

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

# OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE FOR COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

As the unequal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues, there is a need to robustly support vulnerable communities and bolster 'community resilience.' A community resilience approach means to work in partnership with communities and strengthen their capacities to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, including its social and economic fallout.<sup>1-3</sup> However, this is not resilience which returns the status quo. This moment demands transformative change in which inequalities are tackled and socioeconomic conditions are improved. While a community resilience approach is relatively new to epidemic preparedness and response, it frames epidemic shocks more holistically and from the perspective of a whole system.<sup>4-6</sup>

While epidemic response often focuses on mitigating vulnerabilities, there is an opportunity to use a resilience framework to build existing capacities to manage health, social, psychosocial, and economic impacts of an epidemic. This makes a resilience approach more localised, adaptable, and sustainable in the long-term, which are key tenets of an epidemic response informed by social science.<sup>7-9</sup> This brief presents considerations for how health and humanitarian practitioners can support communities to respond to and recover from COVID-19 using a community resilience approach. This brief was developed for SSHAP by IDS (led by Megan Schmidt-Sane with Tabitha Hrynicky) with Anthrologica (Eva Niederberger) and is the responsibility of SSHAP.

## WHAT IS COMMUNITY RESILIENCE?

Community resilience is both a process and an outcome that emphasises local capacities which can be adapted (e.g., adaptive capacities) and used during a crisis to cope, to mitigate harm, and recover after one.<sup>6</sup> A community is defined here as a group of individuals sharing common characteristics.<sup>10</sup> A resilient community is one that builds on local strengths, or community's capacities, skills, and knowledge that can be used for recovery from crisis or shock.<sup>11</sup> Human and social capacities might include the following.

- **Local knowledge**, or experience to address specific needs and propose solutions or interventions. Past work has leveraged existing local knowledge on how to prevent and contain epidemics like Ebola for a more locally relevant epidemic response.<sup>12,13</sup>
- **Technical capacity in the community** (e.g., potable water distribution, vulnerable household identification, food security) which can be strengthened.
- **Community networks and relationships**, or the connectedness of a community is defined by linkages within a community based on social or kin relationships. They can improve community resilience by actively and meaningfully engaging networks during an emergency or shock. These networks have been used to coordinate a response, distribute supplies, and respond to emergency needs.<sup>14</sup>
- **Governance and leadership** are vital capacities that shape how communities handle crisis, how decisions are made, who receives support and resources, and whether a response is trusted.<sup>4</sup>

These capacities must be complemented by an enabling environment. National and regional governments, development, and humanitarian actors should provide targeted support, including resources like equipment or training.

Supporting community resilience involves building on local capacities and recognising and addressing local inequalities, power relations, and social tensions. It requires core principles of equity and fairness in access to resources so that existing vulnerabilities are not exacerbated during a time of crisis.<sup>15</sup> A 'transformative,' or social justice-oriented community resilience approach can build equity in the longer term, distribute resources equitably, and strengthen the capacities and resilience of a community's most vulnerable.<sup>16</sup>

## COVID-19 AND EXISTING COMMUNITY CAPACITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has quickly developed into one of the largest global disruptions of our lifetimes. It has not only impacted millions who have contracted the disease, but it has put massive pressure on health, social, and economic systems.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 added additional stress to already difficult circumstances for many communities. It has amplified how issues of governance, inequalities, social cohesion and inclusion matter. COVID-19 is not a short-term shock, but it has become a protracted crisis disproportionately affecting the world's most vulnerable.<sup>17</sup>

During the pandemic, communities have developed and managed diverse support networks to address and mitigate short- and long-term impact.<sup>18</sup> Community responses

contribute to improved access to basic services - often complementing or even substituting delays in government response. For example, in Argentina, a faith-based network supported local approaches to shield the elderly. In Kenya, a slum-dweller organisation collected information on COVID-19 in informal settlements, identified community level isolation areas and fed into governmental guidelines on isolation.<sup>9</sup> In India, women micro-entrepreneurs developed and distributed millions of face masks.<sup>19</sup>

