

# ENGAGING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: RESPONSES AND CHALLENGES



An Exploratory Study of Pakistani CSOs

Issue: May 2020

## INTRODUCTION

This working paper analyses the ability of civil society to respond to the recent Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and its associated challenges. Pakistan's vibrant civil society has played a diverse set of roles in societal development, which is essential for the preservation of democracy and the well-being of citizens<sup>1</sup>. "Civil society" is an ever-widening ecosystem of communities and organizations that have worked to meet the immediate needs of people, collectively address societal challenges, translate government's actions and messages, and hold government accountable for improved service delivery.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the need for civil society engagement in mitigating the effects of public health catastrophes is undisputed.

Pakistani civil society has responded effectively to natural calamities like the 2005 earthquake and 2010 floods, which led to large-scale devastation and loss of lives

and property. Similarly, Pakistan has witnessed joint responses by the government, civil society, and several humanitarian and relief organizations to contain the spread of dengue virus, polio, viral hepatitis, and cholera. However, COVID-19 poses extraordinary challenges<sup>3</sup> that require extraordinary measures.

This working paper explores the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan in responding to the largest public health emergency in a century. It presents a snapshot of the ongoing work and response by CSOs to COVID-19 and the challenges they are facing. This paper is derived from a qualitative survey conducted with about 300 Pakistani organizations by [Trust for Democratic Education and Accountability \(TDEA\)](http://www.tdea.org) and offers recommendations for the way forward for effective engagement of CSOs in addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

Civil society plays a significant role in domestic and international development and cooperation. These organized, organic and diverse groups have well-established relationships within and access to local communities. They operate in ways that minimize costs and maximize positive impact for development. Civil society roles may include:<sup>1</sup>

---

service provider

---

advocate/campaigner

---

watchdog

---

fostering active citizenship

---

improving governance processes

---

<sup>1</sup> Clayton, A., *et al.* Civil Society Organizations and Service Provision. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. 2000. Retrieved from [http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/\(httpPublications\)/19AB2640214382A380256B5E004C94C5?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/(httpPublications)/19AB2640214382A380256B5E004C94C5?OpenDocument)

<sup>2</sup> Ghaus-Pasha, A. Role of Civil Society Organizations in Governance. In *6th Global Forum on Reinventing Government Towards Participatory and Transparent Governance* (pp. 24-27). 2004. Retrieved from <https://www.semanticscholar.org/>

<sup>3</sup> 1918 Pandemic (H1N1 virus). March 20, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>.

