

REPORT

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

*Challenges, Responses and Opportunities*

JUNE 2020



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## ABOUT THE REPORT

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. While Africa still accounts for relatively few deaths, the numbers are rising. Governments in Africa and elsewhere have instituted wide-ranging measures to curb the spread of the disease including travel restrictions, night-time curfews, the banning of large gatherings and social distancing. These measures had swift and dramatic social and economic consequences for all sectors of society, including civil society organizations (CSOs).

CSOs have a long tradition of performing crucial developmental, humanitarian and advocacy functions across Africa, often under challenging conditions. As a result, there can't be any effective response to COVID-19 without the involvement of CSOs. However, at a time when their contributions are more critical than ever, they are also confronted with the negative impact of the pandemic on their operations and sustainability.

This report is the first of its kind to focus exclusively on the impact of COVID-19 on African CSOs. It is based on a survey conducted by @AfricanNGOs and EPIC-Africa between 29 April and 15 May 2020.

The objectives of the survey were four-fold:

- **Assess the negative impact of the pandemic on the funding and operations of CSOs**
  - **Understand how CSOs are coping and responding to these challenges**
    - **Highlight CSOs' involvement in national responses to the pandemic**
      - **Identify opportunities emerging from the crisis and the lessons learned**

The report presents a snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on African CSOs, as well as the many ways that they are responding to the crisis while safeguarding their organizations. It also highlights opportunities that emerged from the crisis and crucial challenges which need to be addressed in support of the recovery and sustainability of African CSOs.

This report fills a critical knowledge gap and offers funders, governments, the private sector and other key stakeholders data-based evidence to inform their engagement with African CSOs, both during and after the pandemic.

It also provides CSOs with a tool to help strengthen solidarity and inform advocacy for greater recognition and support for the sector.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

These findings are based on the feedback from one thousand and fifteen (1 015) CSOs from 44 African countries who participated in the survey.

### OVERALL IMPACT

**98%** reported that COVID-19 impacted and disrupted their operations in one or more ways.

### LOSS OF FUNDING

**55.69%** had already experienced a loss of funding, while 66.46% expected to lose funding in the next 3-6 months.

### PREPAREDNESS

**84.48%** indicated that they were not prepared to cope with the disruption caused by COVID-19 to their operations.

### COST-CUTTING MEASURES

**49.87%** had already introduced measures to reduce costs because of the loss of funding, or the uncertainty about future funding.

### SUSTAINABILITY

**77.97%** believed that COVID-19 would have a devastating impact on the sustainability of many CSOs.

### CANCELLED OR REDUCED OPERATIONS

**69.34%** had to reduce or cancel their operations, while 54.94% expect this to continue over the next 3-6 months.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

### MOVEMENT OF STAFF

**73.97%** indicated that COVID-19 resulted in restricted movement of staff, while 79.35% experienced reduced face-to-face community interactions.

### WORKING FROM HOME

**84.48%** implemented work-from-home arrangements. Although 75.36% had no such arrangements in place before COVID-19, 71.40% indicated that they would consider making it part of how their organizations operate post COVID-19.

### RECOGNITION

**68.08%** believed that COVID-19 would result in greater public appreciation for the work of CSOs, while 71.58% stated that governments failed to recognize and utilize local CSOs' skills, experience and networks in response to COVID-19.

### OPTIMISM

**45.06%** believed that CSOs would emerge stronger and more agile after the pandemic.

### INVOLVEMENT IN THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

**84.77%** introduced new program activities in response to COVID-19, with 71.94% self-funding these activities. 77.22% indicated that local CSOs were playing a critical role in national responses to COVID-19. 85.47% stated that they could have done more if capacity or funding constraints were not a barrier.



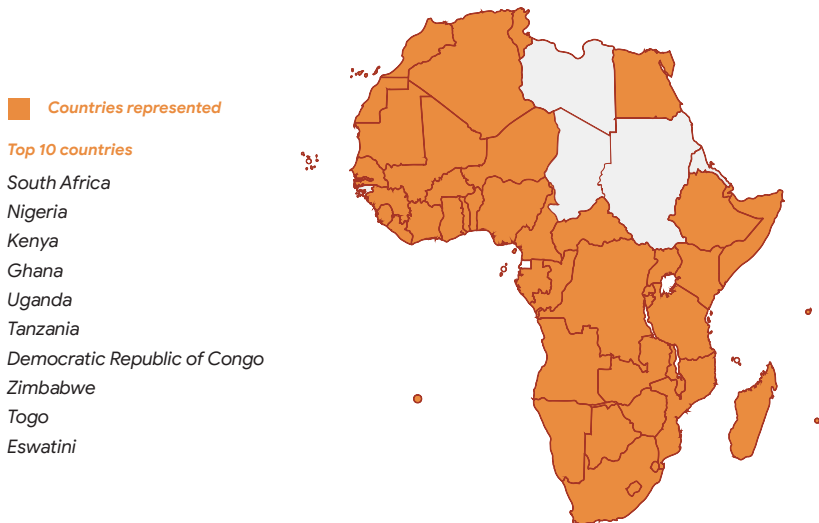
*Our field interventions stopped abruptly due to COVID-19, leaving communities without any support for the services they require. We are also anticipating a loss in revenue from donations and programme funding, and as a result, will have to introduce cost-cutting measures in the next few weeks. We were not prepared to deal with these sudden changes in our operating environment."*

