

# COVID-19 RESPONSES FOR EQUITY (CORE) KEY ISSUES GUIDE



Migrant workers queue to get to a train departing to their home towns after it became clear that the local government was considering a complete lockdown due to the high surge in Covid-19 cases in Mumbai, India.

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## Informality and marginalised groups in crisis response

### Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic had ripple effects that extend beyond the domain of health risks into economic, social, and political domains. These effects were not evenly distributed and exacerbated existing societal inequalities and marginalisation (UNDRR and UNU-EHS 2022: 11). Informal and migrant workers, and those living in informal settlements, were disproportionately affected by the health and secondary impacts of the pandemic, which further impacted their livelihoods and ability to meet basic needs, and constrained their ability to recover given the coping mechanisms they had to adopt (Chen *et al.* 2022: 19). At the same time, successful disaster risk reduction (DRR) often depends on informal actors and networks (Boersma *et al.* 2019). Limitations of formal disaster governance mechanisms have been much discussed, with shortcomings being largely connected to the lack of (local) knowledge, contextual understanding, incentives, coordination mechanisms, or flexibility, as well as focusing on infrastructural and technocratic solutions over engaging with existing local

resources (Duda, Kelman and Glick 2020: 375). Despite this, short-term, single-hazard disaster management approaches still dominate (Donoghoe *et al.* 2022).

Research supported by the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) Programme – which is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) – points to the need for special provisions addressing current and future challenges of informal workers in disaster response (Pillai *et al.* 2022b). This requires not only including informal workers in Covid-19 recovery policies, but also centring them in economic, social, and disaster policy (Alfers *et al.* 2022). Certain actions need to be prioritised, including the need for better data, a rethinking of policies to ensure they encompass gender considerations and social protection measures that are inclusive of informal and migrant workers, and greater recognition of the important role that grass-roots organisations play in supporting marginalised groups in times of crisis.

## Key issues

### Pre-existing vulnerabilities of informal workers and marginalised groups

The pandemic can be understood as a triple crisis: a public health crisis; an economic crisis, and a care crisis (Ogando, Rogan and Moussié 2021: 2). Impacts were particularly severe for many informal workers who earn day-to-day to meet basic needs and were already living in poverty (Roever and Rogan 2020). Given their insecure jobs, low incomes and (typically) migrant status, informal workers often live in informal settlements, with little access to sanitation and hygiene, further adding to their vulnerability. For example, in India, more than two-thirds of the urban female workforce are under the category of informal workers (Nanda *et al.* 2021: 6). Informal workers across the world have been shouldering the burden of economic vulnerability and health crises for a long time. In particular, women informal workers have largely been excluded from social protection schemes, e.g. in India and Kenya (Pillai *et al.* 2022a).

### Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on informal workers

A study of 11 cities conducted by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) found that informal workers were severely impacted by the economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, as the informal workforce could not work remotely (Chen *et al.* 2022: 19). Amongst marginalised groups (including informal and migrant workers), the pandemic enhanced the risks for economic precarity, the risks of harassment and gender-based violence (GBV), and aggravated the lack of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for women (Alfers *et al.* 2022; Banerjee *et al.* 2022; Pillai *et al.* 2022a; Roever and Rogan 2020). For example, research in Tunisia found that labour-dependent and low-income households were hit the hardest by the pandemic and resulting lockdowns, suffering income shocks or loss (Jannet 2021). Earnings of home-based, informal workers across the world were hit particularly hard in the pandemic and its recovery. Specifically, women informal workers were disproportionately impacted due to care burdens (Alfers *et al.* 2022). Evidence gathered from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) as part of the CORE-supported REBUILD project in Uganda, Kenya and India supports this finding, explaining that women were 'first to lose [out] and last to return [to work]'. This trend matches those observed during other pandemics in the past such as Zika and Ebola (Nanda *et al.* 2021: 20). The significant effects of lost income, food insecurity, increased household chores, social isolation,



Construction workers, a sector which is largely made up of migrant workers, have their temperatures checked and wash their hands as they arrive back at their dormitories after a day's work in Bangkok, Thailand.

