

Adapting to the pandemic

**The impact of COVID-19 on Southern
partners of Dutch INGOs**

Lau Schulpen, Luuk van Kempen, Daniëlla van Uden & Willem Elbers

Nijmegen, September 2021
© Radboud University, CAOS

Radboud Universiteit



Content

Introduction	1
1. Southern partners in the sample: key characteristics	2
2. The impact of Covid-19	4
Projects, programmes and activities	5
Finances	9
Staff and organisation	11
3. Surprises and opportunities	13
4. Worries, relations and support	16
5. Covid-19 and other challenges	20

Introduction

In the period February-July 2021, Radboud University (Anthropology and Development Studies) conducted an independent and self-funded study of partner CSOs (civil society organisations) of Dutch donor INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations) to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has and is affecting their operations, staff and finances. Collaboration with Dutch INGOs was sought for access to partner CSOs as well as for ensuring that insights gained through the study would be fed into the INGO's internal policy process. The study consisted of two parts: a survey (conducted in English, French and Spanish) among a total of 323 partner CSOs of ten different Dutch INGOs with a response rate of over 42% (also see Table 1) and a round of online focus groups discussion (FGDs) with a selection of survey respondents from DR Congo (four participants), Uganda (six participants) and India (six participants). This report provides a descriptive analysis of the research findings.

Table 1. INGOs, Partners and respondents

	Partners	Respondents	
	#	#	%
Cordaid*	157	40	25.5%
Mensen met een Missie	91	48	52.7%
Liliane Fonds	21	17	81.0%
ICCO*	15	7	46.7%
Save the Children	14	8	57.1%
Action Against Hunger	8	5	62.5%
World Vision	7	5	71.4%
Hivos	5	2	40.0%
The Hunger Project	3	2	66.7%
Max Foundation	1	1	100.0%
CEGAA	1	1	100.0%
Total	323	136	42.1%

* Cordaid and ICCO have merged in January 2021 under the name Cordaid.

Naturally, this report would not have been possible without the help of all Southern partners who painstakingly filled out the questionnaire, the Dutch organisations who brought us into contact with their Southern partners, and the CSO representatives from the DR Congo, Uganda and India who set aside their valuable time to talk us through their experiences with, and the consequences of, the Covid-19 pandemic. Many thanks to all. Thanks are also due to the members of the reference group for this study: Alinda Bosch (*Cordaid*), Brenda Rozemuller (*World Vision Netherlands*), Eva Krah (*Mensen met een Missie*), Anna Boelens and Luca Genovese (*Save the Children Netherlands*), and Sofka Trajcevska (*Liliane Fonds*). A final word of thanks to ABN AMRO MeesPierson for their financial contribution which allows us to distil the implications for the partner policy of Dutch INGOs and to broadcast our findings to a wider audience.

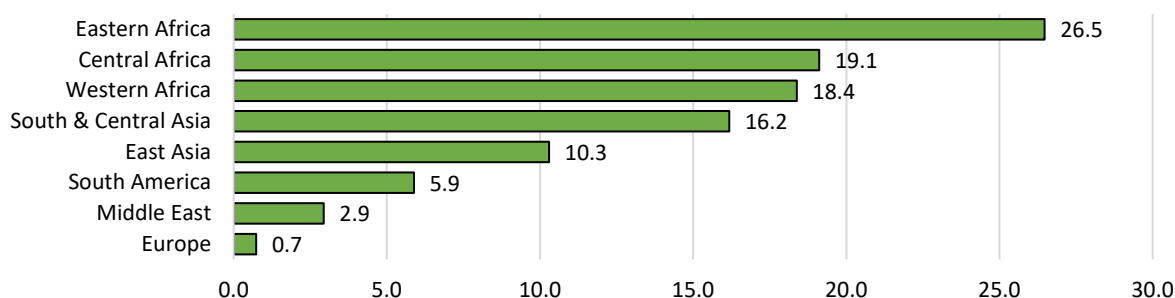
As always: all interpretations as well as any mistake in this report are the sole responsibility of the research team.

Nijmegen, September 2021

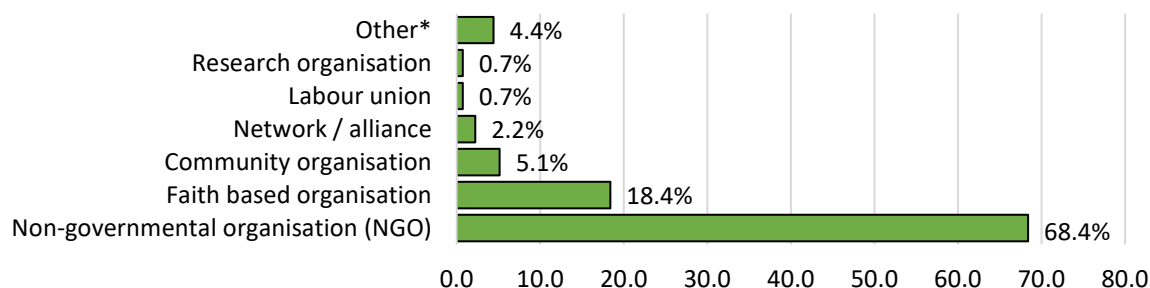
Lau Schulpen
Luuk van Kempen
Daniëlla van Uden
Willem Elbers

1. Southern partners in the sample: key characteristics

The survey included 136 respondents from 28 different countries across eight regions. Nearly two third resides in Africa and over one quarter in Asia.

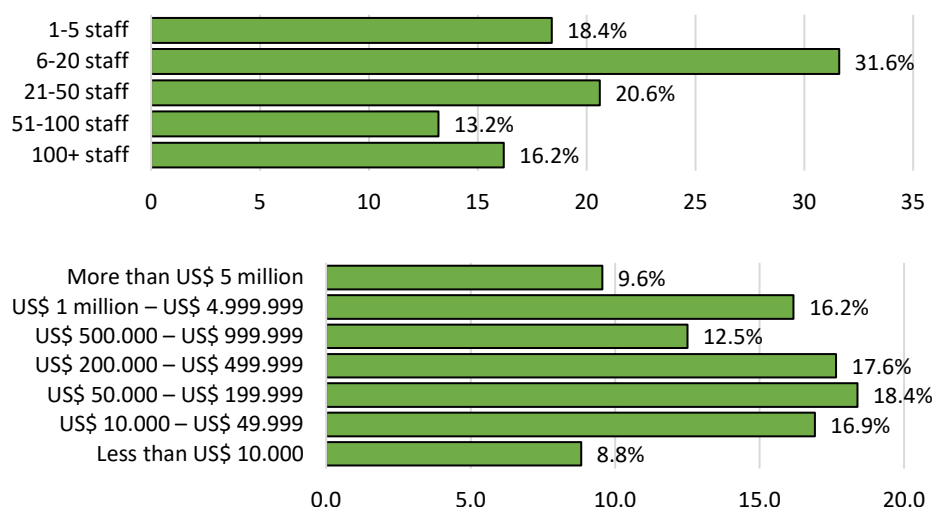


Nearly 7 out of 10 respondents describe their own organisations as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) with Faith based organisation (FBO) coming in second with 18%.