- Quote from a survey respondent

## DATA OVERVIEW

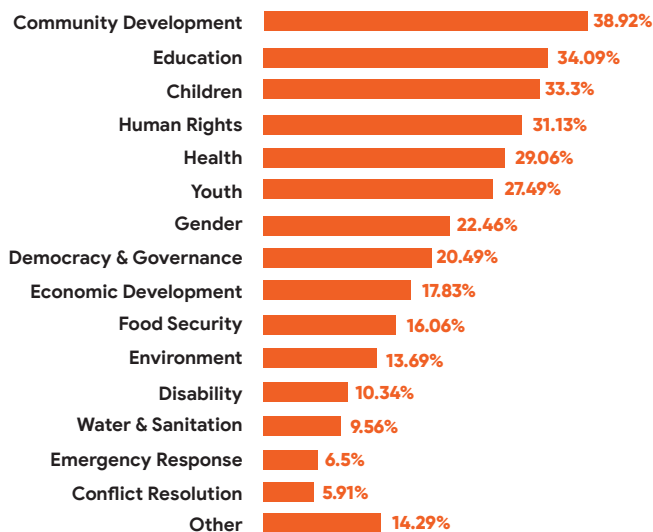
### Countries represented in the survey

A total of 1 015 CSOs from 44 African countries participated in the survey.



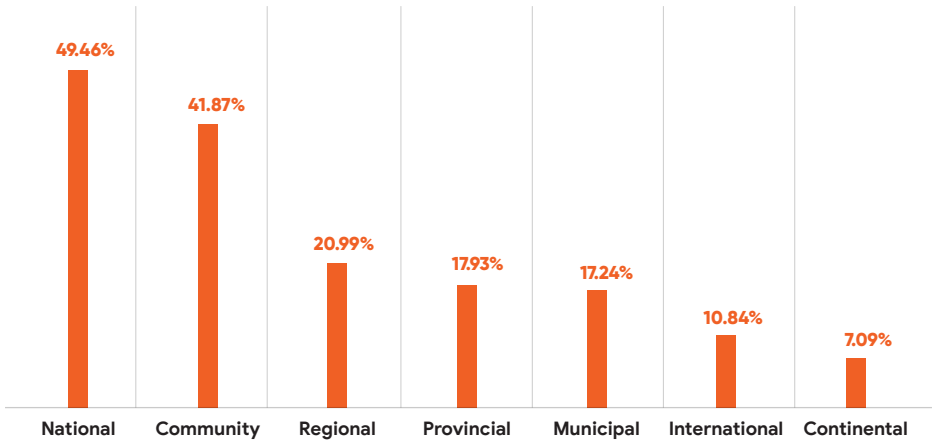
### Main areas of focus

Respondents are active in 15 main thematic areas, with many working across multiple areas.



