization drew from prior responses to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the cholera outbreak in Haiti. From these crises, the organization was able to draw lessons learned on a wide array of key issues surrounding interventions:

- **Organizational Readiness:** set clear priorities, consider timelines, context, resources, and alternate communications measures
- **Leadership:** be willing to take operational risks, clarify & decentralize decision-making, and coordinate at all levels
- **Community Engagement:** work with local leaders, help communities track diseases, build trust, and appeal to emotions and values
- **People:** define roles and strategy, build on existing capacity, and take care of staff
- **Partnerships:** engage with partners early on, support them, and coordinate across actors to reduce duplication
- **Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL):** complete needs assessments early, quickly, and inclusively, ensure feedback & accountability mechanisms are fit for purpose
- **Communications:** communicate early and consistently, designate information/communications officer, communicate decisions with donors, and translate documents into local languages
- **Program Activities:** focus on gender, consider exit planning early, reassess existing activities, and plan for recovery early

In March 2020, CARE International published an [interview](#) with key responder Alfred Makavore, key responder during the organization's Sierra Leone Ebola response from 2014 to 2015, on lessons learned as part of their "[Failing Forward](#)" podcast initiative. In the interview, Makavore described how responders initially viewed the Ebola pandemic as a clinical problem at its onset, warranting only a clinical response. Eventually, Makavore and his colleagues had to move beyond this notion and acknowledge the Ebola pandemic as a social issue, leading them to respond differently. He emphasized that social mobilization was key in addressing the issues brought about by Ebola, which entailed engaging communities, working through existing community-based structures from previous programs, and involving local partners and volunteers. By viewing the problem in a different light, Makavore and his colleagues were able to overcome issues in terms of reach and engagement within communities, and to positively influence the attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders. Makavore stressed the importance of imparting what he learned from the Ebola response in his current role in Nigeria, where he and his colleagues are working to adapt existing initiatives to respond to COVID-19.

LEARNING AGENDAS AND ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING

In line with adapting to the changing operational and programmatic needs brought about by the pandemic, organizations turned to developing learning agendas to capture and share knowledge efficiently. Through learning agendas, important information was obtained and synthesized into working knowledge to be applied and integrated into programs and interventions affected by COVID-19.

In the case of UNICEF, the organization established an internal [Community of Practice (CoP)](#) across country and regional offices to document COVID-19 response and capture emerging lessons from teams in the field, evaluators, and institutional partners. Through the CoP, UNICEF was able to establish a common learning agenda, fostering an environment conducive to global learning. In turn, this initiative complemented and informed data collection, evaluation, research, and other efforts to enhance country-to-country learning and knowledge management on COVID-19. Notably, the work done by the CoP helped the organization understand which aspects of their programs worked and which did not work with respect to the pandemic. Key areas in the CoP's learning agenda include:

1. Knowledge sharing and peer support

2. Documentation approaches and methodological quality

3. Easy access to emerging lessons and related knowledge products

4. Use of early lessons and related knowledge products

5. Identifying connections with other relevant initiatives within the Secretariat and beyond.

Some organizations formed internal working groups to capture and document lessons learned. Led by the organization's Evaluation team, GAC set up its own Lessons Learned Working Group (LLWG), bringing together oversight bodies within the organization to apply evaluation methodology in a more informal context to reflect on how the organization is adapting to COVID-19 and determine actionable next steps. The Evaluation team formed the LLWG to reinforce and socialize the role of evaluation in promoting a strong learning culture at GAC's headquarters and regional offices, and Canada's diplomatic missions abroad. The members of the LLWG include Security and Emergency Management, Evaluation, Internal Audit, Inspector General, and Results bureaus. Across these various oversight bodies, the LLWG coordinates and contributes to consolidated lessons learned by identifying how best practices, tools, and processes can be maximized to meet reporting requirements. To ensure effective learning and reviewing environments, the LLWG prioritized open and honest processes and emphasized problem-solving over assigning blame. One key objective of the LLWG's lessons learned process is to embed identified recommendations into systems and decisions through effective knowledge management, in order to prevent ineffective decisions or duplication of efforts, and to ensure that best practices are mainstreamed. This process also enabled GAC to realistically implement lessons identified through the LLWG and raised leaders' awareness of where respective lessons and recommendations were identified and would be tracked. To further minimize duplication and administrative burden on all parts of the Department, the LLWG considers

the extent to which data gathered through various processes will support multiple reports and products. Reports and knowledge products resulting from analyses by the LLWG are then shared with decision-makers such as development ministers and agency officers for further action.