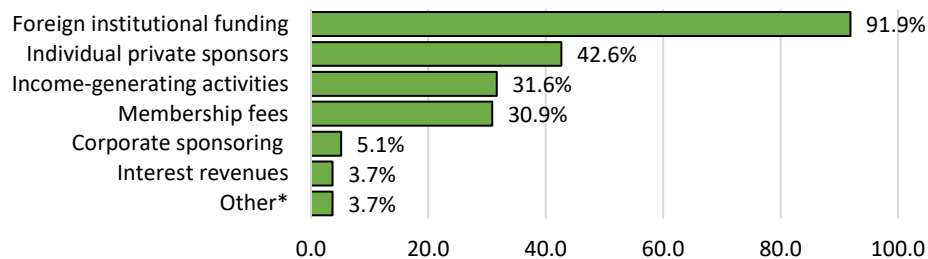


* Includes cooperatives, micro finance institution, credit union

Both in terms of pre-Covid-19 staff and budget, the majority of CSOs is relatively small (20 or fewer staff and less than US\$500.000) but also bigger organisations participated in the study. In the analysis below, we occasionally use a division of respondents in three income groups: (1) large (> US\$ 1 million); (2) medium (US\$ 200.000 – US\$ 1 million); and (3) small (< US\$ 200.000).

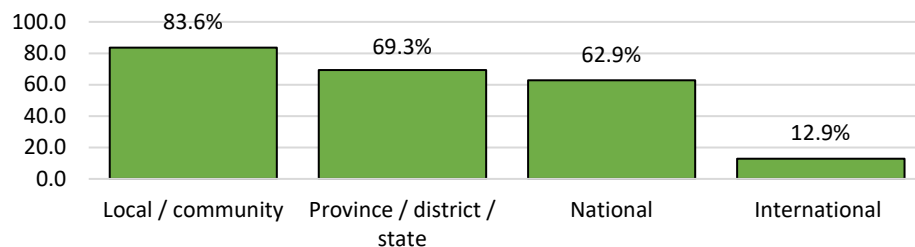


For the majority of CSOs foreign institutional funding (whether through INGOs, bilateral or multilateral) is in a regular (pre-Covid-19) year among the three most important sources of income. In fact, for only 11 CSOs this foreign funding is not one of these sources. The importance of foreign funding is also very clear from the fact that for 84% of the respondents (n=125) between 60% and 100% of their regular (pre-Covid-19) income comes from this source. Individual contributions from the general public and/or members are important as well, as are income-generating activities of the CSO and membership fees itself.

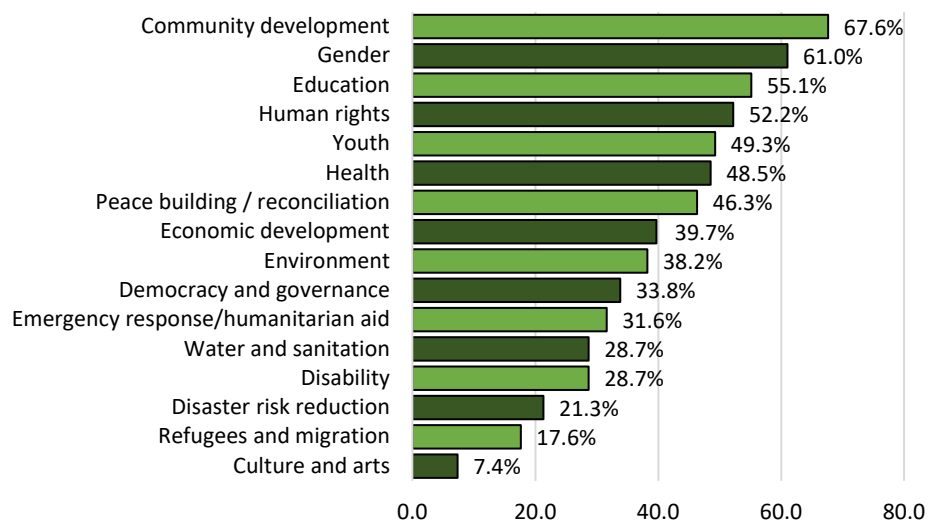


* Includes grants from (local) governments and loans

Although respondents work at local, provincial/district/state, national and international levels, the first three levels are by far the most important. Actually, only 12.5% works also at the international level. The majority (78%) works at multiple levels.



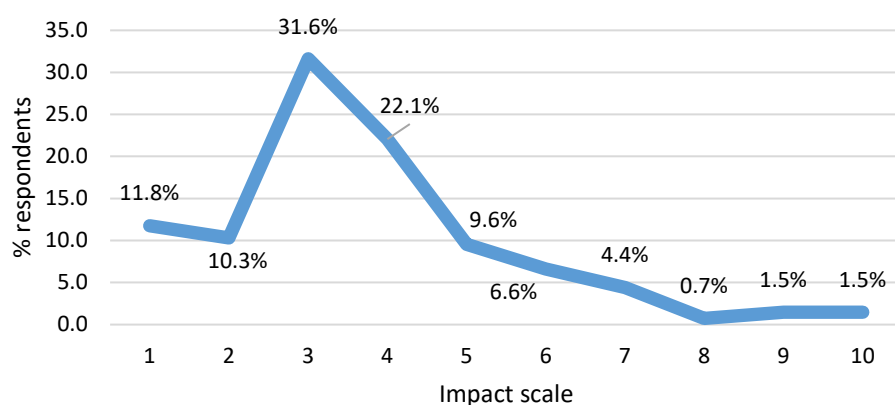
Just 10 respondents are active in only one sector. More than half combines at least six of the 17 sectors distinguished here. Most important are community development, gender and education.



2. The impact of Covid-19

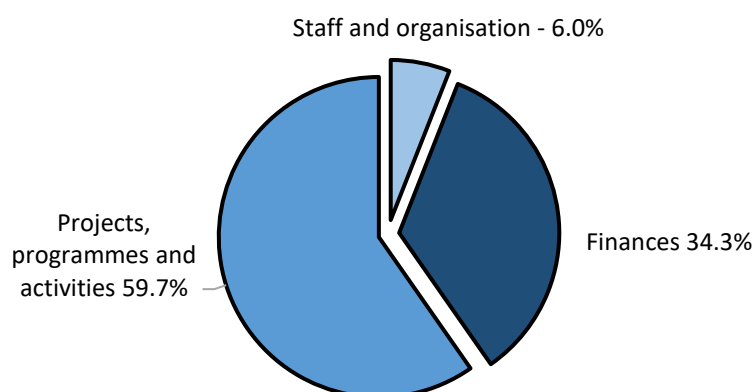
- Although this study focuses on the impact of Covid-19 on local CSOs themselves, these local CSOs are also keen to point out the consequences of the pandemic for their constituencies and target groups. And they do so particularly in the two areas of gender and poverty. As a CSO from the Philippines remarks: 'Since the insecurity affects the women's ability to undertake their normal economic activities they are unable to provide for their homes causing friction between the women and their husbands' while one from Bolivia talks about 'silent violence within families', another about an 'escalating gender-based violence occurrence' in the Philippines and a fourth from India about 'increased abuse of women and girls'. Another from Cameroon simply states that 'during the Covid-19 many of the poor people lost their work' whereas a Bolivian CSO adds that 'the pandemic has caused the level of poverty to grow to unexpected levels'. According to an Indian organisation 'the rural poor have been pushed further in their poverty [...] during this Covid-19 situation'.
- Interesting as well is the fact that several CSOs mention that it is sometimes difficult to convince the local population that Covid-19 is 'actually a disease' and not a 'Western ploy to destroy the world's population' as a Philippine CSO states or that behind the pandemic is a (not further explicated) 'hidden agenda of the government' as an Indian CSO told us during the FGD. A representative from an Indian CSO – while criticising the government for spending 'crores of money on testing, medications and vaccinations' but having failed to invest in basic health services and food – stated that the tribal groups they were working with felt that covid-19 is not a problem for them. Most consider themselves healthy and not in need of testing or vaccination. What is a problem, however, is the lockdown imposed by government - particularly because of its negative economic consequences. From the DRC comes the remark that the 'Covid-19 crisis has created several local rumours, and fuelled conspiracy theories' but also that 'unlike Ebola, people take less care and are sceptical about news from the media'. A participant to the FGD in the DRC added that in some places people do not want to wear masks, because they do not believe Covid-19 exists.
- While not wanting to do away with the above, the remainder of this report focuses on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the CSOs themselves. Figure 1 then provides a first glimpse by showing the overall impact on a ten-point scale where 1 reflects a very negative impact and 10 a very positive one. Quite clearly, the vast majority (85%, n=136) places itself on the negative side (1 through 5). The number of organisations drops abruptly thereafter leaving just a handful of CSOs for which the overall impact was positive to very positive.