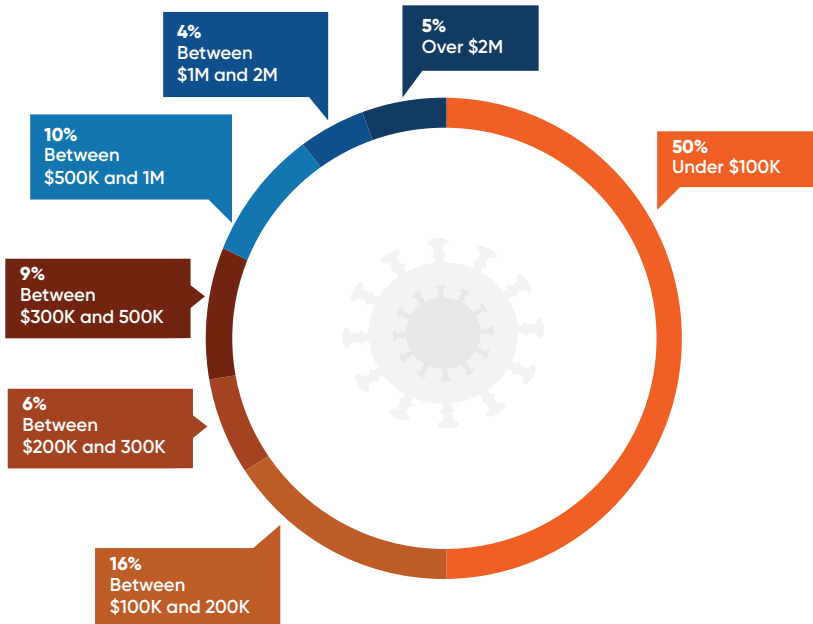
### Geographical focus of African CSOs

Most respondents operate primarily on a community or national level.



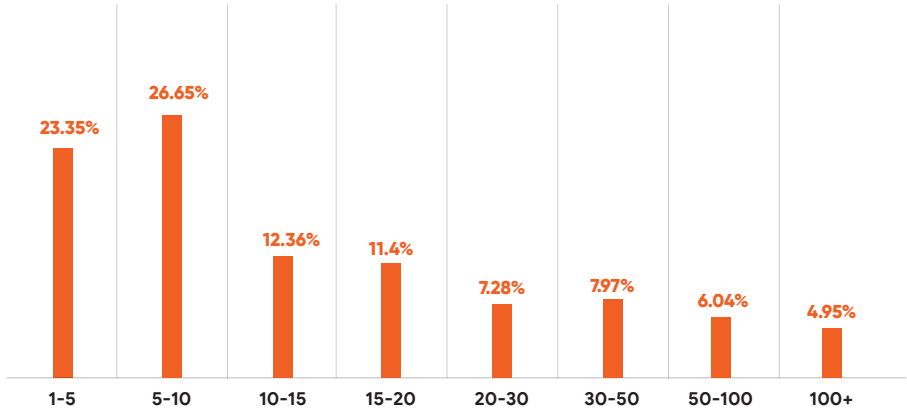
### Current year budget

The annual budget of almost 50% of respondents is less than USD \$100,000.



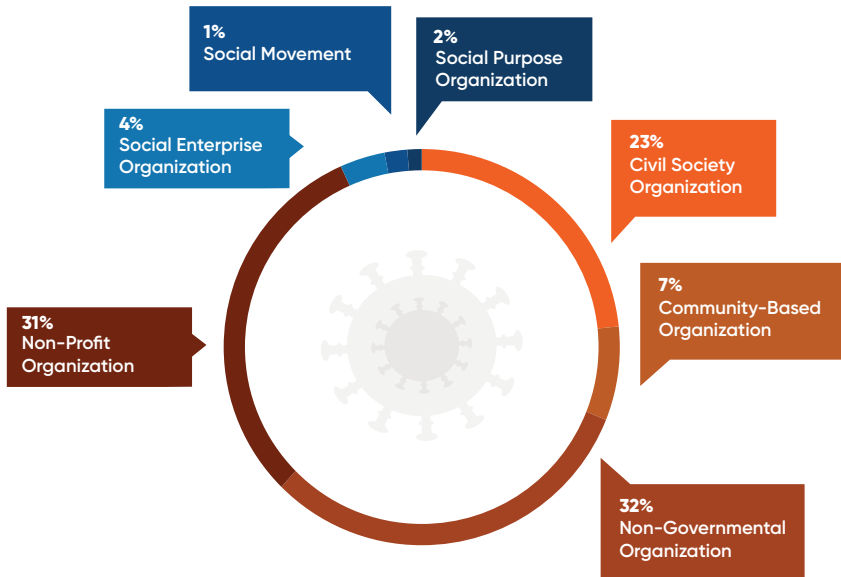
**Staff size**

50% of respondents employ between 1-10 people.



**Type of organization**

Most of the respondents associate with the terms Non-Governmental Organization or Non-Profit Organization.







# IMPACT

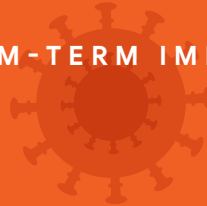
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IMMEDIATE IMPACT