These are all examples of community responses to COVID-19 that can be more systematically strengthened and supported in order to build community-level recovery and a community's ability to withstand future shocks. Building community resilience is not a substitute for government services or support which will be required to address inequalities in areas which are socioeconomically disadvantaged and lack community-based resources.<sup>19</sup>

## OPERATIONALISING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE FOR RESPONSE AND RECOVERY FROM COVID-19

We present specific suggestions for health and humanitarian practitioners who might consider a community resilience approach to support COVID-19 response and recovery. It is vital to think of communities as partners in an epidemic response and consider both their health and livelihood needs. In the longer-term, practitioners can build up community capacities that link into and address social determinants of health. Some of the **main themes** from research and practice in community resilience with lessons for COVID-19 response and recovery include to:

- 1. Integrate communities' local knowledge on how to prevent and contain infectious diseases.** As evidenced in past Ebola outbreaks, using communities as local partners in an epidemic response can lead to more acceptable public health measures.<sup>4,5,13</sup> Public health practitioners can work with communities to leverage their existing knowledge and integrate it into an epidemic response.
- 2. Support community-led actions for recovery.** Public health has a critical role in creating an enabling environment and supporting a community-led process.<sup>20</sup> This means community-led action in the mid- to long-term, underpinned by mechanisms which foster trust and enable the participation of those involved in local governance and leadership. It also means an inclusive approach to local planning and decision-making around shared resources – supported by partnership arrangements with community networks and flexible funding mechanisms and community grants for needs-based support.<sup>16,20</sup>

3. **Strengthen adaptive capacities.** Communities can quickly adapt to a 'new normal' during times of crisis. However, we should support the well-being of a community. Social capital, new skills and training as well as access to financial capital and livelihood options are all features of adaptive capacity.
4. **Build back more equitably through a 'transformative approach,' rather than just returning to normal.** With a focus on particularly vulnerable and marginalised population groups, support could range from immediate cash and food assistance to developing sustainable livelihood options and improving social protection mechanisms.<sup>22</sup>
5. **Address inequalities, which will help to build social cohesion and is critical for reaching the most vulnerable.** While COVID-19 triggered a variety of locally-led actions helping communities to absorb immediate shocks, more recent research found lower levels of social cohesion as the pandemic evolved.<sup>21</sup>
6. **Use a systems approach,** which will require building the resilience of market systems and health systems. Programming should acknowledge resilience at multiple, interconnected levels of society. By taking a systems approach, it is possible to create an enabling environment that supports resilience at the community level.
7. **Acknowledge that communities are dynamic and complex.** It will help to understand local realities, power dynamics and how communities perceive risks – and plan for support in response to diverse needs and realities. Community-based networks can provide valuable insights into the local context and are often trusted advisors. Customary leadership can also be supported to provide an enabling environment for building resilience. Approaches could involve rapid assessments of vulnerabilities and capacities as well as more granular social science research using participatory methods.<sup>23,24</sup>
8. **Recognise the unique needs of urban areas.** Community resilience research is generally lacking in urban areas. These recommendations include pursuing resilient urban development and design and integrating multisectoral response.<sup>25</sup>
9. **Fund community organisations using a flexible funding model** to provide support to organisations already engaged in recovery efforts, address the immediate and long-term needs of a community, and align with community priorities.<sup>26,27</sup>

## OTHER RESOURCES

- Mercy Corps, Strategic resilience assessment (STRESS):  
<https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/strategic-resilience-assessment>
- Care International, More Equal – More Resilient:  
<https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/more-equal-more-resilient-why-care-international-is-making-gender-equality-and-women-s-empowerment-a-priority-for-community-based-adaptation>
- The Oxfam Framework and Guidance for Resilient Development:  
<https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/604990/ml-resilience-framework-guide-120416-en.pdf?sequence=1%C2%A0>
- United Nations. 'Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030':  
<https://www.undrr.org/publication/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030>

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