

ReDSS COVID-19 policy brief

To leave no one behind and mitigate impacts for displacement-affected communities

Overview

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is being felt worldwide and there are growing numbers of cases in the East and Horn of Africa region. As governments struggle to contain the virus and enact emergency public health measures, humanitarian and development partners are also grappling with how to plan for and respond to the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable refugees, IDPs and host communities.

ReDSS adaptation strategy over the next three months (April - June 2020) is across two primary work-streams: (1) *Support ReDSS members and partners to plan for and adapt to COVID-19 through coordination, cross-learning and adaptation based on learning and evidence; and (2) Continue engagement on the broader durable solutions agenda to maintain momentum and stakeholder engagement to address long-term displacement and solutions issues.*

ReDSS has developed a set of key messages to inform and adapt responses and support strategic engagement by ReDSS members including in coordination forums and with key stakeholders:

- Strengthening engagement and mutual accountability with communities
- Upholding rights and mainstreaming protection
- Responding to vulnerabilities and needs in camp, settlements and urban settings
- Strengthening area-based, locally led and integrated approaches
- Ensuring a dual focus that addresses COVID-19 response within longer-term planning for protracted displacement issues

Key messages to inform COVID-19 responses

Need for strengthened and sustained engagement and mutual accountability with displacement-affected communities

- **Engaging communities from the early onset is the key to build trust and confidence:** Sustained engagement and communication with community groups active at the local level helps build trust and confidence in response efforts, and enables community participation and action. Engaging displacement-affected communities through existing community structures which durable solutions partners including NGOs are already working with is key as they already have established relationships with community leaders and experience in participatory and community-based processes. [Learning from the Ebola response](#), preparedness and early action by local governments and communities is essential and agencies must invest and support community-led actions.
- **Emphasise the significant role that community leaders, elders and religious leaders and local networks play as part of an overall effort to draw on the existing capacities:** To effectively implement risk communication and [community engagement](#), agencies must approach all community leaders and members (working within existing systems and structures) in a manner that seeks first to listen (understand their perspectives and solicits their inputs), share information, and engage them in the response to the outbreak. In addition, information must be shared in a manner that allows individuals and communities to learn (receive information and ask questions) and to make informed decisions. Community leaders, elders and religious leaders must be a part of, and have an influence on, response efforts given their critical role to leverage community solidarity around the 'right practice'.

- **Understanding vulnerabilities and needs to plan for COVID-19 programme interventions and ensure mutual accountability:** COVID-19 will heighten [existing gaps in social accountability towards displacement-affected communities](#) if not addressed from the outset in terms of consistent engagement with and integration of displaced people and communities into all stages of the programme cycle – from design, to implementation to monitoring and evaluation and programme mechanisms. Learning from durable solutions programming is the need to place accountability to displaced populations at the centre of our action and amplify specific needs and vulnerabilities based on age, gender and diversity. This needs to move beyond complaints and feedback mechanisms to two-way communication that can support mutual accountability.

<p>Ensure that emergency situations do not undermine rights and support protection of displaced communities</p>
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- **Need to ensure that refugees are able to access protection and assistance:** Governments in the region are increasingly introducing border closures and restrictions, which can impact the ability of vulnerable asylum seekers to access international protection. While measures to manage risks to public health, such as quarantine and health checks at borders can be necessary precautions, [border restrictions must be managed in accordance with international human rights and refugee law](#) and actors should work together to support governments to meet their obligations while managing public health concerns.
- **Recognition that displacement-affected communities (refugees, IDPs and host communities) are highly vulnerable to this pandemic:** People affected by humanitarian crises, particularly those displaced and/or living in camps and camp-like settings (including IDP settlements), are often faced with specific challenges and vulnerabilities that must be taken into consideration when [planning for readiness and response operations](#) for the COVID-19 outbreak. Social distancing in often crowded camps and settlements and sometimes limited access to water, soap and sanitation facilities can hinder refugees and IDPs from observing health practices that limit the spread of the virus. Refugees and IDPs may face difficulties in accessing health services that are otherwise available to the general population due to movement restrictions and documentation requirements. COVID-19 responses must take practical measures focussed on creating resilience and protecting refugees, IDPs and impacted host communities against the pandemic.
- **Anticipating and addressing stigma and misinformation among and towards the displaced:** As with many infectious diseases, people or groups who have contracted COVID-19 or who become associated with it may suffer from stigma. Refugees and other displaced persons may be vulnerable to stigmatisation given their movement patterns and perceived ‘outsider’ status. Stigma can have serious impacts (e.g. heighten tensions, forceful evictions) and long-term consequences for integration and participation of displaced communities in social and economic life. [Planning for COVID-19 responses](#) need to anticipate and work to address stigma from the outset as part of comprehensive responses.
- **Addressing disproportionate impacts on women and girls:** Crisis affects women, men, girls and boys differently, and a pandemic such as COVID-19 can make existing inequalities for women and girls and other marginalised groups even worse. This is because systems that protect women and girls, including community structures, may weaken or break down. [Specific measures](#) should therefore be implemented to protect women and girls with the changing dynamics of risk imposed by COVID-19 such as through engaging with local women leaders in planning. More broadly protection monitoring also needs to be scaled up to understand how COVID-19 is exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and potentially creating new ones to support comprehensive protection responses.