COPING WITH COVID-19

PROJECTED MEDIUM-TERM IMPACT

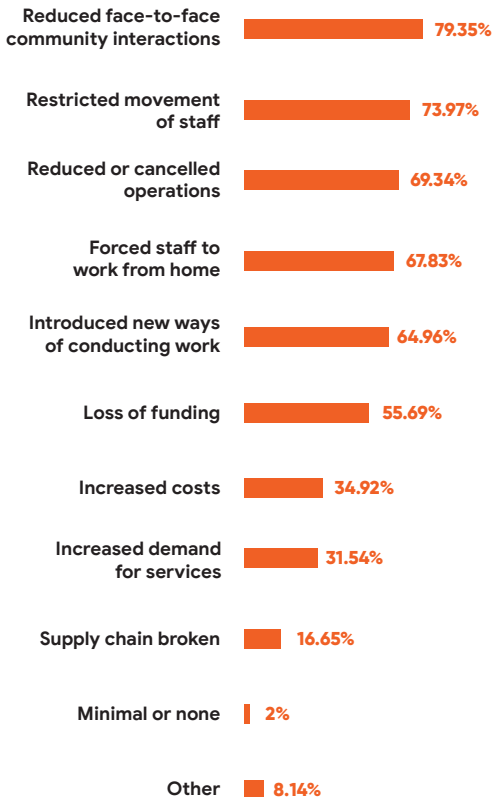


## IMMEDIATE IMPACT

### A. OVERVIEW

The overall immediate impact of the pandemic was swift, widespread and destabilizing. 98% of respondents reported having been affected in one or more ways. Only 2% reported minimal or no impact at all. Most respondents (84.48%) acknowledged that they were overwhelmingly unprepared to cope with the disruption caused by COVID-19. The impact was felt most acutely through changes in **funding**, **operations** and **program activities**.

#### Short-term impact of COVID-19



Other immediate effects that respondents experienced include a reduced number of staff members, increased workloads, increased uncertainty about the future and dealing with compounding issues such as increased domestic violence.

## B. FUNDING

The financial health of African CSOs was tenuous even before the COVID-19 crisis. With almost 50% having an average annual budget of under US\$100,000, the loss of funding could have devastating consequences.

55.69% of respondents experienced a loss in funding, while 34.92% reported rising costs. Only 34.37% reported having any reserves, and of those, 60.83% indicated that they plan to tap into their reserves to see them through the crisis. In addition, 46.18% reported that some of their funders informed them that COVID-19 might impact their ability to continue supporting them.

Most concerning, 77.97% of respondents felt that COVID-19 would have a devastating impact on the sustainability of many CSOs.

## C. OPERATIONS AND PROGRAMS

The most visible and dramatic impact was felt across operations and programs. As countries across the continent imposed measures such as national lockdowns to restrict the movement of people and curb infections, CSOs experienced several operational difficulties.

73.97% of respondents experienced restrictions in the movement of staff, while 79.35% experienced reduced face-to-face interactions with the communities they serve. As a result, 69.34% had to reduce or cancel operations, even as 31.54% reported increased demand for their services.

3.63% of respondents reported one or more of their staff members tested positive for COVID-19.



*Before the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown, we were looking towards an exciting time in the organization. We were at the cusp of entertaining a few funders at our agro-processing centre and mini-food lab, as well as purchasing and establishing a formal office for our operations. We have had to freeze such projects, which would have been an investment into the organization's growth. This has had a knock-on effect. We've had to cancel annual incentives as a cost cutting measure and reduce production at the agro-processing centre."*

- Quote from a survey respondent

## COPING WITH THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

African CSOs are finding ways to mitigate the existential threats imposed by COVID-19. However, they have also experienced specific challenges with some of the solutions.

### A. WORKING FROM HOME

The impact of COVID-19 resulted in 64.96% of respondents introducing new ways of conducting work. 67.83% indicated that COVID-19 forced their staff to “work from home”. As a result, 84.48% of respondents implemented work-from-home arrangements, although 75.36% didn’t have such arrangements in place before COVID-19.

Working from home provides CSOs with a mechanism to continue at least some of their operations. However, most respondents were not adequately prepared for the sudden transition to this new way of conducting work. 23.08% were not prepared at all, while 59.34% were only somewhat prepared.

#### *Challenges faced during the transition to working from home*

Respondents highlighted several specific challenges related to working from home.



Despite these challenges, 71.40% of respondents indicated that they would consider making “working from home” part of the way their organizations operate after the pandemic. In the meantime, they anticipate continuing to introduce new ways of working to counter the impact of COVID-19.

## B. CUTTING COSTS

Given the loss of funding, uncertainty about future funding, and increased costs, 49.87% of respondents have already introduced measures to reduce costs. Some of these include:

- *Reducing or cancelling activities*
- *Reducing travel*
- *Furloughing staff*
- *Freezing hiring*
- *Reducing salaries and working hours*
- *Increasing reliance on volunteers*
- *Renegotiating contracts, e.g. rental and insurance*

At the same time, CSOs also saved some costs as a result of reduced or cancelled operations.

