

Community Mobilization and Activism During COVID-19

This is the 5th and final in a series of articles featured by United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Sri Lanka in the context of International Volunteer Day 2020.

COVID-19 was the first pandemic the world faced in a century. People responded with fear, anxiety and uncertainty during the first wave. Yet, there were also the acts of compassion, courage and care coming from the people. The country was in lockdown for more than two months from March to May 2020. The lockdown and intermittent curfew imposed created panic among people. It also led people to stock up their food and other essential items. However, many underprivileged communities faced a food crisis during the lockdown period though the Government allowed some vendors to sell food and other essential items door-to-door. The situation was worse as most of them were daily wagers. Lockdown kept them away from their livelihoods. The cash grant scheme the Government rolled out did help these communities to a certain extent temporarily.

The lockdown had adverse effects on women, children and people with disabilities. Prolonged lockdown exposed them to a greater risk of increased insecurity, sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence (GBV), decreased livelihood opportunities and economic liberties of females. For instance, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) has reported an increase in the proportion of child cruelty during the lockdown period.

Emergency Relief

Against this light, many Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) including community-based organisations and other volunteers promptly responded to the crisis assisting the individuals and families impacted adversely. CSO representatives based at the district level first assessed the needs coordinating with these care centres. They used local resources available in the district. These efforts received the State's attention as the Presidential Task Force requested the CSOs to assist and coordinate the relief work by the second week of the lockdown. CSOs mainly helped to coordinate the assistance provided to the care homes around the country. They worked with government officials to address the needs of identified vulnerable groups. Assistance provided for six main types of care homes; 1.

Government and Private children's homes 2. Government and Private elder's homes 3. Centres for people with special needs Rehabilitation centres 4. Safe houses for women 5. Rehabilitation centres 6. Probation centres. Assistance provided to these centres were two-fold; emergency relief and restoring service gaps such as facilitating doctors' visits, health and psychosocial wellbeing. The district representatives at several instances facilitated the transport and other logistics arrangement to ensure an effective service. Emergency relief was to provide – food rations and sanitary items. Thus, the assistance provided was wholesome.

By the end of June 2020, the CSO Collective had helped approximately 525 centres and 15,600 individuals, across all 25 Districts. The total amount spent on the initiative was nearly Rs. 50 million. The Collective also worked to bring due notice of the authorities about the identified concerns related to protection, psychosocial wellbeing, and mental health of the affected.

Advocacy

CSOs advocated for equitable distribution of the reliefs. They also worked towards addressing stigma and discrimination through social media campaigns., some voluntary groups assisted the authorities by identifying the worse affected groups. They involved the religious leaders addressing stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19.

Sri Lanka has experienced devastating crises before, but this pandemic left the country in a fragile state both in terms at an individual level and as a country. The pandemic only left Sri Lanka battling the effects of the economic downturn but is also left the country to combat social issues such as the increased violence against women and children. The situation fueled ethnic tension among the diverse faith communities. To overcome this situation, we should prepare to adapt to new lifestyles and use innovative approaches to achieve economic sustainability in the aftermath of COVID-19. We should understand the context and what it presents in the future and transform our response and acts towards the socio-economic functioning sustainably.

It is the final in a series of five articles:

1. [Bringing the talents and skills of youth in Sri Lanka to a greater stage](#)
2. [Volunteer action counts – a story from Sri Lanka](#)

3. [Social aspects of volunteering in the context of COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka](#)
 4. [Volunteer action counts: Reimagining volunteering in the Decade of Action](#)
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