Furthermore, some organizations went for broader and more flexible approaches in collating and translating knowledge such as "learning while doing." Since the COVID-19 pandemic has far-reaching and compounding effects on society, some organizations not specifically focused on public health issues, such as those involved in agriculture and food security, iteratively adapted their current programming in response to the pandemic. Organizing peer-to-peer meetings and discussions aids learning, where the lessons learned are coming from current challenges in the field rather than past experience. IFAD's COVID-19 Learning Note series is a great example of organizing discussions based on staff experiences and knowledge. The bi-weekly discussion series, with each session led by two staff members, allowed for "knowledge-driven feedback." This type of internal feedback is particularly useful for organizations with limited prior experience around health crises, as it provides insight to the challenges stemming from previous crises.

With regard to future pandemics and crises, development organizations and donors are working to build on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to prepare for similar crises in the future. For some organizations, the learning agendas developed in response to the ongoing pandemic will be adapted and used to capture lessons during future pandemics or crises and provide a framework for how to adapt efficiently. As in the case of CARE International, the organization made use of information and knowledge gathered from previous crises to inform decision-making on programs affected by or responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. It follows that organizations such as CARE are routinely collecting useful data and information on the current pandemic and synthesizing learning from these, as they could prove to be valuable resources in the future. Furthermore, the pandemic has accelerated communications and stakeholder engagement practices through the use of the Internet, which allows for quicker and more coordinated response efforts, especially among remote teams and organizations. Exercising the option to work virtually allows all parties involved to consolidate lessons and adapt them to operations and programs instantaneously without being limited by public health and travel restrictions.

LOOKING AHEAD TO FUTURE CRISES

The world was not prepared for a global pandemic. As they work to support their organizations' responses to COVID-19, many knowledge brokers are also looking ahead to the next global crisis humanity will face. The lack of infrastructure around organizational learning and virtual communications pre-COVID-19 was a recurring theme voiced by knowledge management practitioners interviewed for this research. Building up the virtual capacity of the workforce has been both a challenge and a lesson, something that has opened up the possibility of rethinking how we imagine day-to-day practices. Adapting ways to share information, connect to peers and engage the communities we work in has been a major challenge for practitioners during this pandemic. COVID-19 has forced the globe to adapt programming, rethink information sharing and prepare for the unknown. Both the need for strong knowledge and learning infrastructures and the consequences of not having these in place and sufficiently robust, have focused development organizations on the need to invest in knowledge sharing processes to ensure a smoother response in the event of another crisis of this scale.

This review approach can be adapted and replicated in later stages of the COVID-19 crisis and can help to provide evidence to inform learning and adapting during the pandemic. To that end, the questions addressed in this study can, and should be, adapted to fit future situations. An important consideration that should be prioritized is the inclusion of questions around how vulnerable populations are being affected by both the crisis and the response. The focus of this effort was to learn, capture, and share what other international development organizations have done and continue to do in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The information within this report can be utilized to inform future actions. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt for years to come; if anything is clear, it is the necessity of continuing to build on prior lessons and leverage our collective knowledge to address current and future situations.

Please direct any questions or feedback about this report to the team at KMOL@usaid.gov. Feedback is both encouraged and appreciated!