## C. COMMUNICATING WITH STAFF AND FUNDERS

Proactive and ongoing communication with both internal and external stakeholders is critical to how CSOs manage and overcome the impact of COVID-19.

Most respondents had already communicated with all (36.58%) or at least some (42.98%) of their funders about the immediate or expected impact of COVID-19 on their organizations.

Similarly, respondents have been very diligent in communicating with their staff during this period of uncertainty. 96.94% communicated with them about adhering to national protocols in response to COVID-19, while 87.71% informed them about the immediate and expected impact of COVID-19 on their organizations.



*So far we have postponed the implementation of some activities and developed a comprehensive COVID-19 response plan for which we are seeking additional funding. Our donors are mostly happy to redirect funding to our COVID-19 response work in the short/medium term. If the crisis continues beyond June or July, we will need to start implementing cost-cutting measures.”*

- Quote from a survey respondent

#### D. INVOLVING BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Boards of respondents also played an essential role in how CSOs have responded to COVID-19.

Although 6.59% of respondents don't have a Board, and 11.13% reported no Board involvement, 44.78% indicated that their Boards were very involved, and 37.5% somewhat involved. The nature of this involvement entailed regular consultations between management and the Board, regular consultations between Board members, and Board members helping to connect CSOs to resources.

#### E. LEARNING AND DOCUMENTING EXPERIENCE

The impact of COVID-19 on the operations and program activities of African CSOs is unprecedented. While they may not experience a disruption of this magnitude in the foreseeable future, the lessons that CSOs learn from this experience, including the shortcomings identified in various aspects of their operations, will assist them in preparing for any future emergencies.

55.95% of respondents indicated that they were documenting their experience during this period and would incorporate it into their monitoring and evaluation framework.

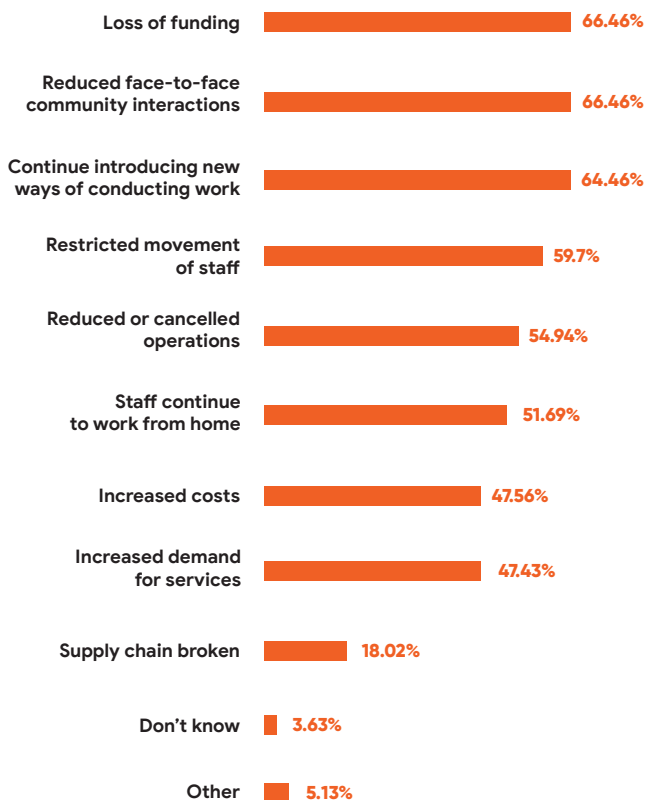


## PROJECTED MEDIUM-TERM IMPACT

Respondents reported a mixed outlook for the next 3-6 months, with improvements in some areas, and more disruptions expected in others. CSOs do not expect that their operations will return to “normal”, and there is significant uncertainty about what the future holds.

The issues that respondents are most concerned about, or that they expect will continue to disrupt their operations and program activities include:

### *Expected impact of COVID-19 in the next 3-6 months*



Respondents expect funding will continue to decrease, while costs continue to rise. They are also concerned about the fall-out from the impact of COVID-19 on national economies.