Figure 1. Overall impact of Covid-19 from 1 (= very negative) to 10 (= very positive), in % (n=136)



- A basic distinction is made here between the impact of Covid-19 on (1) projects, programmes and activities; (2) staff and organisation; and (3) finances of the CSO. Asked which of these areas is the most important one affected by the pandemic, Figure 2 quite obviously shows the answer not to be staff and organisation. Just over one-third see finances as the most important area, while nearly six out of ten respondents feel that Covid-19 mainly impacts their organisation in terms of projects, programmes and activities. And it is with this area that we start our more in-depth investigation.

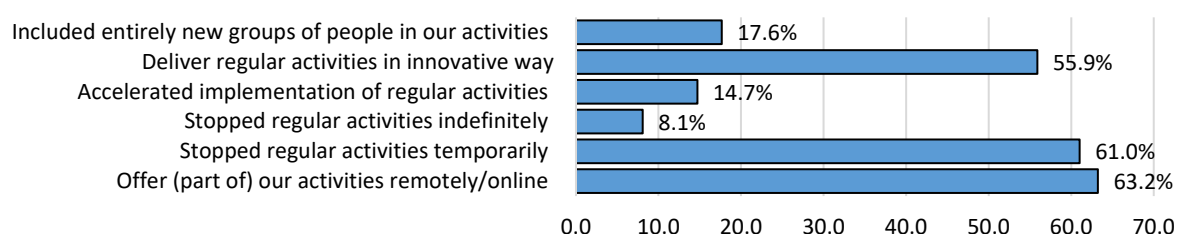
Figure 2. Most important area affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, in % (n=134)



Projects, programmes and activities

- Considering the importance attached to the impact of Covid-19 on their activities, it is no surprise that practically all CSOs indicate that changes have indeed occurred in their regular activities. In fact, only one organisation states not to have changed anything in their regular activities because of Covid-19. What has changed with all the others is quite diverse, however.
- The good news is that Covid-19 has forced only 8% of the organisations to shut down (part of) their activities *ad infinitum*. Figure 3 shows that many CSOs are finding ways to keep on delivering (part of) their regular activities; partly by stepping up implementation (15%) but mainly by either shifting to online implementation (63%) or by finding another innovative way of delivering them (56%). With many, however, such online or other alternative ways go hand in hand with a temporary stop to part of their regular activities. So, 65% of those that went online have also stopped part of their activities temporarily and 50% of those that found another innovative way of implementing their activities have done the same.

Figure 3. Changes in regular activities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in % (n=136)



- Diving deeper into the innovative ways CSOs manage to deliver (part of) their regular activities in times of Covid-19, two innovations stand out. Most important are new and other ways of communication with target groups or partners. For many (53.4%, N=73) this means the use of

Table 2. Adapted modes of delivery (n=77)

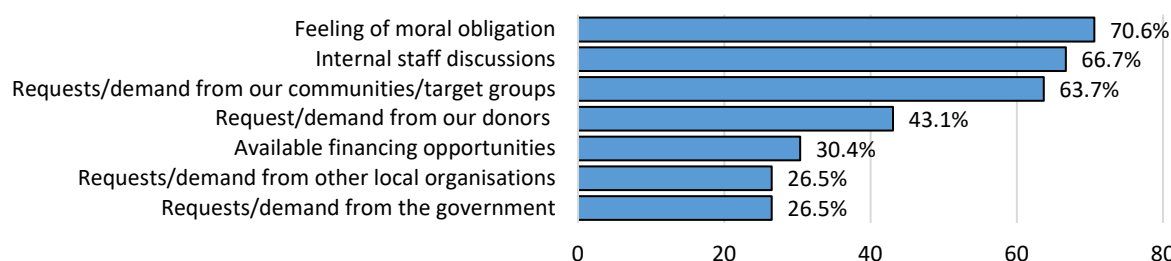
Category	Strategy	# org	Illustration
Maintaining (offline) face-to-face contact with beneficiaries	From indoor to open-air	2	'workshops with youth on violence and masculinity have been moved to open-air spaces'
	Split groups into smaller ones	18	'to reach 80 participants in an activity, we mobilise smaller groups of 10 participants who meet at different times and 4 times a day. So those are 40 participants in a day. The activity which was supposed to be for a day, is now done for 2 days. This is also rather time consuming, labour intensive and costly, but achieves the quantitative result.'
	Open up more points of contact	4	'community outreach clinics are now clustered at village level rather than sub county level to reduce on massive numbers in one place at a go.'
	From group-based to individual contact (door-to-door campaigns or centre-only attendance)	4	'instead of mass mobilisation we have opted for door-to-door sensitisation in the various healthcare areas covered by the project.'
Changing (faces in) chain of delivery	Appointment-based contact (assignment of slots)	2	'to avoid crowdies in front of hospitals we activated appointment system, and regular patients could seek health care services through scheduled visit to the health facility'
	Introducing new local intermediaries	5	'in a project to train farmer groups to be resilient to natural shocks, this was not possible since it would involve the farmer groups gathering in large numbers, so the innovation we introduced was to train a group called DRRC (Disaster Risk Reduction Committees) each of whom would then train a group of 10-15 participants in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) mechanisms.'
	Piggybacking on other intermediaries	3	'Existing local bodies of government have been included into the program. In other instances we work through already existing community organisations and faith based organisations.'
	Leapfrogging intermediaries by capacitating (caregivers of) beneficiaries	5	'We trained mothers and caregivers of children with malnutrition to take mid upper arm circumference (MUAC) measurements, which was initially a role of the nutrition staff'
Switching from face to voice	On-site public address (roadshows)	4	'community sensitisation drives using a public address system mounted on the top of a truck with short messages. These messages are played while the truck is moving slowly (no stops) such that no gatherings are attracted'
	Radio	10	'using community radio drama acted out live in the radio studios'
	Telephone	6	'we established a Toll free line to handle gender-based violence (GBV) cases for women and girls since GBV increased during the lockdown'
Switching from face to text	Personalised messaging/consultation (e.g. WhatsApp groups)	5	'Therapies to accompany women were organised in WhatsApp groups to share experiences'
	Generic messaging (mobile or social media)	4	'we also send hygiene messages through mobile devices to affected population in target location.'
	Generic messaging (in print)	4	'We integrated socialisation activities about human trafficking and the Covid-19 Protocol by distributing leaflets.'
Re-creating face-to-face contact online	Teleconferencing and live-streaming	25	'we set up Zoom meetings for online communication and performed music and drama virtually.'

online facilities but it also includes a switch to radio, leaflets, phones, or different art forms. So, 'agricultural, technical and specialist advice' is now given over 'the radio', 'plastic art (drawing) and humour and poetry' are used 'to communicate cheerfulness to communities', 'support to families and organisations that work on disabilities' is now provided via 'virtual or telephone support', 'hygiene messages' are now sent 'through mobile devices', and 'phone hotlines' have been opened to offer 'personal counselling services'. One FGD participant in the DRC explained they have set up WhatsApp groups and use Zoom, as the pandemic makes it difficult to travel. The WhatsApp groups meanwhile also help them 'to know the situation in the provinces, territories and health zones'.