Ensure coordinated responses and effective community engagement in camp and camp-like settings including IDP settlements

- **Support safe access and plan for impact on operations:** [A drastic scale down of humanitarian operations](#) in refugee camps and IDP settlements in the current context would risk reducing access to basic and life-saving services. Humanitarian NGOs have well established community networks in the camps and should be supported to coordinate with the relevant authorities to ensure unhindered access for those providing essential services. Where scaled down and remote responses are necessary to protect the safety of frontline NGO staff, operational partners can build on experiences of remote management and localisation processes in other contexts in the region whilst ensuring that risks are not pushed down to local actors and community workers.
- **Restrictions on freedom of movement to and from refugee camps and IDP settlements should not be arbitrary or discriminatory:** While states are taking measures to curb the spread of the virus e.g. suspension of refugee movement passes by Kenya government, these restrictions should not be maintained longer than needed and should not be applied in a discriminatory manner.
- **Ensure harmonised community engagement and enhanced feedback mechanisms:** Community engagement should be harmonised to avoid a multiplicity of agency specific approaches to information and community-engagement in relation to COVID-19 public health messages. In these uncertain times, agencies should also proactively engage communities about the impact of COVID-19 on essential services and assistance that goes beyond compliant mechanisms such as through town hall and other community engagement forums to reduce misinformation and ensure information sharing responds to fears and concerns.
- **Support and work within area-based, government-led structures and approaches that include refugees/IDPs and hosts:** Donors, UN and implementing agencies should support joint prevention and preparedness planning with national and local governments (particularly the government health authorities) and share relevant and timely information from existing camp coordination structures with local authorities that supports joint rather than parallel responses and includes camps and settlements within wider area-based approaches.

Understand and address specific vulnerabilities and barriers for refugees and IDPs in urban contexts

- **Key considerations for informal settlements in urban settings:** Health and non-health urban stakeholders are not always well connected, with often poor coordination between health authorities and sectors dealing with land, local government, environment, water or sanitation. [Coordination mechanisms and structures at national level need to be connected to local governments](#) who are familiar with urban contexts and have established relationships with community leaders and experience in participatory and community-based processes.
- **Identifying the vulnerable in urban settings:** Vulnerability will often be a function of support structures breaking down, with the most vulnerable being those who fall through the gaps. While transmission is low, steps should be taken to understand which [supportive social networks and institutions exist](#), and how they may be put under strain. By identifying them and representatives of key groups it will be possible to better understand how COVID-19 may debilitate them, or strengthen their relevance/role. This should inform how to invest scarce resources. Pre-defined protocols about vulnerability may not be helpful as a shock can shift priorities and vulnerabilities.

Strengthen area-based and locally led approaches and integrated programming to address the multi-sector response required

- **Building on existing leadership and coordination structures:** It remains critical to work through existing and familiar coordination structures, which can be effectively scaled up, and to avoid setting up new or parallel mechanisms. The focus must be on working with [existing local authorities and actors and investing in partnerships with local authorities](#) such as providing secondment and capacity injection support. It is also important to anchor all interventions in a thorough context analysis so as to strengthen area-based approaches based on a common understanding among actors including understanding of the [planning and interventions that already exist within the same area](#), to identify gaps that can be filled and the opportunities capitalised on in relation to reprogramming.
- **Ensure that local ownership is invested in the community at all times:** [Lessons from previous humanitarian and health crises](#) highlight that locally led and adapted responses that consider the diversity and complexity of displacement settings are key to effectiveness and reducing harm. States of emergency and ‘emergency thinking’ can sometimes preclude bottom-up approaches but ultimately, they will depend on them. Partnerships with local authorities and support for local action will be essential such as through investing in community-led action plans.
- **Need for Integrated programming that recognises COVID-19 as a broad-based humanitarian emergency from the outset:** More broadly, integrated programming is vital to respond to the multi-faceted impact of COVID-19. The [current pandemic goes well beyond a health crisis](#) with implications for food security, livelihoods, education and protection amongst others. [Learning from the Ebola crisis](#) was that there is a need to treat COVID-19 from the outset as broader than a public health emergency and plan for and coordinate a multi-sector and long-term response.
- **Inclusion of displaced populations in national COVID-19 strategies and responses:** The inclusion of [displaced populations in the development of national strategies and responses](#) will help support their access to assistance and services and ensure that humanitarian and development partners are responding within an overall approach led by the government.

Need to ensure a dual focus that addresses COVID-19 response within longer-term planning for protracted displacement issues

- **Implications of COVID-19 on durable solutions agenda:** Given the long-term nature of COVID-19 it is important to continue, in parallel to preparedness and emergency response, dialogue and engagement around the need to address long-term displacement and solutions issues [informed by continuing research and learning](#). As COVID-19 moves from an initial emergency response phase, it is also essential in medium and long-term planning to more closely identify linkages between COVID-19 programming and the need to address underlying vulnerabilities of displacement-affected communities caused by long-term and structural barriers.
- **Flexible funding that responds to COVID-19 while not undermining the long-term durable solutions response:** Operational partners including NGOs need flexibility from existing and new donors to reprogramme funds and adapt projects as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. However, as humanitarian and development donors look to potentially reprogramme their funding in relation to COVID-19 responses, it is also important to ensure that funding continues for the long-term durable solutions agenda and responses. While it is understandable that donors are reprogramming some of their funding, [there must be a balance](#) to allow for continued multi-year programming to avoid losing key momentum built around such processes as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Nairobi and related processes and now Global Compact on Refugees (GCR).