

RAPID ASSESSMENT ON

THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN VIETNAM

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CORONAVIRUS
COVID-19



MANAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (MSD)

Distinguished Readers,

You are flipping through the first page of the rapid assessment report: **“The Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Vietnam”** conducted by **Management and Sustainable Development Institute (MSD)**. Wrapped up within only 10 days, the rapid assessment report offers a brief but well-informed overview of how the coronavirus outbreak has influenced, and emerged new challenges and demands for CSOs in Vietnam.

As considered the third pillar in society, it goes without saying that CSOs hold a pivotal role in the country’s socio-economic development, along with the State and business sector. We hope that the survey findings will guide **stakeholders on developing supporting strategies and plan for CSOs and help CSOs find their self-reliance and recovery process** so that CSOs in Vietnam can continue their missions and taking the lead in the field of socio-economic development in Vietnam.

To make the rapid assessment possible, we also would like to extend our gratitude to 101 CSO leaders and representatives for participating in the survey, as well as MSD team who helped to hand out questionnaire in a timely and responsive manner and Anh Tuan Chu, MSD intern who translated the report into English in just 2 days. In such a short time frame, limitations may be inevitable, thus, we look forward to receiving positive feedbacks and contributions from the readers and hope that the report will have useful and practical implications.

Yours sincerely,

Research Team

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Management and Sustainable Development Institute (MSD)

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KEY FINDINGS

1. **96%** of surveyed CSOs reported **moderate to serious effects of COVID-19** on their operations, with 40% either seriously or very seriously affected;
2. Amidst the turmoil, **most of surveyed CSOs** (95%) had **more than one difficulty or obstacle** during COVID-19 pandemic, of which (1) Delays in operation; (2) Funding shortage; (3) Difficulties in communication cooperation and coordination with partners are the biggest perceived ones;
3. **1 out of 3 CSOs** were worried about **new challenges in raising funds and other resources** as the post- COVID-19 pandemic economic depression/crisis could make CSOs slip off the funding agenda of international donors and business partners;
4. **1 in 4 CSOs have difficulties in building strategies and plans**, such as creating the contingency plan during and after the outbreak, the human resource management plan in the remote working framework;
5. **1 out of 10 CSOs face downsizing** for failing to pay staff salaries, and **office rents**, and **lacking technological platforms** to operate efficiently during the social distancing of COVID-19;
6. **More than 90% of CSOs** cited serious difficulties serving and supporting **constituencies/beneficiaries**, especially vulnerable groups. Most of them could not reach and or keep in touch with their constituencies during the social distancing or failed to address their changing demands or emergency needs;
7. **Under 50% of CSOs** proposed **solutions** on how to transform management and operation as well as boost community fundraising and tech-applications during the crisis. The survey received very few feedbacks on how to maintain their community services during the outbreak;
8. **CSOs demand for capacity building** to adapt and continue growing with the challenges in and after the outbreak. Three top demands include: (1) approaching and diversifying funding sources and other resources during and post-COVID-19 outbreak; (2) enhancing communication and social media in the new context, (3) making use of technology for organization's transformation;
9. **As far as children living in the crisis are concerned, surveyed CSOs claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed children to higher potential risks** in different aspects. The top-three highest risks are (1) Facing internet overuse and threats online ; (2) Deteriorating living due to economic insecurity among family; and (3) Poor learning productivity due to learning online or learning from home. In addition, children may also face up with high risks of being unable to access adequate education on COVID-19; lacking positive parenting (or positive interactions between parents and children and increasing incidence of violence and abuse at home. That calls for constructive and comprehensive interventions engaging the participation of multi-stakeholders.

1. CONTEXT

SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, also known as COVID-19 has spread in Vietnam since January 2019. It has escalated with confirmed cases skyrocketing on a daily basis.