- Many organisations typically engage in face-to-face group-based outreach work, opportunities for which were often severely constrained when lockdown measures were enacted. Table 2 captures the various ways in which CSOs adapted new 'modes of delivery' to make them Covid-19 proof. Apart from the observation that organisations often use multiple of these strategies in parallel, there are also examples of more integrated combinations. For example, within the category 'from face to voice', a large FBO in Uganda that mainly works in refugee settings combined two conventional voice technologies. Their usual group meetings were replaced by having their facilitators talk about training issues through local radio stations, reaching small groups of beneficiaries (no more than five) gathered around a single radio. Each of these groups is subsequently awarded airtime to phone in to the radio station if they have additional questions on the topic discussed on the airwaves. A smaller organisation in Uganda, which provides legal support for victims of gender-based violence (GBV), applied a true 'blended technology' combination. They recruited social media influencers to amplify awareness about GBV and in their social messaging they direct victims to either a toll-free telephone line connected to a Situational Room, or to a Social Web Application that offers on-the-spot legal advice. A medium-sized organisation in Tanzania presents an example in which the adaptation 'from face to text' is facilitated by shortening the chain of delivery. They reduced the number of field workers usually employed to assist disabled children, and instead retained a few who trained the children's parents on how to use mobile phones, particularly how they could upload observational reports and pictures, allowing the organisation to keep track of the beneficiaries. Similarly, a Nigerian FBO that normally goes out to identify malnourished children, has engaged local volunteers to take over this task, but also to educate caregivers on how to screen their children on symptoms of malnutrition themselves.
- A final 'innovation' mentioned by just a few organisations (9.6%) refers to networking and their collaboration with others. Practically in all these cases this increased cooperation is linked to specific – and for the CSO often new – activities directly related to Covid-19 (e.g. the distribution of masks and hygiene materials, health and hygiene (awareness) training of staff and target groups). The latter already indicates that for part of the CSOs innovation is linked not (only) to 'new ways of doing old things' but to 'doing new things'.
- In fact, three out of four CSOs state to have started new activities due to Covid-19. A kind of emergency activities around hygiene is, as mentioned, prominent here. As one organisation from the Philippines stated: 'Covid-19 has taken our attention more into emergency response for humanitarian purposes'. Many such examples are provided (e.g. health awareness, dry food distribution, hygiene kits provision). Occasionally, reference is made to related new interventions such as training to manufacture these hygiene products (e.g. masks, soap) by members of the target group itself (as part of livelihoods programs), the 'construction of water facilities', or the adoption of 'household direct support interventions' with the added value according to the concerned CSO of creating 'a closer relationship with our target stakeholders'.

- For some of the Indian CSOs taking up new activities went hand in hand with moving into new communities and coming into contact with new groups that were sometimes particularly hard hit by the pandemic (e.g. transgenders, lepers). Taking up such new activities then often went together with restricting their regular activities (e.g. schools). There are few indications that CSOs manage to integrate such new interventions with their regular interventions. A particularly clear example, however, is provided by a CSO active in the field of peace & reconciliation between different religious groups in India. They managed to truly integrate their Covid-19 relief activities (with which they reportedly reached 10,000 families over 2020) within their regular peace teams by inviting Hindu priests to distribute relief goods to Christians in a church, and Christian priests and imams to do the same in a mosque and Hindu temple, respectively.
- As Figure 4 shows, taking up new activities was principally motivated by a feeling of moral obligation, following internal staff discussions and/or upon request from the communities the CSOs serve. Requests from outside (donors, other local organisations or governments) and even available financing opportunities have played a role as well, but are substantially less important drivers.

Figure 4. Factors driving taking up new activities due to Covid-19, only (very) large extent, in % (n=102)



- To gauge the nature of the new activities launched during the pandemic, both in terms of sectoral focus and organisational roles required, the level of representation of each sector and role in these new activities is compared to their pre-pandemic share. Concerning sectors, four of these stand out as more prevalent among the new activities than usual: (1) emergency relief/humanitarian assistance, (2) health, (3) WASH, and (4) disaster risk reduction (DRR) (also see Table 3). Across these four sectors, there is substantial variation in the extent to which these activities are performed by organisations with/without prior experience in this particular sector. Whereas almost half of the new emergency relief activities are undertaken by organisations who would not be involved with humanitarian assistance under normal circumstances (labelled as 'newcomers' in Table 3), this only applies to a quarter of the new health initiatives (WASH and DRR take intermediate positions). Therefore, the strongest move out of organisations' comfort zone has been the one where emergency aid is picked up as a new activity, which applies to 18% of the organisations.
- Less change is discernible among roles performed during the pandemic. The only role that has clearly gained prominence during the pandemic is the one of service provider, which is plausibly linked to the surge in emergency relief activities. Only 8% of the organisations, however, have assumed service delivery as a completely new role, implying that the emergency relief was mostly taken up by (traditionally) 'non-emergency' service providers. The shift towards emergency relief has mostly happened in countries where the stringency of lockdowns was

medium or strict,¹ suggesting that the economic disruption caused by lockdowns prompted immediate hardship.

Table 3. Shifts in sectors/roles embodied in new activities during COVID-19

<i>Sector</i>	% in pre-Covid-19 activities	% in new activities (change in percentage points)	% of new activities performed by newcomers to sector/role	% of organisations entering sector/role during Covid-19
Emergency relief	5%	12% (+7%)	48% (24/50)	18% (24/136)
Health	8%	13% (+5%)	24% (13/54)	10% (13/136)
Water, Sanitation & Hygiene	4%	6% (+2%)	31% (8/26)	6% (8/136)
Disaster risk reduction	3%	4% (+1%)	39% (7/18)	5% (7/136)
<i>Role</i>				
Service delivery	19%	20% (+1%)	16% (11/68)	8% (11/136)

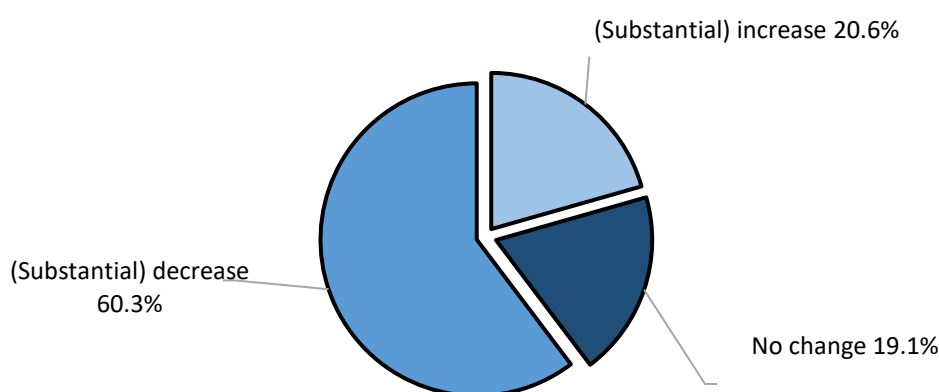
- A clear example of service delivery as a new role is provided by several of the Indian CSOs in the FGD. Taking up humanitarian or emergency activities (e.g. providing food and medicines) was not only a crucial change in their regular activities but for some also an entirely new endeavour. This was, for instance, the case with a human rights organisation with a strong focus on legal support which switched for a large part to 'welfare measures' in order to 'help suffering people' and a peace & reconciliation-focused CSO which did the same.

Finances

- The second most important area in which Covid-19 impacted the Southern partners of Dutch INGOs is in the field of finances. Over 2020, 60% of CSOs indicate to have suffered a (substantial) decrease in revenues due to the pandemic. In contrast, 21% experienced exactly the opposite and the remaining 19% saw no change in income (also see Figure 5). The probability of having experienced a decrease in revenues, either substantially or moderately, does not vary significantly across organisations with a small, medium, or large (pre-Covid-19) budget. It is notable, however, that organisations located in countries that applied strict lockdowns reported a significantly lower incidence of revenue loss, which ties in with the earlier finding that emergency relief was stepped up especially in these countries. Donors appear to have indeed assisted with additional funding for humanitarian assistance, as those organisations involved in 'new' emergency relief activities are significantly more likely to have witnessed a (moderate or substantial) increase in revenue.