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and reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services and GBV services during the pandemic have compounded and reinforced existing gender inequalities (Suubi *et al.* 2022: 33). Covid-19-induced lockdowns increased incidences of GBV, precipitating the 'shadow pandemic' (Pillai *et al.* 2022e).

The findings from the WIEGO-led study have demonstrated that recovery of many informal workers has been slow and that many are still in a highly precarious position due to the losses in earnings and livelihoods and the impacts of multiple crises in quick succession (the pandemic, cost of living crisis, food price increases) (Alfers *et al.* 2022: 40). Furthermore, the impacts of the pandemic on informal workers and marginalised people were not even. For example, across the 11 cities studied by WIEGO, about 40 per cent of domestic workers, street vendors and waste pickers were still earning less than 75 per cent of their pre-pandemic earnings in mid-2021, whereas subcontracted home-based workers from Ahmedabad, Bangkok, New Delhi, and Tiruppur reported the near-total loss of their livelihoods and earnings (Alfers *et al.* 2022: 40).

### Social protection did not reach informal workers

Informal workers often fall into the 'missing middle' of existing social protection systems. In many countries, they earn above the threshold for targeted poverty relief but too little to participate in contributory social protection and insurance programmes (Alfers *et al.* 2022: 41). Hence, many social protection systems do not adequately include informal workers during emergency situations. For example, although the Ugandan National Social Protection Policy (NSPP) states that all Ugandan citizens are entitled to social protection, it lacks a clear framework demonstrating how

to provide social protection measures and benefits to the informal sector (Wandera *et al.* 2021). WIEGO found that relief measures were more likely to reach those already covered by some form of social assistance (such as families with children) than to reach the previously uncovered, although there is some uncertainty in this finding (Alfers, Ismail and Valdivia 2020: 3). The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) observed that the inadequacies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's social protection systems to support the most vulnerable was driven by an environment in which broader politico-economic and governance factors are driving Arab states away from assuming responsibility for nationwide social assistance (Al Shami 2023).

One of the biggest challenges in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic and the scaling-up of social protection measures in many countries was the lack of robust, disaggregated data on marginalised groups and informal workers, especially internal migration (Pillai *et al.* 2022a). Most of these migrant workers in countries such as India were unregistered and therefore invisible on government databases (Pillai *et al.* 2022d). Migrant returnees in Central America's Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) were also invisible in government social support records in part due to a lack of identity documents, as shown in research by the Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES). In addition, many returnees to these countries reported community rejection levelled at them and their families, demonstrating the stigma that migrants can face (García *et al.* 2022). In the MENA region, data poverty in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon (whose census data is more than 25 years old) leaves informal workers entirely dependent on community-based support. Research by ARI speculates that there are deep knowledge inequities under these circumstances as a result of pseudo-sampling by foreign organisations, and policy analysis that is subject to bias and a poor understanding of informality (Al Shami 2023).

## The role of grass-roots organisations and mutual aid in response efforts

There is growing recognition of the importance of community-led approaches as a vital component of crisis response (Few *et al.* 2020: 11). This reflects not only the potential that grass-roots level interventions have in risk management but also that in reality it is communities themselves (not aid agencies) who must do the most to cope with the impacts of disasters. CORE research has highlighted how grass-roots and civil society organisations (CSO) were key throughout the pandemic in extending government services in many countries to hard-to-reach communities, including informal settlements. For example, in Uganda, non-governmental actors provided considerable support to marginalised groups, including distributing food and other items to families most affected by the pandemic (Afifu *et al.* 2021: 33). Membership-based organisations of informal workers provided mutual aid and are well-placed to meet needs due to their reputation for being trusted advocates, providing a critical interface between communities of informal workers and authorities (Braham and Ogando 2021: 7).