As of 18.00, 10 April 2020; 1,627,869 infected cases have been documented with 97,331 deaths all over the world. In Vietnam, meanwhile, 257 cases have been reported with no deaths and more than 50% of patients have recovered. Notwithstanding a relatively small number of infections, the chance of a widespread outbreak in Vietnam remains high according to health experts. To battle against COVID-19 pandemic, the Government and the health sector in Vietnam have led great efforts to squash the outbreak and achieved some success in controlling the situation. As of 31 March 2020, the Prime Minister issued Directive 16 to enforce social distancing nationwide until as soon as 15 April 2020, forcing people to stay at home, unless they have an essential business to attend to. Almost offices are closed and required remote or online working from home. Schools have been closed since late January 2020 and students are expected to return to schools as early as June 2020, although there is no firm plan yet.

To deal with citizens' needs on emergency responses, the Prime Minister, in some recent government meetings, concurred with the proposal by the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) to introduce an urgent package to support citizens and businesses. In coordination with relevant ministries, agencies, and departments, the ministries are in process of drafting the resolution to help citizens to overcome the COVID-19 crisis.

2. RAPID ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

It is obvious that the COVID-19 outbreak has been affecting seriously on all aspects and sectors of the country, so have civil society organizations (CSOs). In order to understand what effects the COVID-19 outbreak have on CSOs in Vietnam, the Management and Sustainable Development Institute (MSD) carried out the rapid assessment with objectives as below:

Objective

- To assess the levels of effects of COVID-19 outbreak on CSOs in Vietnam;
- To identify challenges and obstacles that CSOs have to face up with during COVID-19 outbreak;
- To gather initiatives and solutions from CSOs to overcome the COVID-19 crisis;
- To assess the need for strengthening capacity of CSOs in responding to the crisis;
- To examine how the pandemic exposed children to increased risks.

Timeline

The assessment was conducted online from 14h, 31 March 2020 to 17h, 7 April 2020. The assessment data was then cleared and analyzed, the report was developed from 7 to 10 April 9, 2020. This assessment report was completed within 11 days in total. It took 3 more days for designing, English translation and planned to go public on April 14th 2020.

Methodology

The questionnaire designed by MSD includes 27 questions. It was then disseminated to a number of CSOs in Vietnam via email as well as published on the website and Facebook page of MSD, and various groups and forums in CSOs circles.

The questionnaire consists of not only multiple-choice questions but also a handful of open-ended questions to collect short statements and responses of the participants, the research team then “cleared” and coded data. For analyzation, Microsoft Excel was applied to visualize data in percentages and lists. The qualitative answers were also analyzed to provide the in-depth context and narrative for quantitative data.

Survey respondents

In total, MSD received 110 responses from CSOs in Vietnam. After clearing the form, we found out 101 out of 110 valid responses.

Limitations

The assessment was designed and conducted within a limited period of time mainly to provide timely brief insights on how the COVID-19 outbreak affects CSOs in Vietnam, the assessment questions are; therefore, mainly quantitative. Since open-ended questions are optional, the survey did not receive a high number of qualitative responses. Therefore, it means the assessment did not have an opportunity to mention specific and private issues of any CSOs exclusively. While the rapid assessment findings only offer an overview of the situation, they can serve as a baseline for the formulation of future strategic activities and operations to advance the role and capacity of CSOs in Vietnam.

3. RAPID ASSESSMENT RESULTS

3.1. General information of CSOs in the rapid assessment

101 CSOs participated in the assessment, including 73 local Non government organizations (NGOs- account for 72%), 10 community based organizations (CBOs), and 9 International NGOs (INGOs) operating in Vietnam, and 9 social enterprises (SEs). Participating CSOs are located in all three regions in Vietnam, 57 CSOs are headquartered in Hanoi and 8 in Northern provinces, 9 in Central Vietnam, 21 in Ho Chi Minh City, and 6 others in Southern provinces (Figure 1).