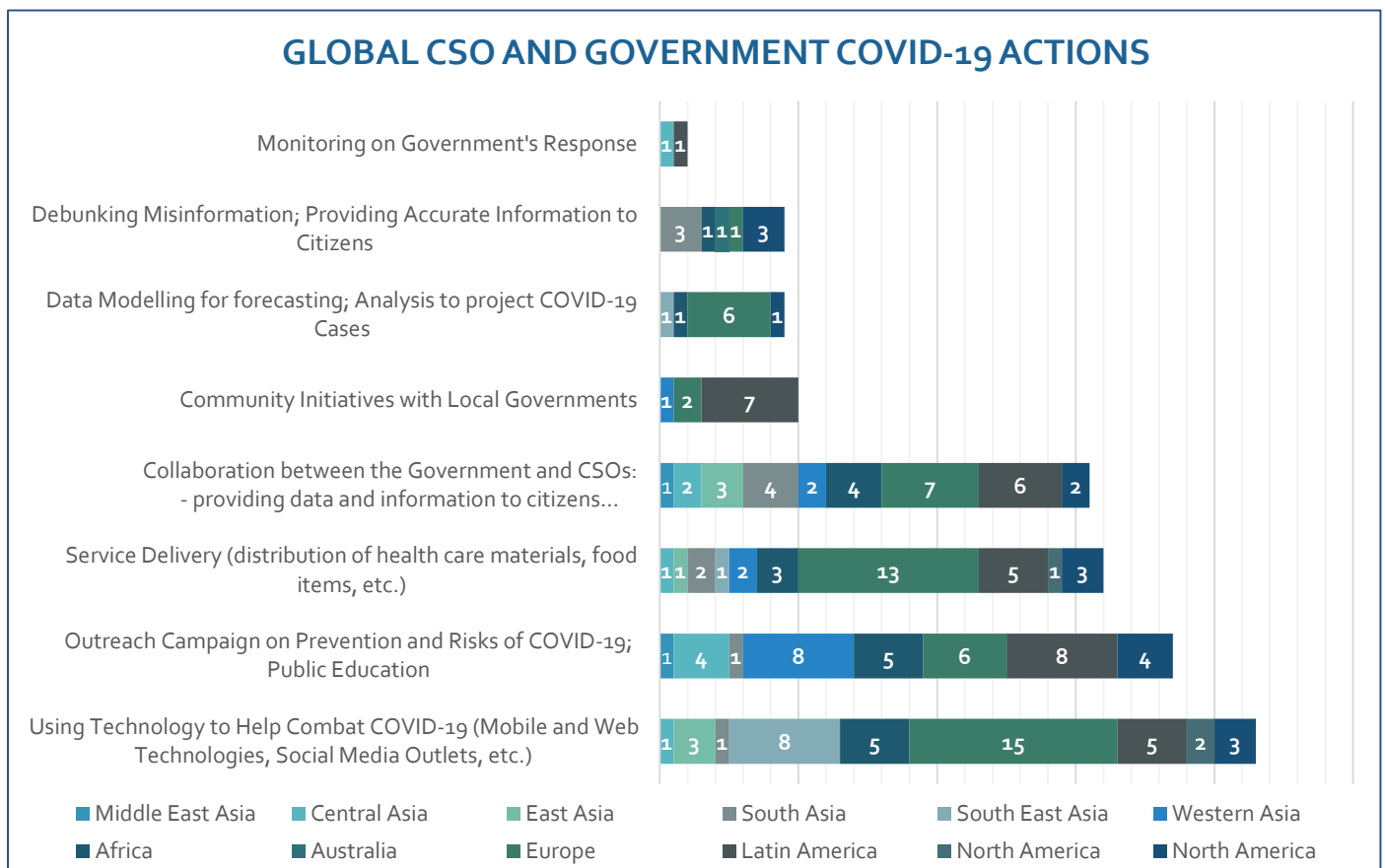
## THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OF CIVIL SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Significant research has been carried out globally to analyze what CSOs can do for health and during health crises. International development discourse suggests that working with civil society has become an established mechanism of health governance and governance for health<sup>4</sup>. However, in some cases from the Global South, collaborations between governments and CSOs are unsynchronized. Their relationships are often unclear or weak, operational tensions between them

are common, and administrative procedures are often poorly harmonized. In fact, unnecessary legal and administrative restrictions are often counterproductive and lead to underemployment of the full potential of CSOs. Experts indicate that societies' resilience to pandemics depend on their ability to contain the spread of pathogens and their capacity to mitigate the non-medical effects, such as those related to communication and economy.<sup>5</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society's response

has been evolving globally.<sup>6</sup> CSOs around the globe are collaborating with governments to provide services, including distribution of food and other necessities, to lead public education outreach campaigns, and to conduct data modelling.

The following graph presents an analysis of CSO and government responses to COVID-19 around the globe.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Governance for health in the 21st century - WHO/Europe. (2012.). Retrieved from [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/171334/RC62BD01-Governance-for-Health-Web.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/171334/RC62BD01-Governance-for-Health-Web.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Walker, J. Civil Society's Role in a Public Health Crisis. Issues in Science and Technology 32, no. 4. Summer 2016. Retrieved from <https://issues.org/civil-societys-role-in-a-public-health-crisis/>

<sup>6</sup> Howie, T. Disrupt & Innovate. April 6, 2020. Retrieved from <https://icscentre.org/2020/04/06/covid-19-resources-for-civil-society-2/>.

<sup>7</sup> TDEA analysis based on data from Collecting Open Government Approaches to COVID-19. Open Government Partnership. Retrieved from <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/collecting-open-government-approaches-to-covid-19/>.

## PAKISTANI CSOs' RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC AND CHALLENGES

CSOs are best placed to raise awareness, communicate accurate information, counter rumors, provide services, and liaise with the government during this pandemic.<sup>8</sup> However, their abilities have been hampered by a lack of sustainable funding and government's unclear strategy to engage and benefit from CSO volunteers and networks. These organizations are committed to protecting the health of aid workers and communities, but they need to operate within a harmonized approach to ensure safety and complement government's efforts.

Many Pakistani CSOs have taken it upon themselves to respond to the pandemic in whatever way they can. However, the financial and operation challenges for CSOs – like the pandemic itself – are unprecedented in scale. There have been substantial funding cuts by international donors, and operational activities have also been limited due to lockdown<sup>9</sup> in various parts of the country, making it almost impossible to carry out project or relief activities.