¹ We calculate the stringency of a national lockdown over 2020 using daily indices published by the [Oxford COVID-19 government response tracker](#), which results in the following categorisation: a) *strict lockdown*; Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, India, Iraq, Kenya, Nepal, and Philippines (n=41); b) *medium lockdown*; Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Turkey, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (n=46); c) *light lockdown*; Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, DRC, Mali, Sierra Leone, Syria, and Tanzania (n=49).

Figure 5. Impact of Covid-19 on revenues over 2020, in % (n=136)



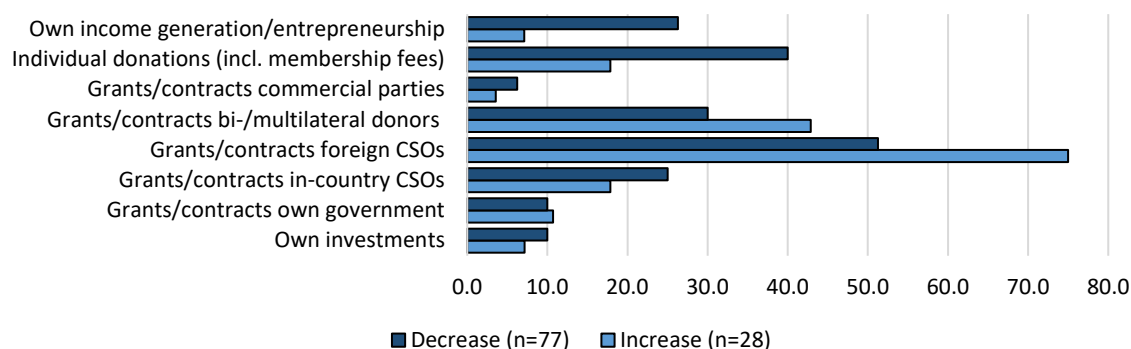
- Those CSOs that indicate an increase in revenues have on average experienced growth by nearly 20% compared to their pre-Covid-19 revenue base. The maximum increase recorded for an organisation is 80%. In contrast, the category of organisations losing revenue posted an average loss of 35%. One organisation saw its entire revenue base melt away during the pandemic.

Table 4. % change in revenue (compared to pre-pandemic revenue), by budget size and degree of foreign funding – median values per group (2020)

	Degree of foreign funding (pre-Covid-19)		
	<80%	≥80%	
Budget category (pre-Covid-19)			
Small	-25.0% (n=17)	-15.0% (n=32)	-20.0% (n=49)
Medium	-25.5% (n=18)	-2.5% (n=20)	-20.0% (n=38)
Large	-12.0% (n=13)	0.0% (n=22)	-10.0% (n=35)
	-20.0% (n=48)	-5.0% (n=74)	-13.5% (n=122)

- After ranking all CSOs from biggest loser to biggest winner (including those that reported no change in revenue), the median organisation posts a (moderate) loss of 13.5%. Applying the same procedure for subgroups, selected on size of pre-pandemic budget and degree of funding by international institutional donors, generates the results in Table 4. It can be observed that organisations that are funded for 80% or more by foreign donors consistently outperform those whose share of foreign funding is below 80%, regardless of the budget category to which they belong. Hence, strong donor-dependence is a factor that appears to cushion the financial fallout from the pandemic. The same holds for being an organisation with a large budget (>\$1mln), as the large ones outperform those with medium or small budgets, irrespective of whether their share of foreign funding exceeds 80% or not.
- Foreign CSOs (perhaps even their Dutch INGO partners) are brought forward as the most important source for an increase but also as the most important one in case of a decrease in revenues (also see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Revenue source(s) contributing to either an increase or decrease in revenues due to Covid-19, in %



- Notwithstanding a decrease in revenues for 6 out of 10 CSOs, almost the same percentage (59%, n=134) notes a(n) (substantial) increase in expenditure (while just over 30% saw their expenditure decrease and nearly 10% remained at the same level). Not surprisingly then, more than two thirds saw their financial reserves shrink.

Table 5. Risk factors for 'double whammy' (revenue fall + expenditure rise) and substantial deterioration of reserve position

		% facing 'double whammy'	% with substantial decrease in reserves
Small budget size (<US\$ 200K) (pre-Covid-19)	Yes (n=58)	37.9%	27.6%
	No (n=76)	26.3%	21.1%
Service delivery role (pre-Covid-19)	Yes (n=88)	35.2%	34.8%
	No (n=46)	23.9%	18.2%
Active in peacebuilding & reconciliation (pre-Covid-19)	Yes (n=63)	39.7%	25.4%
	No (n=71)	23.9%	22.5%

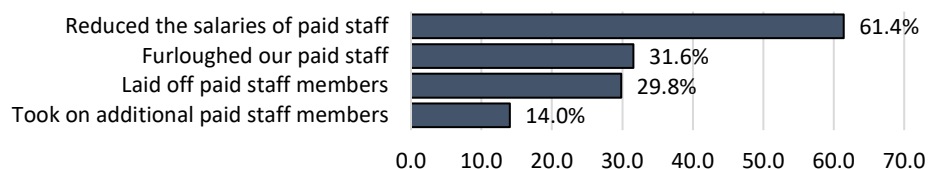
- 42 organisations (31%) experienced a 'double whammy' in the sense of witnessing a decline in revenue while at the same time being confronted with an increase in expenditure (note that only two organisations report the reverse; a rise in revenue coupled with falling expenditure). We identify three risk factors for being hit with such a 'double whammy' (see Table 5), which has obvious (negative) repercussions for the reserve position of the organisation. First, small CSOs (budget <US\$ 200.000) are significantly more likely to fall in this category compared to their medium and large counterparts. Second, those operating as service provider (often among other roles) were more exposed to this 'twin' financial risk. Finally, organisations working on peacebuilding & reconciliation have been relatively hard-hit.

Staff and organisation

- In contrast to finances and (certainly) projects, programmes and activities, the majority of CSOs in the survey (58%, n=136) have not changed in regard of paid staff due to Covid-19.
- Although the total number of CSOs that changed in this field is relatively low, the impact of these changes on individual staff members might be high. That is, for instance, because over 61% (n=57) of the CSOs have reduced the salary of (part of) their staff. At the same time, 32% have furloughed (part of) paid staff members and 30% have laid off paid staff. While one CSO

‘encouraged voluntary contributions from paid staff to survive the crisis’, another explained that ‘due to lack of funding staff have been asked to work on voluntary basis’ while adding that there is now ‘less work as our programmes have been temporarily stopped’. One Syrian CSO explicitly calls for attention to the consequences for staff by stating that ‘staff salaries were stopped/disallowed on the basis that activities were put on hold during the lockdown. This resulted in a lot of hardship on the staff and their families’. The fact that only eight organisations (14%) took on additional staff members is hardly a solace in this regard (also see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Changes in terms of paid staff, in % (n=57)



3. Surprises and opportunities

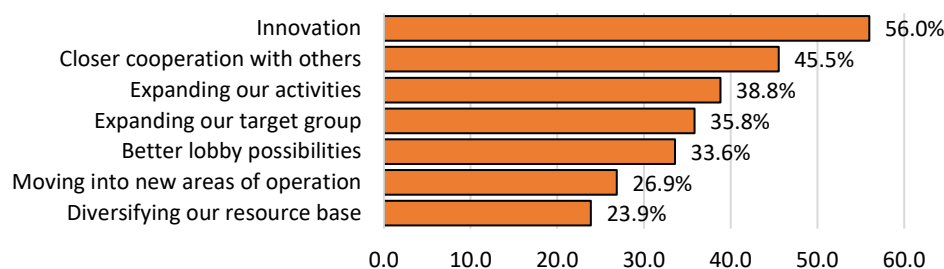
- Whereas two CSOs state that nothing has pleasantly surprised them about their organisation and work over the Covid-19 year 2020, seven out of ten of the others express their satisfaction with the way their own organisation and the staff have shown flexibility in dealing with the pandemic (also see Figure 8). More than half of the organisations also mentioned the understanding of their target group for adaptations in programmes and activities and the support received from foreign donors. This inherent praise for foreign donors is in sharp contrast with the support from the side of government; only 15% were pleasantly surprised about the role of authorities.