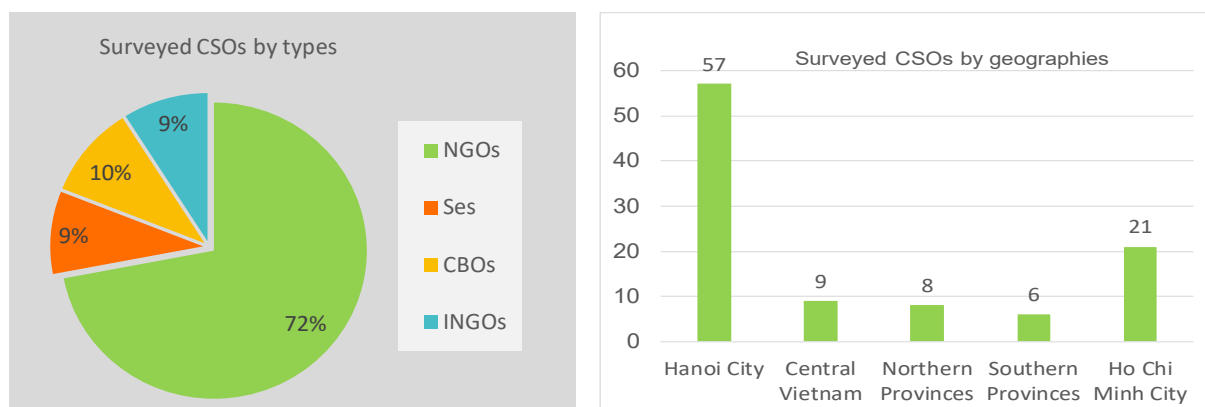


Figure 1. Surveved CSOs by types and geographies (n=101)

Surveved CSOs work in a diverse range of sectors such as education and training, child rights protection; persons with disabilities, communication and community development; agriculture and rural development, finance; environmental protection, sustainable development; partnership and capacity building; gender equality; resource management; climate change, etc. Targeted constituencies/ beneficiaries of CSOs include children, women, ethnic minorities, minor youth, and so on (as in figure 2). CSOs working in child rights protection (61 CSOs) and persons with disabilities (23 CSOs), people living in poverty (18 CSOs) constitute a majority of surveved organizations (Figure 2).

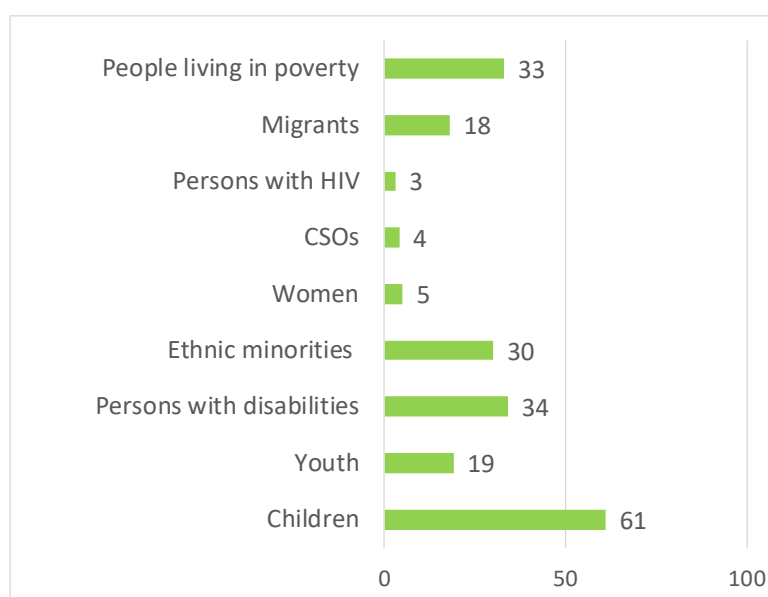


Figure 2. Survey CSOs by constituencies/beneficiaries (n=101)