Collaboration between national governments and other actors was shown to be key in the pandemic response. Evidence from Colabora.Lat suggests that governments that pursued collaboration were more effective in containing mortality rates at the beginning of the pandemic, particularly when national governments collaborated with social organisations on detection and vaccine distribution (Cyr *et al.* 2021). Their evidence suggests that collaboration allowed actors to cooperate rather than compete for resources. It also helped the government buy time to prepare for potential contagion waves and enabled actors to produce a unified message as to what citizens should do to prevent the spread of the virus. Research by WIEGO demonstrates that grass-roots organisations in their 11 study cities played an important role in providing access to relief for informal workers in the early stages of the pandemic (Alfers *et al.* 2020). These organisations were able to build on long-standing relationships with the state to facilitate access to relief for informal and marginalised people, providing so-called 'last mile' services (*ibid.*). For example, in Bangkok and Tiruppur, HomeNet Thailand and the Anuhatham Union played key roles. Mutual aid and CSOs have also proven to be vital resources in providing public services where none existed during the pandemic (Pillai *et al.* 2022a). CORE-supported research in Tunisia, for example, highlights how unity, solidarity, and mutual aid were critical for families and communities during the pandemic, where government support measures were insufficient (Jannet 2021: 9).

A man hauling water sits on a sidewalk to undo a knot in his rope near Escuintla City's market, Guatemala.

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## Emerging lessons

### Identify cascading effects and trade-offs of interventions

During the Covid-19 pandemic, several interventions (e.g. lockdowns, school closures, travel restrictions) have shown high potential for cascading effects. In all cases, such restricting measures had repercussions and exposed underlying vulnerabilities. Specifically, informal livelihoods often meant that those most in need of assistance, for instance through social protection, were invisible to the existing mechanisms, resulting in further exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities, as demonstrated by research across multiple countries (Alfers *et al.* 2022; García *et al.* 2022). Interventions can be more effective when thoroughly analysed against the interconnected vulnerabilities of the system, so as to anticipate possible cascading effects (UNDRR and UNU-EHS 2022: 78).

### Carefully consider patterns of exclusion and inclusion in disaster relief

Vulnerable informal sector workers, especially migrants, were likely to remain excluded from schemes that emerged in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which typically adopted models that were more likely to cater to salaried and formal workers (Pillai *et al.* 2022d). For example, a review undertaken in Kenya by ICRW in 2021 found that informal workers, particularly women, were rendered 'invisible' in terms of Covid-19-related fiscal and macroeconomic policies (Ajema *et al.* 2021). Such exclusionary measures continue to impede the economic recovery of the informal women workers. Hence, schemes need to be extended to informal and migrant workers who are commonly excluded by both poverty- and employment-based protections (Roever and Rogan 2020). This includes filling pre-existing gaps in the coverage and improving the portability of social protection schemes to avoid excluding large numbers of the most vulnerable during times of crisis (Pillai *et al.* 2022c). Migrant-specific difficulties – such as their registration outside of the city and their limited social and institutional networks – should be included in the design of relief measures (Ismail and Valdivia 2021).

### Identify, support, and legitimise the role of grass-roots organisations in public crisis response

Research supported by CORE illustrates the importance of localised responses and the need to coordinate the efforts of informal community groups, CSOs, local governments, and national governments (García *et al.* 2022). For example, community-managed kitchens in Peru (*ollas comunes* (OC)), often led by women, arose in the poorest areas of the country that had insecure access to basic services, as spontaneous citizen initiatives in reaction to the pandemic response. As shown by research by the Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE), these OCs played a central role in the survival of the most vulnerable in cities during the pandemic, and in places have even replaced social food programmes (Alcázar and Fort 2022). In Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras, Uruguay, and Venezuela,

Covid-19 infection rates were significantly lower on average when social organisations collaborated with national governments on detection, compared to other Latin American countries where there was no collaboration (Cyr *et al.* 2021). Another example comes from the Dhaka slums where rates of Covid-19 were much lower than expected. This was linked to widespread community-led initiatives in key areas such as sanitation, in the absence of state and non-state actors in the early stages of the pandemic, that were later supported by government efforts. This study points to not only the inequity inherent in a crisis situation but also 'the relevance of governance from below through informality and community participation' (Collyer *et al.* 2021: 2). Integrating these insights and an understanding of informality can help to design more grounded and contextualised crisis response (*ibid.*).