INVOLVEMENT IN THE  
RESPONSE TO COVID-19



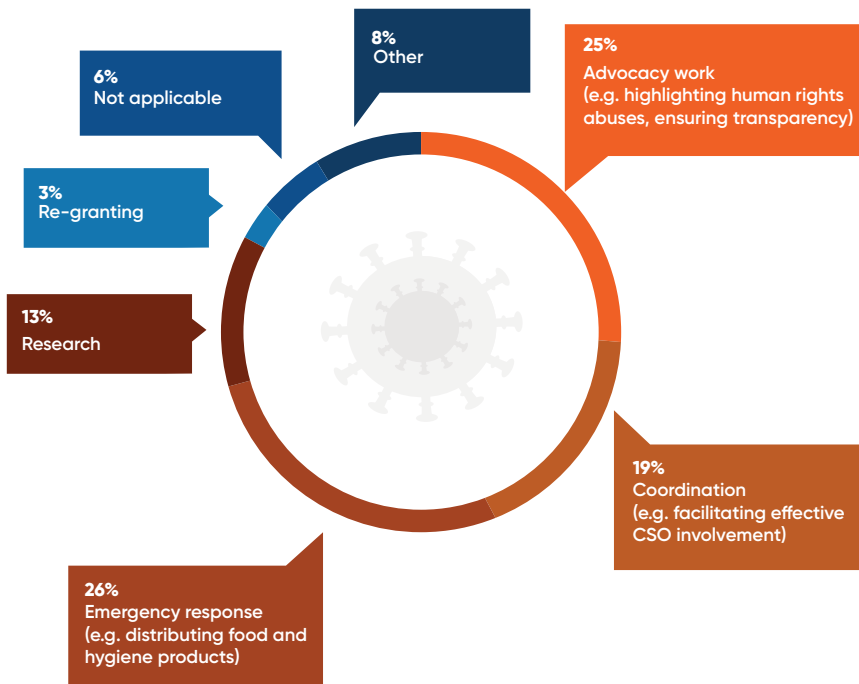
## INVOLVEMENT IN THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Despite the daunting impact of COVID-19 on their operations, African CSOs are actively involved in national and continent-wide responses to the pandemic.

### A. NEW PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

#### Types of activity

84.77% of respondents introduced new program activities in response to COVID-19.

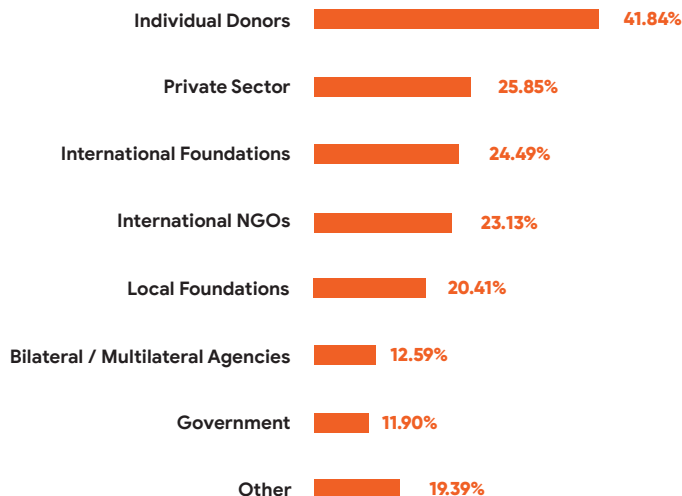


78.38% of respondents indicated that these activities are in line with their missions.

## B. FUNDING

71.94% of respondents are self-funding their activities related to COVID-19. The rest have secured funding from a range of sources, with local individual donors and the private sector the most significant contributors.

### Sources of funding



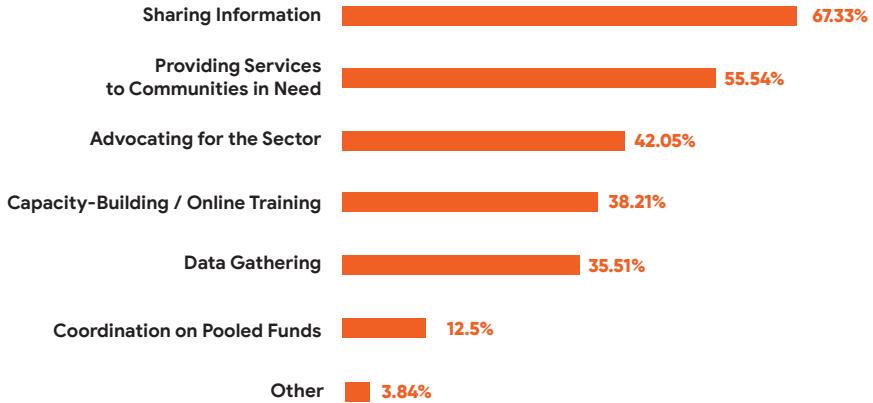
85.47% of respondents indicated that they could have done more if capacity or funding constraints were not a barrier. Asked to describe what more they could have done, CSOs mentioned several activities that broadly fall within community engagement, filling gaps in service delivery, monitoring government accountability, and policy advocacy. Examples include:

- *Providing information and education on essential preventive actions*
- *Supporting governments to reach remote and hard-to-reach communities such as the elderly and disabled people*
- *Addressing mental health issues*
- *Mitigating stigma*
- *Monitoring national COVID-19 budgets*
- *Advocating for equitable policies and actions*

## C. COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIP

The need and urgency for meaningful responses to COVID-19 have contributed to cooperation and solidarity amongst CSOs, which perhaps is not always the case in some national or thematic contexts. 83.95% of respondents are working with other CSOs in their respective countries in support of a range of issues, with sharing information and providing services to people in need receiving the most attention.