3.2. COVID-19 effects on the management and operation of CSOs

3.2.1. The levels of effects

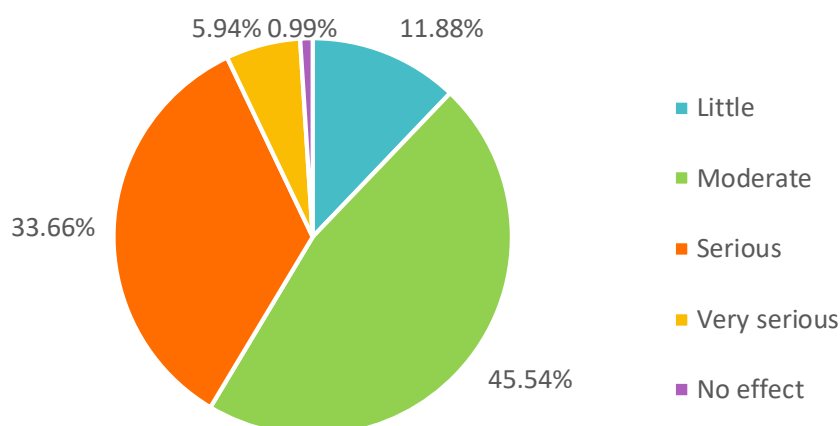


Figure 3. Levels of effects of COVID-19 on CSOs' management and operation (n=101)

Almost CSOs (96%) had their operations affected to some certain degree (Figure3). In particular,

- Nearly 40% of CSOs were either seriously or very seriously impacted, 6 hardest-hit organizations were even on the consequently permanent closure. There is no significant difference by location, size and type when it comes to the scale of effects. However, considerably, 50% of seriously or very seriously affected CSOs work in the field of education and training;
- 46% of surveyed CSOs reported moderate effects;
- Approximately 12% of CSOs in the survey reported little effects and only 1 CSO claimed no effect at all by the COVID-19 outbreak.

3.2.2. Effected dimensions in CSOs' management and operation

The COVID-19 pandemic had consequences for CSOs in many management and operation dimensions. In particular, a staggering majority of CSOs (over 95%) had more than one difficulty or obstacle during the crisis. Major challenges are listed in the graphic below (Figure 4).