It is hence critical that the roles that CSOs and grass-roots organisations can play in responding to a public crisis are recognised and factored into disaster response and recovery plans (Banerjee *et al.* 2022: 26). These organisations are often most able to reach informal workers through long-term engagement and trust (Braham and Ogando 2021: 1). At the same time, it needs to be ensured that the government does not nullify its responsibility for last mile delivery (Pillai *et al.* 2022a).

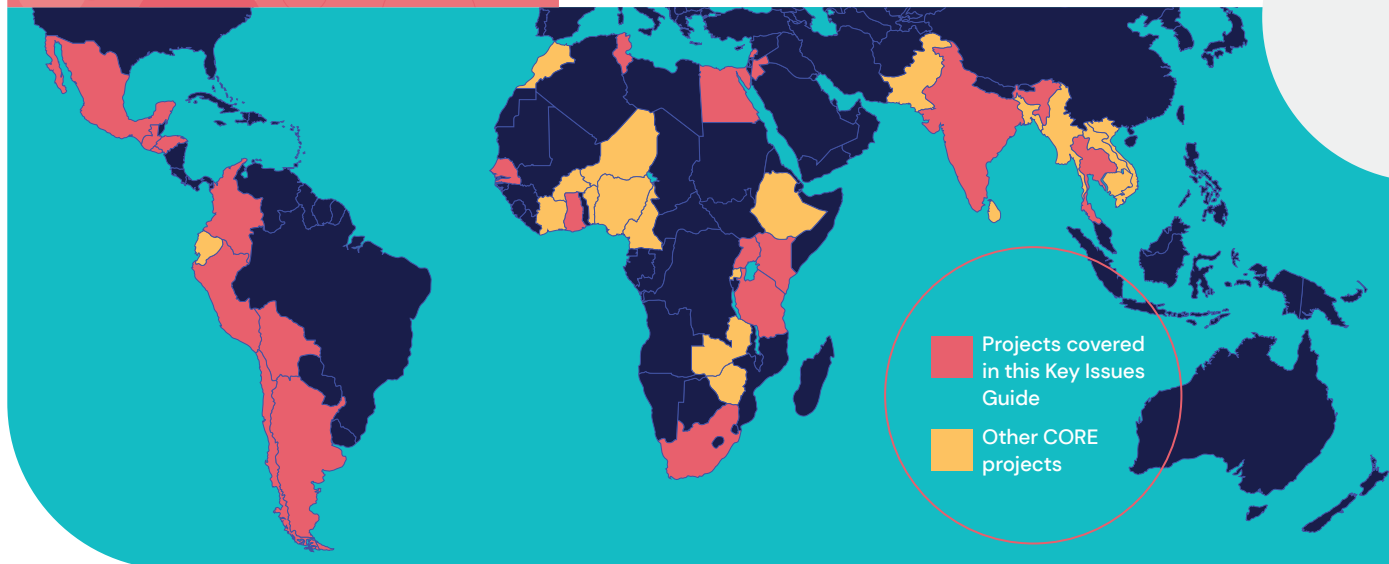
### Improve data availability, especially gender-disaggregation

For effective future responses to disasters and crises, there is a need for robust and gender-disaggregated data on a number of marginalised groups (including migrant workers), to ensure that relief reaches those most in need. For example, in June 2021, the Indian Supreme Court directed all states to expedite registrations of unorganised workers on a National Database for the Unorganized Workers (NDUW), to ensure migrant workers have access to different welfare schemes of the central and state governments (Pillai *et al.* 2022d). Robust and usable data is also needed to better understand the reach and impact of government schemes, and the markers of exclusion (Pillai *et al.* 2022a).