### Areas in which CSOs are forming partnerships



In addition, 25% of respondents indicated that CSOs in their countries had formed a national coalition to coordinate specific COVID-19 related actions by the sector. Similarly, 25% of respondents are also partnering with African CSOs outside their own countries in response to COVID-19.



*We have a national footprint and are able to swiftly respond to the pandemic with key services to vulnerable communities. We have an opportunity to create lasting partnerships with government, private companies and other development organizations."*

- Quote from a survey respondent

### D. RECOGNITION

77.22% of respondents felt local CSOs are playing a critical role in national responses to COVID-19, while 68.08% felt this contribution would result in greater public appreciation for the work of the sector.

### E. LACK OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Sadly, governments have not supported or recognized the efforts of CSOs or offered support to lessen the impact of the pandemic on their operations and program activities. 71.58% of respondents felt that governments failed to recognize and utilize local CSOs' skills, experience and networks in response to COVID-19. This oversight has weakened the planning, coordination and implementation of national responses, as well as the ability of CSOs to expand or sustain their efforts.



*This is a good time for African CSOs to interrogate the sustainability of their models and make changes where needed, and also to prioritize activities that might guide them towards sleeker operations in future."*

- Quote from a survey respondent

# EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES



## EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

While many African CSOs were overwhelmed by the immediate impact of COVID-19 on their operations and will struggle to recover or even survive, they remained surprisingly optimistic about the future. 45.06% of respondents felt that the pandemic would give rise to a more robust and agile sector. Only time will tell if this optimism results in tangible change, but it demonstrates the resilience and adaptability at the core of many African CSOs.

Based on how CSOs responded to COVID-19, several opportunities are emerging that could begin to shape the way the sector operates in future.



**Re-orienting operations** - the speed with which CSOs pivoted and adopted new ways of working while initiating new COVID-19 related activities demonstrated that they could be agile and innovative in response to changing operating environments and community needs. This experience provides CSOs with a framework for reviewing and re-assessing their cost structures and operational requirements which could result in significant savings, more efficiencies, and stimulate more innovation.



**Accelerating digital transformation** - office closures and restrictions on staff movement fast-tracked the adoption of technology solutions. It enabled their staff to work from home and continue some of their operations. Staff acquired new skills and gained experience in new tools and applications. Combined with the use of social media and crowdfunding platforms, CSOs have harnessed their online presence to increase their visibility, connect with new audiences and secure support from new supporters. CSOs will probably prioritize further technology investments in the post-COVID-19 period as they restructure their operations.



**Leveraging domestic funding sources** - the primary sources of new funding for CSOs' COVID-19 activities were local and included support from businesses, individuals and foundations. As international donors face their own challenges, CSOs will need to diversify their revenue streams, including payments for delivery of public services and developing income-generating activities. In the short term, CSOs noted a need for governments to allocate a portion of national COVID-19 emergency funds to the sector.



**Shifting power relations** - 67.58% of respondents felt that COVID-19 would force funders to rethink the power dynamics between them and African CSOs, and transform their engagement with the sector. African CSOs have found themselves on the frontlines of the response to COVID-19, particularly when many international NGOs have withdrawn personnel. The pandemic has highlighted shortcomings in current funding approaches that still tend to be short-term and project-based and leave CSOs financially vulnerable. COVID-19 may force funders to shift to strategies that strengthen the long-term resilience and independence of African CSOs.



**Strengthening advocacy** - COVID-19 laid bare the developmental challenges facing African countries and the gaps in the service delivery capacity of many governments. CSOs are often at the forefront of highlighting these shortcomings and advocating for changes in public policy and actions. With a more engaged public now experiencing the impact and consequences of COVID-19, CSOs have an opportunity to reinforce their activism and advocacy interventions around critical issues such as water, sanitation, health and education; intensify demands for improved public service delivery; monitor how governments are utilizing public funding in response to the pandemic; and expose any abuse of state power during the enforcement of measures aimed at curbing the spread of the disease.



**Improving visibility** - while media attention has been concerned mostly with the health crisis and potential collapse of economies, COVID-19 also placed the public and media spotlight on African CSOs. More people are now aware of their work, the challenges they face and their contributions during the pandemic. This awareness has resulted in new donations, support and recognition. CSOs need to capitalize on this renewed public interest and exposure in support of their ongoing operations.