Figure 8. Pleasant surprises about own organisation and its work in times of the Covid-19 pandemic, in % (n=132)



- Without a doubt Covid-19 impacts people, countries and organisations more negatively than positively. Still, opportunities emerge from this pandemic as well. ‘Never waste a good crisis’ is then a catchphrase one hears frequently. But what are the opportunities that the CSOs identified? As Figure 9 shows, these opportunities are mainly observed in the field of innovation and, although to a substantial lesser extent, closer cooperation with other organisations. Few see opportunities in such fields as new areas of operation or broadening and diversifying their resource bases. A few CSOs add, although in relatively general terms, that the pandemic has been a learning exercise as well: in helping organisations ‘to be risk averse [and] think of a plan for any eventualities’; in emphasising the need to seek ‘a whole new direction that may be more realistic and need-based’; or in providing an opportunity ‘to learn, unlearn and relearn so as to be relevant in the fluid, dynamic changing environments’.

Figure 9. Opportunities offered by the Covid-19 pandemic (only large and very large extent), in % (n=134)

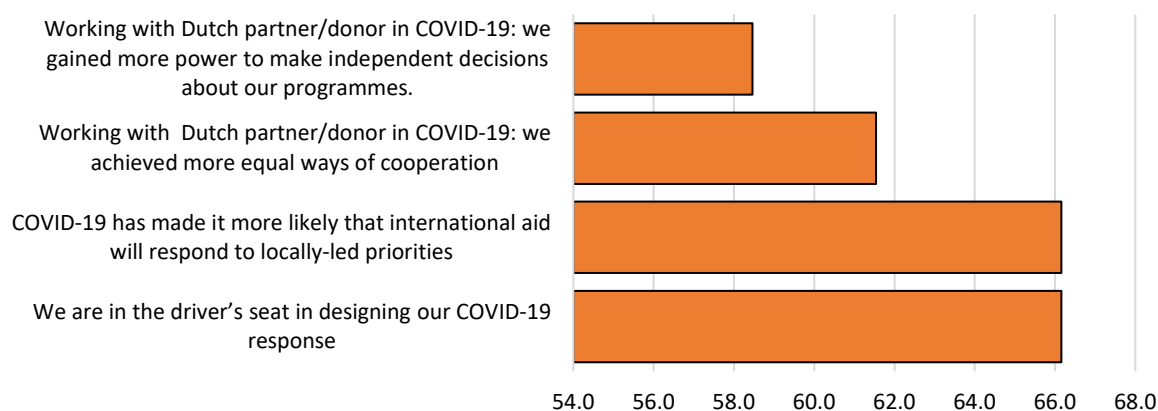


- Taking a closer look at the innovation opportunities CSOs have seen, a few stand out. Not surprisingly, the move to working online has been a major innovation for many organisations, as

is already clear from the 63% that now offer (part of) their activities online (also see Figure 3). Many (42.3%, n=97) thus agree with an organisation from Mali stating that ‘remote work is the main innovation we have made’. The advantages of such ‘remote work’ are diverse and include being able to ‘employ persons with disabilities’, reaching ‘places further away from our area’ or simply ‘more people’, allowing for ‘larger groups of people to discuss issues that matter to them’, or meaning, as a Bangladeshi CSO briefly summarised, ‘less travel expenses, smaller offices’. A Ugandan CSO explained that ‘we realised that certain activities can be easily done online or via the phone’ and that the advances in online communication ‘are there to stay, even if Covid would go away’. Another organisation pointed out that ‘We used to drive 400 km to hold a training. We will not return to that model’. Also CSOs in the DRC who switched to online activities expect to not totally abandon these new technologies after the pandemic, as it helps to communicate with people who are not easy to reach. At the same time, they are also aware that such technologies cannot replace all other means of implementing activities, as internet access is not universal.

- The move to ‘online’ has also created an opportunity to interact with other organisations (including ‘high level organisations like the WHO and others [where pre-Covid-19] face-to-face meetings were usually restrictive’). Some 10% of respondents specifically mention such interaction (in terms of coordination and partnerships) with other organisations (ranging from governments to other CSOs and from national to international) as (part of) their innovation. Such cooperation with others enables ‘building on synergies in the midst of decreased revenue streams’ as one CSO explained. Around 10% (also) specifically talks about using different ways of communication with their target groups apart from online. Radio, film, music, drama are then mentioned but so is establishing a call centre for direct support to constituencies or even the ‘use of megaphones’.
- One in five of the CSOs explaining the innovation they have seen concerns new activities or, more precisely, diversification of services. In most cases this refers to activities related directly to Covid-19, e.g. health education, awareness raising about the pandemic, setting up community-based surveillance of Covid-19 cases, and/or the distribution of masks, hand washing kits, and hydro alcoholic gels. Occasionally, this diversification goes one step further as in the case of an Ugandan CSO that ‘launched a national hotline to respond to cases of gender-based violence affecting girls and women with disabilities resulting from the Covid pandemic situation’.

Figure 10. Impact of Covid-19 on shift the power, in % (n=130)



- Finally, let us take a look at the extent to which CSOs feel that Covid-19 provides a positive contribution to the ‘shift-the-power’ discussion within the field of international cooperation. For

the majority of respondents this contribution is certainly seen and, what is more, it is seen as positive. Two thirds of the respondents (totally) agree to be in the driver's seat in designing their Covid-19 response and an equal part feels that the pandemic has made it more likely that international aid will respond to locally-led priorities (also see Figure 10).

- During focus group discussions with CSOs from Uganda and India, CSOs emphasised that donors have become more flexible due to Covid-19, which increased their autonomy and ownership. Yet they also emphasised that they don't expect a structural change in the (power) relation in the long-run as the transfer of funds remains the defining feature of the relationship. Several CSO-representatives identified financial independence as pre-condition to move from a donor-recipient relationship to a 'real' partnership.
- The same positive attitude can also be seen when zooming in on the relationship and interaction with their Dutch partners/donors. Six out of ten respondents (61.5%) feel that their cooperation with their Dutch partner/donor during Covid-19 has led to more equal ways of working together and just slightly fewer (58.5%) (totally) agree that in their Covid-19 cooperation they have gained more power to make independent decisions about the direction of their programmes. Although for many this greater equality and more power seem to be linked, that is certainly not always the case.

4. Worries, relations and support

- With Covid-19 impacting on different areas of the CSOs surveyed over 2020, it is logical that many also worry about the (near) future. As Figure 11 shows, the organisations worry the least about a possible decreased team spirit due to Covid-19 or for not being able to comply to demands from donors. And although the survival of their own organisation is not a main worry for the majority of CSOs, a further decrease in revenues certainly is. Combined with a possible exhaustion of financial reserves, it is first of all finances that keep CSO representatives awake. Directly following, however, are concerns in the field of activities and staff. New with nearly 47% is the fear that the Covid-19 pandemic might actually lead to a (further) shrinking of civic space in their respective countries. This fear is particularly present among those CSOs already working in a repressed civic space according to Civicus (see, for instance, <https://monitor.civicus.org/>). It should be noted here that civic space in all countries included in this study is troublesome and ranges from 'narrowed' to 'closed'. CSOs from Uganda (and also from India) stressed that the shrinking of civic space was a process which was already well underway before Covid-19 arrived. While Covid-19 did not trigger the shrinking of civic space, there is no doubt that it was (ab)used by certain government officials and politicians and as such contributed to a further deterioration of the operating space for CSOs.