In Pakistan, the government response for containment of COVID-19 has been swift and categorical. However, the scale and scope of the crisis requires extraordinary collective measures, including the urgent involvement of CSOs as catalysts for behavioral

change (by reinforcing the messages for prevention), supporters of government efforts to minimize the impact of economic slowdown, watchdogs and advocates for government action, and voices to counter misinformation. TDEA's primary research with 318 Pakistani CSOs presents a snapshot of what roles these organizations are playing in dealing with the pandemic and what challenges they are facing in doing so.<sup>10</sup> A majority of these organizations are locally registered with outreach at district- and community-levels. These organizations have worked on an array of social issues, including education, health, human rights, and labour rights. However, three-quarters (75 percent) of the CSOs have shifted their focus to respond to issues related to COVID-19. Despite their wish to contribute, these organizations face financial and operational limitations that are forcing them to downsize and lay off staff at the precise moment when their work is critically important.

These CSOs' current activities include collecting funds locally to enable food distribution, awareness-raising, and providing health safety kits. While praiseworthy, these efforts may not be maximally efficient or effective to address the colossal challenges communities face. Such efforts

need to be harmonized to yield substantial and long-term results.<sup>11</sup> Due to a lack of a coordinated strategy and effective relationships between CSOs and the government to jointly tackle this public health emergency, a majority of the organizations (73 percent) reported difficulties in taking measures against COVID-19. Most of these CSOs are working at the grassroots level and have the requisite understanding, relationships and ability to reach relatively remote areas without any cultural, linguistic or social barriers. These strengths are extremely beneficial for a comprehensive response, but most of the CSOs rely on funding from international donor agencies. About half of the organizations (51 percent) reported that they are facing funding shortages, leading to closure of projects. Sudden funding gaps have both curtailed their efforts to respond to COVID-19 and exacerbated the economic impact of the pandemic as many CSO employees are being laid-off.

CSOs that have been able to stay active in addressing the crisis report that they are not fully equipped with health and safety gear and that they lack staff with relevant experience in dealing with such a health crisis. About half of the CSOs (51 percent) noted these gaps.

<sup>8</sup> Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response: A WHO Guidance Document. Geneva: World Health Organization. 3, Roles and Responsibilities in Preparedness and Response. 2009. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK143067/>.

<sup>9</sup> "[Prime Minister] PM Imran extends Pakistan coronavirus lockdown by two weeks." *The News*. April 15, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/644354-pm-imran-extends-pakistan-lockdown-by-two-weeks>.

<sup>10</sup> These organizations either received or applied for grants from TDEA during the last decade. A total of 318 CSOs responded, out of which 291 responses were used for the analysis. The other responses were discarded due to inaccuracies or incompleteness.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, J. Civil Society in the Age of Crisis. *Journal of Civil Society*, 7:3, pp 241-263. 2011. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17448689.2011.604986>

## AVENUES FOR GOVERNMENT — CSO COLLABORATION FOR EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

Avenues of collaboration between the government and CSOs need to be explored for an effective response to tackle COVID-19 in Pakistan and its ascribing social and economic challenges.

The government may prioritize and formalize the role of CSOs in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship may be defined in the National Action and Health Plans. The government also may work with civil society in developing pandemic preparedness and response plans, and work with local and international humanitarian agencies and organizations to identify who has the capacity in which locations to meet which basic needs of local populations (*i.e.*, food, health, shelter, water, and sanitation).<sup>12</sup>

Though the government has provided an exemption to local NGOs for acquiring an MoU with Economic Affairs Division (EAD) to help tackle COVID-19, there is still a need to establish operational clarity facilitating logistics and administrative matters. Moreover, inter-department coordination between EAD and national and provincial disaster management authorities needs to be further streamlined for harmonizing the acquisition of No-Objection Certificates (NOCs). The

government also may consider providing funding to local organizations to take maximum advantage of their outreach and capacities. Though the government recently has eased restrictions on non-for-profit organizations, it should develop a systematic, long-term approach for overcoming the challenges posed to CSOs by COVID-19. Both international and local CSOs have carried out relief and humanitarian work in Pakistan for decades. As COVID-19 increasingly causes illness and loss of life, unemployment, depressed stock markets, decreased exports, and devaluation of the Pakistani currency, it is essential to find ways for CSOs to contribute to the national response. Their efforts during past crises have benefitted local communities, but have been criticized<sup>13</sup> for filling roles that should be the duty of state agencies, thereby impeding the state's institutional strengthening. With these factors in mind, the following suggestions may be adopted by CSOs and the government for a meaningful collaborative response:

### Risk Communication and Community Engagement

Communicating the risks of COVID-19 and fostering preventative action by citizens are key to

building communities' resilience to the pandemic. CSOs may consider training communities on participatory, citizen-led crisis response strategies, including dissemination of awareness literature related to prevention and treatment. Organizations may build upon their existing networks of volunteers to assist governments with containment strategies to minimize the impact of the pandemic.

### Trust-building between Government and Citizens

Civil society may assist in building trust between government and citizens, including through public messaging to reach vulnerable communities with the information and services they need. For example, CSOs may raise local awareness about the government's relief measures, such as the Prime Minister's [Ehsaas Emergency Cash Program](#) and [Ehsaas Rashan Program](#). Such action would complement the government's efforts and have long-term positive impact on the relationship between the State and citizens.

### Fostering Tolerance

Similarly, using cost-effective (high impact, low-budget) awareness-raising, civil society may promote social and religious tolerance and

<sup>12</sup> Whole-of-society pandemic readiness: WHO guidelines for pandemic preparedness and response in the non-health sector. World Health Organization. July 2009. Retrieved from [https://www.who.int/influenza/preparedness/pandemic/2009-0808\\_wos\\_pandemic\\_readiness\\_final.pdf](https://www.who.int/influenza/preparedness/pandemic/2009-0808_wos_pandemic_readiness_final.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ali, S. M. The Politics of Development Aid: Implications for Pakistan. Oxford University Press. Forthcoming. Retrieved from <http://www.policy.hu/ali/OUP%20chapter%20from%20the%20EVSST%20publication.pdf>

mutual-support in the COVID-19 context. For example, CSOs may discourage communities from assigning blame to any sect or group for a local rise in COVID-19 cases. CSOs may also complement government efforts to destigmatize the disease in order to encourage social acceptance and support for recovered patients and their families.

### Providing Data and Help in Forecasting

Civil society may assist governments in gathering data regarding COVID-19 cases within communities and providing accurate and objective information related to the most-affected communities. This data and information may also be used to

help forecast the spread of the disease and help contain it through preemptive measures. Such data and information may also help government to identify communities most affected economically or socially.

### Countering Rumors and Disinformation

In this digital age, rumors and disinformation may wreck more havoc than pathogens. Tackling myths and misleading information is another area where CSOs can fill a gap. They may help citizens realize the need to verify content before sharing it with others, and they may initiate information campaigns to counter myths and mis-understandings. CSOs may also monitor and report any sources

of disinformation to the appropriate regulatory authorities.

### Technology-led Responses

CSOs may also consider developing technological solutions to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. These solutions may include digital platforms or apps to keep citizens informed, enable citizens to share their experiences, and offer open data. Digital tools may enable public participation and may contribute to the other communication strategies and themes noted above. Online training platforms may also be created by CSOs to help communities prepare Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) using the approved specifications of the [Drug and Regulatory Authority of Pakistan \(DRAP\)](#).

## ABOUT TDEA

TDEA's mission is to strengthen civil society, human rights, and democratic processes in Pakistan. Since 2008, TDEA has managed over US\$100 million in programs, including more than \$50 million for training, technical assistance, and grants to strengthen more than 250 Pakistani organizations in research and advocacy, governance oversight, civic engagement, and use of media. TDEA's reputation as a Pakistani organization delivering excellence in managing development programs is recognized by numerous international donors. TDEA programs have benefited Pakistani people in rural and urban areas of all ages, gender, ability, ethnicity, religion, and economic status, and TDEA brings this experience and commitment to effectively implement and deliver results for each project. TDEA ensures regular coordination with funding organizations and other stakeholders through our communication strategies; delivers management excellence by engaging highly-experienced personnel; and creates sustainable results among partners and grantees through our proven approaches to results management and capacity-strengthening.



### Trust for Democratic Education & Accountability - TDEA

Address: Building No 1, Street 5 (Off-Jasmine Road), G 7/2, Islamabad

Contact # +92-51-8466232, 051-8466120

Fax # +92-51-8432141

Email: [info@fafen.org](mailto:info@fafen.org)