**Reinforcing relevance and credibility** - CSO responses to the needs of vulnerable communities were often done with their own resources and without external support. Their interventions sometimes represented the only assistance available to these communities, filling a void in the absence of government services. CSOs demonstrated their responsiveness and technical capabilities, and reinforced their legitimacy and relationships with local communities. They should build on this experience to achieve greater support and impact.



**Building sector solidarity** - the challenges facing African CSOs are universal. COVID-19 created opportunities for CSOs to support each other and work together in response to local community needs and sometimes broader African priorities. CSOs that are working in specific communities, countries or thematic areas benefited from belonging to a community with shared aspirations and challenges. The lessons learned and experiences of CSOs in both Africa and beyond should be used to rebuild and strengthen the work of individual CSOs and the sector at large, and contribute to more collaborative approaches for sharing information and resources.



*African CSOs have relied largely on Western donors for funding. With the West experiencing the brunt of the pandemic and their economies struggling, African CSOs will feel the effect. Coming to terms with this reality, African CSOs need to find new continental, regional and national resource opportunities, including support from governments."*

- Quote from a survey respondent

## WAY FORWARD

It is still too early to comprehend the full impact of COVID-19 on African CSOs. The pandemic is still spreading, and its implications for the sector will continue to evolve. Ultimately, the impact will be long-lasting as COVID-19 has exacerbated historical and ongoing challenges that hamper the sector. If left unattended, a significant number of CSOs will close down, people working in the sector will lose their jobs, and the various constituencies that depend on CSOs' services and advocacy interventions will suffer the consequences.

Without losing sight of the long-term, the following actions are required to assist CSOs to manage and overcome the immediate impact of COVID-19:

### For funders

- Provide additional and unrestricted funding through your internal mechanisms, and work with others in creating pooled funding mechanisms for CSOs.
- Use your influence to advocate for the inclusion of CSOs in governments' national emergency funding mechanisms, similar to the support provided to the private sector.
- Support the digital transformation of CSOs through strategic investments in their technology infrastructure, from paying for laptops, connectivity and cloud services to staff training.
- Fund African CSOs directly. In the absence of international NGOs that frequently dominate disaster relief on the continent, direct more Africa-designated resources to local CSOs.

### For CSOs

- Organize and connect with other CSOs and stakeholders to advocate for inclusion in national government responses to COVID-19 and emergency funding mechanisms.
- Communicate with your funders about your funding situation and requirements.
- Maximize your online presence and crowdfunding platforms to create awareness about your work, solicit donations and recruit volunteers.
- Reflect on the future of your organization and start reimagining your organizational strategies for the post-COVID-19 period.

### For governments

- Support CSOs' operations and COVID-19 activities through national emergency funding mechanisms.
- Leverage CSOs' experience and expertise in planning, coordinating and implementing national responses to COVID-19.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

@AfricanNGOs and EPIC-Africa would like to thank all the African CSOs who participated in the survey. We would also like to acknowledge everyone who assisted us in creating awareness about the survey across the continent.

We are committed to sharing the survey findings with CSOs, funders and all other stakeholders interested in learning more about the impact of COVID-19 on African CSOs and supporting the work of the sector.

We will implement a follow-up survey in late 2020 to assess the evolving impact of COVID-19 on African CSOs.

If you have any questions or inquiries about the survey and report, please contact:

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## ABOUT @AFRICANNNGOS

@AfricanNGOs is a Twitter account that covers news and information for and about NGOs in Africa. It is moderated by David Barnard, a development consultant with more than 25 years' executive and senior management experience in initiating and leading development organizations and programs across Africa. His expertise covers fundraising, strategic communication, stakeholder management, advocacy, governance, ICT4D and philanthropy. David currently acts as a consultant to various NGOs and foundations, and serves on the Africa Policy Advisory Board of the ONE Campaign, and as a Play Your Part Ambassador for Brand South Africa.

## ABOUT EPIC-AFRICA

Co-founded by Adwoa Agyeman and Rose Maruru in 2015, EPIC-Africa is a Senegal-based, pan-African organization that seeks to strengthen the ecosystem for philanthropy in Africa. EPIC-Africa is developing new approaches to help build a robust and resilient civil society sector. The organization's creative use of data and technology offers African CSOs a unique platform to demonstrate transparency, reinforce legitimacy and build credibility. EPIC-Africa's services and tools create opportunities for CSOs and their funders to share knowledge, build capacity and scale impact.

For more information, please visit our website at:  
[www.epic-africa.org](http://www.epic-africa.org)