III. APPENDIX

LEARNING AGENDA

Guided by USAID's aim to adapt its development assistance to respond to the challenges presented by COVID-19, the USAID KMOL team developed a learning agenda to collect information and knowledge from development organizations and bi-lateral donors. The learning agenda provided a framework for knowledge synthesis drawing on insights and lessons learned that can be applicable to the needs of a wide range of stakeholders. The agenda focused on the following key challenges:

- Acting on emergent COVID-19 information
- Ensuring that we are identifying and leveraging knowledge inclusively, including using local knowledge and learning from local COVID-19 responses
- Using our knowledge broker roles to support COVID-19 responses
- Managing the quantity of new information about COVID-19
- Engaging stakeholders in the context of lockdowns, social distancing, and other restrictions • Addressing disinformation around COVID-19
- Applying lessons learned from previous pandemics such as Ebola, and capturing insights regarding COVID-19 to inform future crises

ORGANIZATIONAL OUTREACH

The team identified potential interviewees through the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community of practice, as well as through the team's professional networks. The team reached out to organizations primarily through email, and afterwards invited them to share insights by setting up virtual interviews. Participating organizations were interviewed, and materials subsequently shared by them were reviewed accordingly by the team.

INTERVIEW PROCESS

The interview process was guided by a questionnaire, seeking to address the major areas of interest as defined by the learning agenda and thematic areas of interest. The interviews took the form of discussions of open-ended questions allowing for organizations to provide their interpretation of the processes the KMOL team sought to identify. Therefore, the questionnaire below was utilized only to ensure the objectives were addressed in some capacity.

Appendix 1: Sample of questionnaire employed in this activity

COVID-19 Landscape Analysis

Interviewee 1: _____   Organization: _____

Interviewee 2: _____   Date: _____

Time: _____

Interviewer: _____

The first set of questions are regarding acting on emergent info:

1. *Begin with:* **How is _____ acting on emergent info using knowledge management initiatives?**

   Follow-up:

   a. How is _____ managing emergent knowledge about COVID?

      i. This question is to identify the methods used to compile and organize the most current information in a manner conducive to KMOL practices.

   b. How is _____ shaping and executing COVID learning agendas?

      i. This question is to identify how the organization is learning about COVID to support its COVID programming/response.

   c. How is _____ iteratively adapting COVID responses based on emergent knowledge?

      i. This question is to identify the process of gathering the most current and relevant information and evolving the response programming as a result.

Through these interviews, the KMOL team sought to speak with those working or leading knowledge management initiatives in some capacity. The goal of this effort was to identify knowledge management and organizational learning processes utilized in response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, it was imperative that the team spoke to those with insight on the KMOL processes within their organization. It was also important that the team interviewed global organizations, including bilateral donors, as well as local organizations. The participants came from international financial institutions, humanitarian agencies, and government development organizations.

ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED

The interview process allowed the KMOL team to speak to leading knowledge management experts in the field, including representatives from the following organizations:

- International Livestock Research Institute, CGIAR
- Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank Group
- The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, CGIAR
- STRATactical LLC
- OXFAM America
- CARE USA
- UNICEF Division of Data, Analysis, Planning and Monitoring
- UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti
- Global Affairs Canada
- IFAD
- The Movement for Community-Led Development
- Southern Voice
- Africa Centre for Evidence, University of Johannesburg

CITED INFORMATION

This report serves to provide an understanding of the different knowledge management response strategies employed by the organizations listed above during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the information cited in this report came up through the interviews or was provided to the team directly by the interviewees. Links are embedded in the text to provide specific examples and invite further exploration on the topics. Additionally, case studies from the field are included to provide specific insight to the topics being discussed—to note, the cases cited are single examples from a wide body of available studies.

WEBINAR

To support knowledge sharing efforts beyond this report, the USAID KMOL team hosted a virtual webinar that featured three of the individuals interviewed for this report as panelists. The webinar provided a space for KMOL practitioners and international development professionals to share and exchange information, practices, and knowledge around their efforts to respond and adapt to COVID-19. The team facilitated a panel discussion around the knowledge and key challenges documented in this report and addressed questions and comments from the audience. Overall, the webinar aimed to identify knowledge gaps and explore future steps, such as how to best inform and create programs or operations that can quickly adapt moving forward. A link to the webinar recording is [here].