A street vendor in Barros Arana, Concepción, Chile.  
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## Highlighted projects



### **Informal Workers and Covid-19: Evidence-Based Responses to the Crisis at the Base of the Economic Pyramid**

This project focused on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns on the livelihoods and health of poor workers, especially women, in the informal economy. It used a mixed-methods longitudinal study that includes a large-scale survey of informal workers spanned over ten cities across eight countries, with a focus on four groups of informal workers that predominantly employ women: domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, and waste pickers.

#### **COUNTRIES**

• Ghana • India • Mexico • Peru • Senegal • South Africa • Tanzania • Thailand

#### **RESEARCH PARTNERS**

• [Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing \(WIEGO\)](#)

### **REBUILD: Covid-19 and Women in the Informal Economy in Kenya, Uganda, and India**

This project focused on urban informal economic activities across three countries (Kenya, Uganda, and India), where researchers have provided critical insights into the resilience of and challenges faced by women and their broader social 'ecosystem'. The ultimate goal of the research is to inform policies and strategies that ensure vulnerable populations (such as female workers in urban informal economies affected by Covid-19) can recover and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

#### **COUNTRIES**

• India • Kenya • Uganda

#### **RESEARCH PARTNERS**

• [International Center for Research on Women \(ICRW\)](#)

### **Colabora.Lat: Towards a New Model of Governance After Covid-19**

This project focused on (1) understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social relations, trust, and collective action, especially among women and vulnerable populations; (2) identifying innovations in social mobilising, citizen participation, and campaigns that can be supported and scaled; and (3) an analysis of public policies in the region designed to protect vulnerable populations, with an emphasis on how these policies have incorporated innovative forms of public engagement and how they can be further strengthened through transparency, citizen participation, and other forms of good governance and collaboration.

#### **COUNTRIES**

• Argentina • Bolivia • Chile • Colombia • Guatemala • Mexico

#### **RESEARCH PARTNERS**

• [Asuntos del Sur Asociación Civil](#) • [Diálogos Guatemala](#) • [Escuela de Política y Gobierno – Universidad Nacional de San Martín](#) • [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung \(Bolivia\)](#) • [Nosotrxs](#) • [Universidad de Icesi](#) • [Universidad de Santiago de Chile](#)

### **Promoting Resilience in Covid-19 in MENA: Building Inclusive and Effective Social Protection and Safety Nets**

This project focused on the promotion of inclusive and effective social protections and safety nets during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Social safety nets are interpreted differently in each country. Some countries focus on poverty-targeting programmes while others employ subsidy schemes and unemployment/labour benefits. The research explores how these can ensure inclusiveness and effectiveness within each country and across the four countries, to eventually inform a regional perspective.

#### **COUNTRIES**

• Egypt • Jordan • Lebanon • Tunisia

#### **RESEARCH PARTNERS**

• [Arab Reform Initiative \(ARI\)](#) • [Daraj Media](#) • [Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights](#) • [Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux \(FTDES\)](#) • [Inkyfada \(Al Khatt\)](#) • [Lebanese Center for Policy Studies \(LCPS\)](#) • [Mada Masr](#) • [Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies](#)

### **Addressing Covid-19-Related Vulnerabilities for Migrant Returnees in Central America's Northern Triangle**

This project sought to promote efficient policy responses by identifying and addressing the differentiated labour reintegration and gender-based violence (GBV) challenges and experiences faced by migrant returnees in Central America's Northern Triangle. With an emphasis on female and minor returnees, the project aimed to answer the following questions: What are the differentiated vulnerabilities that Covid-19 imposes on Northern Triangle returnees, with regard to labour reintegration and addressing GBV? What are the most effective short- and medium-term responses required to meet the economic and human security needs of these returnees?

#### **COUNTRIES**

• El Salvador • Guatemala • Honduras

#### **RESEARCH PARTNERS**

• [Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales \(ASIES\)](#) • [Foro Social de Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras \(FOSDEH\)](#) • [Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social \(FUSADES\)](#) • [Glasswing](#)

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