Figure 11. Worries for the (near) future (only very and extremely worried), in % (n=133)

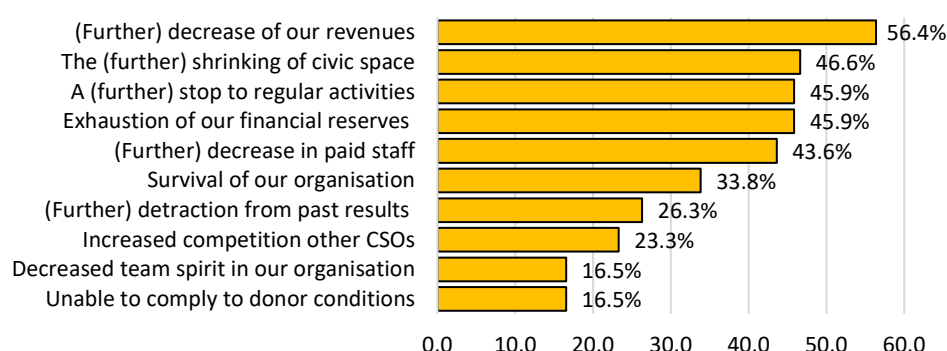
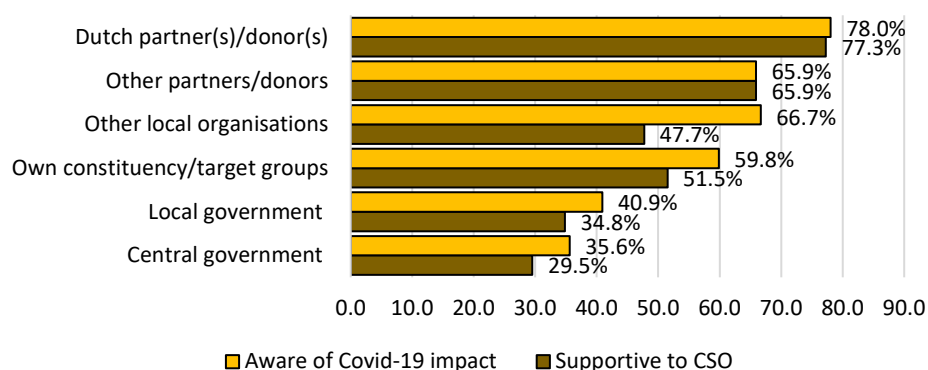


Figure 12. Awareness of stakeholders of impact Covid-19 on CSOs and extent to which CSOs feel supported by the same stakeholders (only moderately to extremely aware / supportive), in % (n=132)

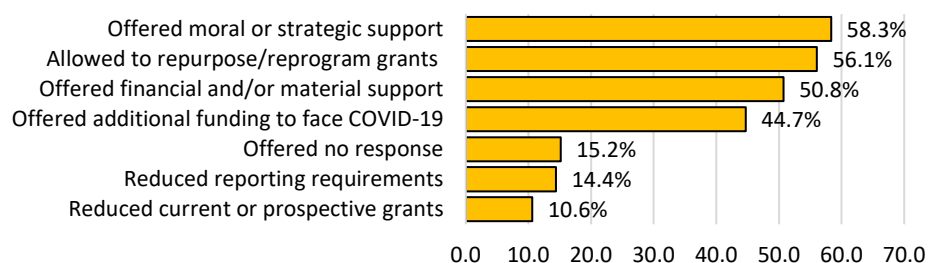


- In the previous section, it was noted that, certainly also in comparison to foreign donors, only few respondents were pleasantly surprised by the support received from the government. This is

not to say that (local) governments did not support CSOs, as evidenced, for instance, by the DR Congo's government facilitating a flight back home for workers of a CSO. Still, the relatively low number of survey respondents being pleasantly surprised seems to be directly linked to the extent to which specific stakeholders are aware of the way and extent to which Covid-19 has impacted upon CSOs and the extent to which CSOs feel supported by them. Figure 12 clearly shows that on both counts governments (and certainly central governments) score relatively low. All other stakeholders are seen as more aware and more supportive than governments and the fact that 25% of all CSOs feel that central government is 'not aware at all' and 36% that this central government is 'not supportive at all' is telling. The respective percentages regarding (foreign) partners/donors are as low as 1.5% and 3.0%. Still, even with these (foreign) partners/donors – and that includes the Dutch ones – such awareness and support is not absolute.

- Looking more closely at the Dutch partners, CSOs feel that they responded primarily by offering moral or strategic support (58%), by allowing for flexibility in repurposing or reprogramming current grants (56%) and by offering financial and/or material support (51%) also in the form of additional funding to face the Covid-19 crisis (45%) (see also Figure 13). Interestingly, whereas all the above could be regarded as 'positive responses' from the side of Dutch partners, it is worthwhile to also note that in some cases these responses were more negative. That is the case with 15% of the partners who feel that the Dutch partner did not respond at all and also with one in ten who experienced a reduction in the current or prospective grants from Dutch partners due to Covid-19. Still, a positive opinion prevails and that was also clear from the reaction in several of the FGDs. So we have Ugandan and Indian CSOs calling their Dutch partner 'a good donor who listens to our realities', 'really supportive in the process', and 'flexible'.

Figure 13. Responses of Dutch partners to the Covid-19 crises, in % (n=132)

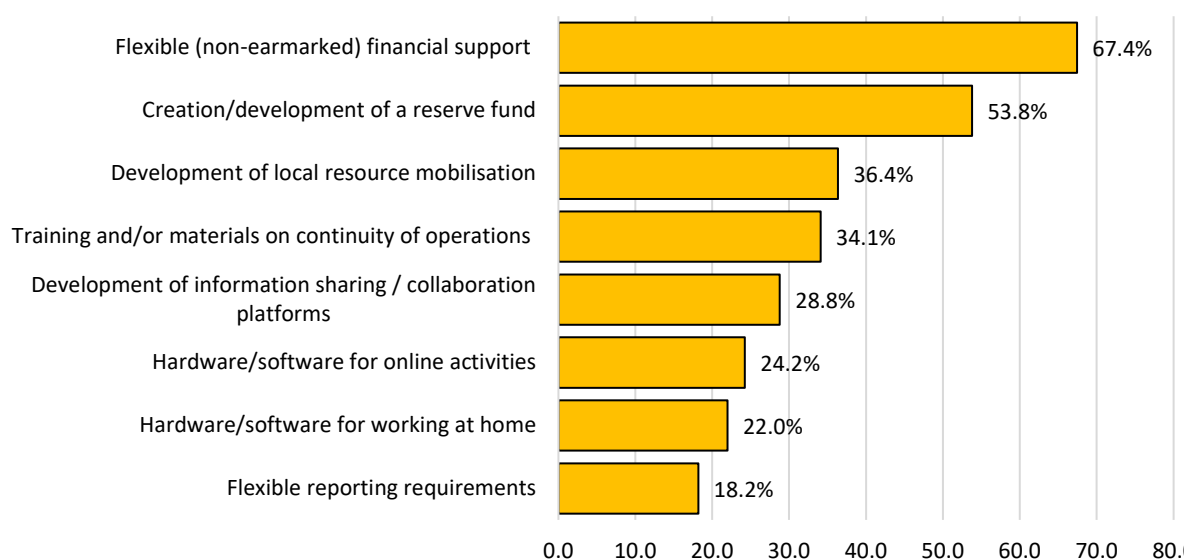


- The latter does not mean all is hunky-dory. CSOs from the DRC, for instance, called upon their Dutch partners to not only provide funding but also to pay more attention to the local context and not 'come with approaches copied from [elsewhere]'. Asked what their Dutch partner/donors could do (better) to support them specifically in dealing with the pandemic, the answer is very clear: 75.6% of the CSOs (n=123) principally want financial (sometimes combined with material) support from their Dutch partners/donors. Occasionally, this financial request relates to being (or remaining) flexible with existing funding or for simply continuing funding after the present project period ends but in most cases it is simply a call for additional funding. Additional funding then for all kinds of needs, whether or not related to Covid-19, of either the organisation itself or its target group. So, some call for support 'with hardware for remote work' or 'to improve online working conditions at home', while others want financial support to create awareness among their target group, to be able to distribute 'masks, hand sanitizers, leaflets about the Covid-19 protocol, vitamins and food', to 'add some welfare fund [...] along with [their] regular activities', to help in reaching a 'larger geographic area and more target population with

relief support', or to 'develop skills of people for livelihood, self-employment and entrepreneurs'.