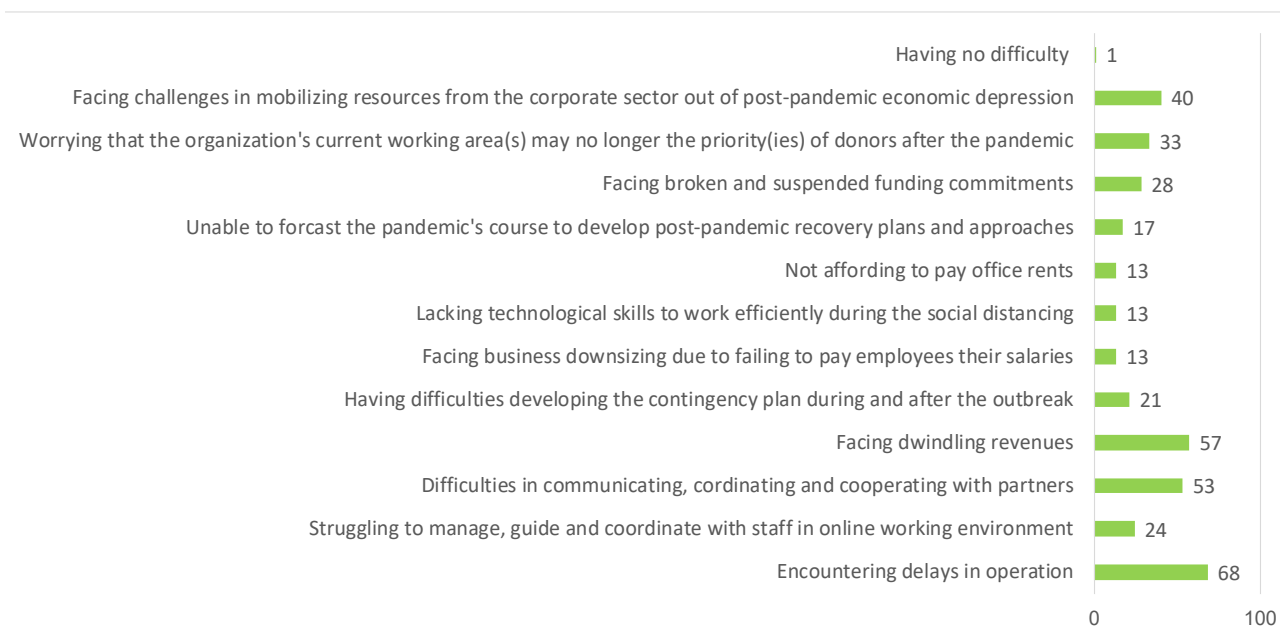


Figure 4. Challenges and obstacles facing CSOs (n=101)

Delays in operation were the first major challenge facing most of CSOs in Vietnam (68 CSOs) during the outbreak as activities and plans went off schedule, and plans created in January 2020 (before Vietnam traditional lunar new year) were either postponed or cancelled. More seriously, business delays also drove a handful of social enterprises, which work on the non-profit basis, to the verge of permanent shutdown. Education and training programs for youth were suspended.

“Our offline activities have been delayed indefinitely.” (Respondent 19)

“Our growth may come to a standstill; we won’t expect any development this time.” (Respondent 15)

“International exchange programs have been paused since January. It’s impossible for us to hold development activities for youth.” (Respondent 64)

“Our social enterprises have no growth, we will have to close the social enterprise.” (Respondent 40)

Funding crisis is the second major challenge (57 CSOs) confronting CSOs. CSOs anticipated swindling resources due to the economic downturn, therefore CSOs will be cut off from much-needed funds to maintain future activities and services. Conducting research and hosting fundraising activities may no longer be financially viable. Charity centers were forecast to decline by 30% to 40% in revenues.

“Budgets from cancelled activities will be reserved for outbreak prevention and control, we are not allowed to repurpose these budgets.” (Respondent 62)

“In the aftermaths of the pandemic, revenue will be down 30% to 40%.” (Respondent 63)

Difficulties in communication, cooperation, and coordination with partners (53 respondents) – Telecommuting or working online may not ensure 100% of work productivity, it takes a considerable amount of time for the arrangement of online meetings with colleagues and partners.

“It is quite tough to implement online-based operations, and we have yet to develop child support strategy during COVID-19 pandemic. We also find it difficult to reach communities and localities since hosting online meetings and training workshops for communities is challenging.” (Respondent 56)

“We cannot visit our local project fields due to the lockdown.” (Respondent 33)

Challenges in the mobilization of funds

- The post-pandemic economic pains present various challenges in mobilizing resources from the corporate sector (40 CSOs);
- The fields in which CSOs are working may no longer be the priority of donors in the post-pandemic period (33 CSOs);
- Funding commitments may be broken, withdrawn, or suspended by donors (28 CSOs).

"In the long run, the economic depression and other pandemic-related impacts will make it harder for fundraising... It's harder to promote corporate social responsibilities and mobilize funding from business partners." (Respondent 23)

"It's hard time now for resource mobilization from companies, given much damage caused by the pandemic." (Respondent 64)

"Most of our revenues derive from the companies, and individual donors in the community, therefore financial hardship due to COVID-19 may take away our fundraising opportunities in the coming period." (Respondent 70)

Apart from these aforementioned challenges, CSOs also faced difficulties **in developing strategies and plans**, for example, developing the contingency plan in response to the crisis (21 CSOs) or anticipating the pandemic's course to map out feasible development strategies in the post-pandemic period (17 CSOs). Human resource management-wise, CSOs struggled to manage, guide, and coordinate with the staff while working remotely. (24 CSOs).

"Working from home or working online may not guarantee 100% the efficiency of working at the office, because it takes a lot of time to arrange virtual group meetings and contact partners online. It is also more inconvenient to monitor and track work progress online. It is more challenging for female-majority CSOs as the female staffs may meet with more family tasks when working at home (such as looking after children, supervising their online learning, do household chores, etc...)." (Respondent 23)

"Our staff is undertrained when it comes to performing online tasks, launching online communication campaigns, designing online products (video/clip, audio, layout/flyer, etc...)." (Respondent 67)

Notably, 1 out of 10 CSOs face **downsizing for failing to pay staff** (13 CSOs), not affording to **pay office rents** (13 CSOs), and **lacking technology platforms** to work efficiently in the social distancing time (13 CSOs).