- A special financial request mentioned by a handful of CSOs is one for setting up a reserve fund to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. An Indian CSO, for instance, stated that Covid-19 raised 'the question about [their] economic vulnerability' following which they not only propose to 'continue making grants available for the implementation of projects in communities' but also for 'a reserve fund to ensure the functioning and continuity of activities on an ongoing basis'.
- Financial in nature is also the call by around ten respondents (7.3%) for assistance in connecting them with other potential donors. 'Help in resource mobilisation abroad' as one CSO bluntly stated. Another – and perhaps in line with the shift-the-power discussion – called upon its Dutch partner/donor to 'work together in fundraising'. For a few CSOs, assistance in connecting them to other organisations (at home or abroad) is not motivated by financial needs but by the need to exchange ideas, experiences, information and knowledge – in short: the need to learn from others.
- Finally, and apart from financial support in different ways, just over one in five CSOs (22%) would like the Dutch partner/donor to provide technical support/training. While some generally call for technical assistance in order 'to cope with the new normal' or 'adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic', others are a bit more specific. Two specific areas in need of technical support stand out: (1) virtual/online working which relates to strengthening the 'digital competence of staff' but also includes such challenges as 'how to reach people without internet' and 'online fund raising'; and (2) strategizing in terms of e.g. setting up a business plan, an operational strategy, or in identifying 'the change of priority in our services'.

Figure 14. Kind of future support needed to deal with consequences of Covid-19 pandemic, in % (n=132)



- Unsurprisingly, the calls for support in the direction of their Dutch partner/donor are almost 1-on-1 reflected in the answers to the more general question what kind of support they need most in the coming months in order to deal with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for their organisation. As Figure 14 shows, the respondents are in need of many different things but first and foremost are financial resources. Not any kind of money, but money that might be used more flexibly and provides more security over time. Hence, CSOs call for support in the form of

non-earmarked funds, the establishment of a reserve fund and/or in developing a system for local resource mobilisation. Although certainly considered less important than financial means, support needs such as assistance in training, exchange, and for enabling the digitalisation of both office work and programme activities, are latent in a substantial share of the respondent group (varying from 22% to 34%, depending on the specific support area). Interestingly, reporting requirements from donors are much less of a concern to respondents: only 18% feel they need to be flexed.

5. Covid-19 and other challenges

- After a year of Covid-19, it almost seems as if the pandemic is all-encompassing and the source of all change, but this is at least questionable. Not only because the pandemic does not hit every country in equal ways (see, for instance, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>), but also because other challenges remain as well. The problems with e.g. political competition, civic space, nutrition, education, and youth unemployment might be worsened due to the pandemic (or vice versa) but these problems were most likely already there before Covid-19. Likewise, natural disasters remain as well as do changes in donor policies. As such, the pandemic is, as an organisation from Cameroon feels, 'now added' to the already existing crises.
- A logical question is therefore whether Covid-19 is, at present, the most important challenge that CSOs experience, compared to non-Covid-19 problems. How many would agree (although perhaps with problems of a different nature) with their South Sudanese sister-CSO who stated that 'in South Sudan, [the] economic crisis and hunger are more deadly [than the] Covid-19 pandemic'?

*Table 6. Non-Covid-19 challenges experienced by CSOs**

Challenges	Subgroups	# / %	Example
1	<i>Internal</i>	62 / 36.3%	
	Financial issues	29 / 46.8%	Lack of funding / limited finances
	Programmes & activities	18 / 29.0%	Need to give special attention to climate change
	Staff & volunteers	13 / 21.0%	Ensure payment of staff
	Other	2 / 3.2%	Resilience
2	<i>Relational</i>	36 / 21.0%	
	Donors	10 / 27.8%	Changes in funding priorities of donors, donor fatigue
	Target groups	10 / 27.8%	Dealing with demands / meeting people from remote areas
	Communication	8 / 22.2%	Networking
	Other partners	8 / 22.2%	Competition amongst development actors
3	<i>External</i>	73 / 42.7%	
	Political issues	18 / 24.6%	Civic space / political crisis / monitoring by security agencies
	Societal issues	17 / 23.3%	Increased polarisation / increased poverty / Internally Displaced Persons
	Conflict	14 / 19.2%	Armed conflict / war
	Natural disasters	13 / 17.8%	Floods / grasshoppers
	Economic issues	9 / 12.3%	High inflation / unemployment
	Other	3 / 4.1%	Destruction of infrastructure
<i>TOTAL</i>		171 / 100.0%	

* Respondents were allowed a total of four 'other challenges'. Of the 84 respondents stating that there were other challenges, 83 also mentioned at least one such other challenge. A total of 253 other challenges were mentioned (including 82 challenges which were assumed to be directly related to the Covid-19 pandemic e.g. travel restrictions, lock down, fear of vaccines, myths about Covid-19, restrictions of movement).

- To start with, we asked respondents whether they experienced any other challenges and forces outside of the Covid-19 pandemic that had an impact on their organisation, and 63% (n=133) responded affirmatively. A qualification is that quite a few of these challenges are in fact clearly linked to Covid-19. Even if we ignore these, still a large number of non-Covid-19 challenges

remain. Taking into account that the relationship between these other challenges and Covid-19 might be difficult to grasp (e.g. Covid-19 might strengthen specific challenges or vice versa), these other challenges can be categorised in three different groups: (1) internal challenges; (2) relational challenges; and (3) external challenges. Table 6 provides an overview of these groups by pointing out subgroups and specific examples for each of them.

Table 7. Non-Covid-19 challenges experienced by CSOs

	<i>CSOs mentioning a specific challenge category</i>		<i>Average impact*</i>
	<i>#</i>	<i>%</i>	
Internal challenges	37	46.3%	3.90
Relational challenges	28	35.0%	4.00
External challenges	38	47.5%	3.88
Total	80	100.0%	3.88

* Impact was measured using a five-point scale: 1 = substantially less impact; 2 = somewhat less impact; 3 = equal impact; somewhat more impact; and 5 = substantially more impact.

- The question then is whether these other challenges are considered to have less or more impact on the CSO (i.e. on changes in the fields of staff and organisation, finances, and projects, programmes and activities) in comparison to Covid-19. Overall, CSOs feel that all these other challenges have ‘somewhat more impact’ (also see Table 7). This does not nullify the impact of Covid-19 but it certainly nuances it. For part of the organisations Covid-19 – even in the midst of the pandemic – is not *the* but *a* challenge, or better: one of the challenges with which they have to deal. It emphasises the need (1) to contextualise the challenges Covid-19 poses to CSOs, (2) to understand the impact of Covid-19 in relation to other challenges and their interaction, and (3) for INGOs to think through how to tailor their support to partners facing different sets of challenges.