"We don't have enough reserve fund to pay our staff." (Respondent 11)

"Running out of revenue, we need to extract our reserve fund to pay staff their salaries and office leasing." (Respondent 55)

"We may have to make layoffs during this crisis." (Respondent 57)

3.3. COVID-19 effects on CSOs' service provision capacity to their constituencies/ beneficiaries

3.3.1. The levels of effects

While the pandemic affected CSOs in their operations in general, it also had **big consequences** on CSOs capacity to support their constituencies/beneficiaries. In this regard, nearly **a half of surveyed CSOs** reported a serious to very serious effects (45.54%), and also nearly a half reported a moderate effects (46.53%). Only a minority of participants (under 10%) reported little or no effect. (Figure 5). There is negligible difference according to type and geography among CSOs when it come to the levels of effects.

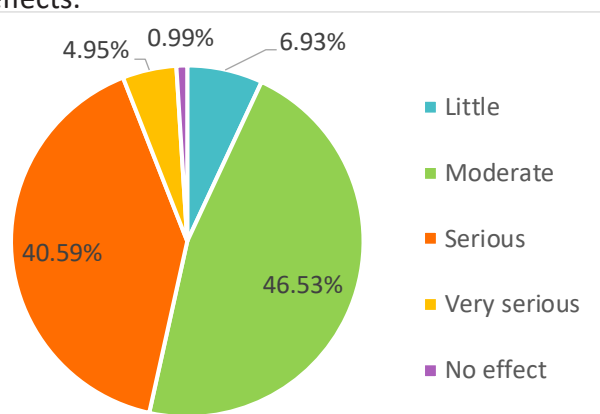


Figure 5. The levels of COVID-19 effects on CSOs capacity to support their constituencies/ beneficiaries (n=101)

3.3.2. The affected aspects on CSOs' works on supporting their constituencies

In particular, most of surveyed CSOs encountered delays in their service provision activities to their constituencies. 2 out of 3 CSOs emphasized on the fact that during the outbreak and especially during the social distancing, they **could not reach the constituencies**. As a result, their end-beneficiaries were not able to access their programs/ projects (64 CSOs). In other cases, some CSOs struggled to anticipate the course of the pandemic to develop client support plans (40 CSOs); ran out of revenues (38 CSOs); and failed to mobilize resources to address emergency needs (31 CSOs) or changing demands (21 CSOs). (Figure 6)

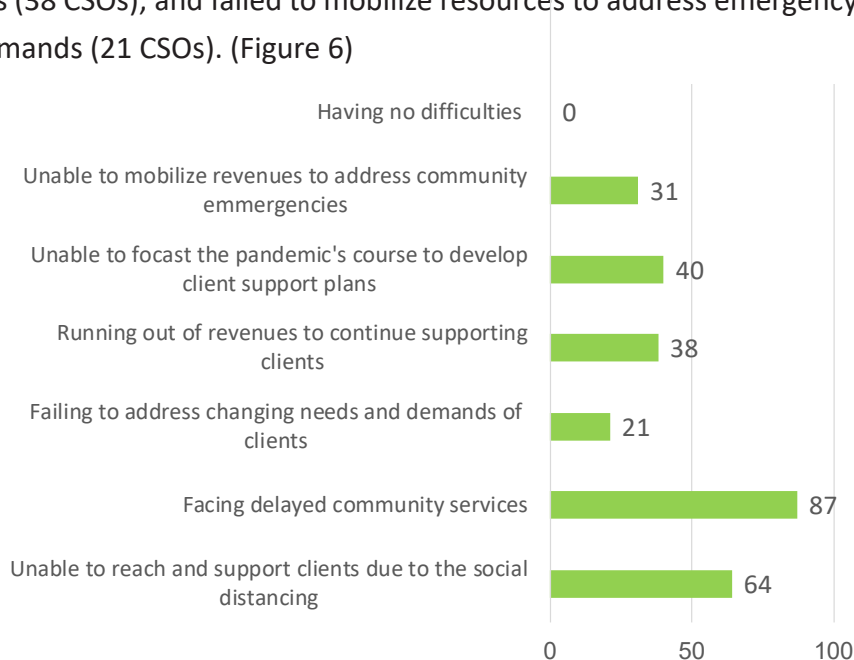


Figure 6: Difficulties facing CSOs in supporting their constituencies (n =101)

Considerably, the COVID-19 pandemic took a huge toll on children with disabilities, meanwhile, support work for this group was disrupted.

“Exercises and therapies for children with cerebral palsy were interrupted due to the outbreak. Their condition may worsen without such treatment.” (Respondent 41)

Deaf students cannot study online independently, they need assistance of their parents, but their parents often cite that they are busy or lacking skills to assist their kids.” (Respondent 12)

3.4. Adaptive solutions of CSOs in response to the crisis

3.4.1. Management and operation

To deal with of COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing, more than 30% of surveyed CSOs suggested solutions to ensure business continuity as presented below:

- Building contingency plans and switch to online-based working. Most of the surveyed CSOs worked remotely/from home and deployed technology to advances and applications to run the organization. Some events and activities were also to be hosted online.

“In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, we tailored our contingency plans and regulations to fit in with remote work, we moved online, from group meetings, online training, to media campaigns on social networks.” (Respondent 88)

“We conducted a survey to investigate the situations faced by our targeted groups and the impacts of COVID-19 outbreak on their employment, financial, health, family status, their future plans and orientations; it can serve as a basis to realign our strategies develop relevant community support plans in the future.” (Respondent 86)

“We keep our business going by applying technology to work online and remote management methods such as doing weekly and monthly planning, hosting online meetings with MS Teams, decentralizing the organization into smaller groups, making sure back-up plans, communication and coordination between staff are always there. We frequently have brief meets online to keep work progress informed and updated. We have been running quite smoothly up to now, delays due to remote working is yet to be seen.” (Respondent 54)

“Facilitating the implementation of new initiatives and activities not depending on offline working, for example launching and operating Facebook Page.” (Respondent 70)

- Restructuring or modifying activities of the organization, focusing on preparedness to get ready as early as the outbreak is over.

"We will work in full capacity after the outbreak, and make a request for amended plans to donors." (Respondent 93)

"Make full preparation of detailed plans, and put them into implementation as soon as the outbreak is over." (Respondent 79)

"Adjusting KPIs and deadlines of some activities." (respondent 80)

"This presents a challenge, obviously, but this is also an opportunity for us to focus on organizational capacity development and risk management. We also concentrate on research and survey activities, building capacity for our organization, and planning in order to get ready as soon as the social distancing is over. We have both online and offline plans for each activity. For each and every activity, we develop an offline plan together with a plan for working online." (Respondent 88)

- Focusing on fundraising activities during and after the pandemic.

"We are actively engaged in charity work [for emergency aids during the pandemic] to attract and maintain the participation of companies and individual donors. On this basis, we also integrate our development projects into community support work." (Respondent 64)

"We focus on developing project proposals for the post-pandemic period. We also believe that online fundraising platforms should be made use of to reach individual donors." (Respondent 88)

"While working from home during the social distancing, we develop project proposals to call for more support." (Respondent 105)

3.4.2. Service provision to constituencies/beneficiaries

The assessment only received a few initiatives and solutions on how to ensure continued support to their constituencies/beneficiaries. These initiatives included raising emergency aids during the pandemic, switching from on-site client support to online support (for example, hosting virtual classes for students, online training sessions for parents, and training workshops for CSOs; and launching communication campaigns online, etc.). These solutions need further review before CSOs can have specific plans for rehabilitation, adaptation and restructuring.

3.5. CSOs' supporting demands

Nearly 98% of CSOs were in needs of support to adapt to COVID-19 pandemic as below (Figure7):

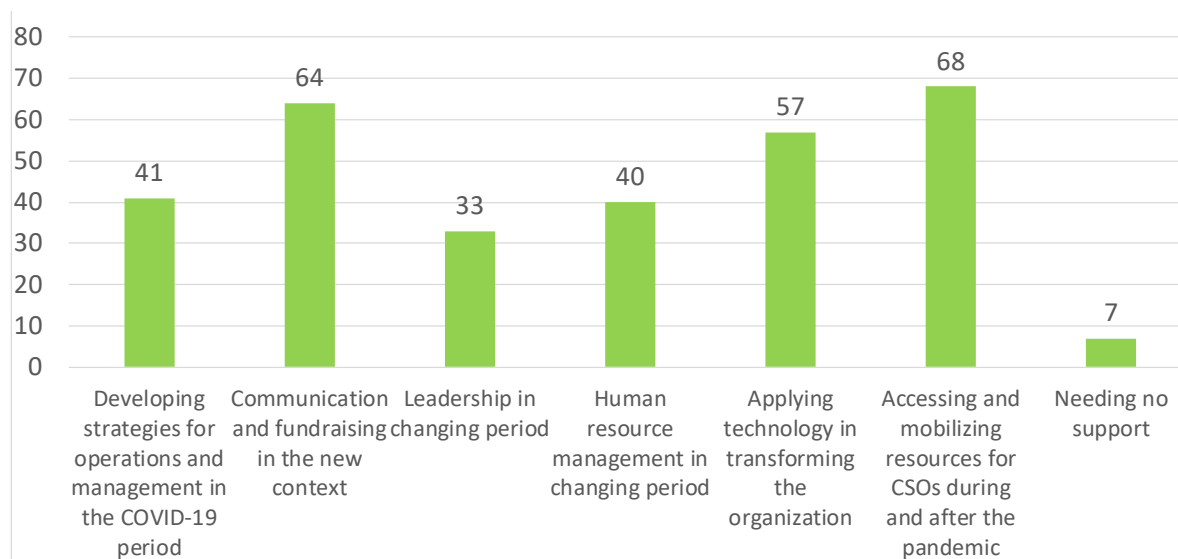


Figure 7. Areas in which CSOs want to receive support (n=101)

CSOs claimed critical needs for support in top-three areas: Accessing and mobilizing resources for CSOs during and after COVID-19 pandemic (68 CSOs); communication and fundraising in the new context (57 CSOs); applying technology in transforming the organization (57 CSOs).

3.6. Thematic focus: How the COVID-19 pandemic exposed children to high potential risks

3.6.1. Risks facing children during the COVID-19 crisis

Table 1. List of potential risks children can be subject to during the COVID-19 pandemic (Highest= 5, lowest= 1)

	1	2	3	4	5
Unable to access education on COVID-19 prevention	7.25%	24.64%	4.35%	42.03%	21.74%
Increased incidence of violence and abuse at home	8.08%	18.18%	33.33%	31.31%	9.09%
Frequent accidents and injuries (such as sanitizer, disinfectant poisoning)	8.08%	23.23%	32.32%	28.28%	8.08%
Increased anxiety, depression or deteriorating mental health during the social distancing	6.06%	17.17%	37.37%	26.26%	13.13%
Higher rates of harmful, hazardous and exploitative child labor (due to family income loss)	11.22%	17.35%	38.78%	26.53%	6.12%
Deteriorating living due to economic insecurity among family	1.01%	6.06%	22.22%	51.52%	19.19%
Learning online and from home resulting in poor learning quality	1.02%	5.10%	25.51%	47.96%	20.41%
Lacking positive parenting (or positive interactions between parents and children)	1.02%	10.20%	38.78%	41.84%	8.16%
Facing internet overuse and threats online	2.02%	2.02%	21.21%	51.52%	23.23%

The degree of risks was ranked from moderate to high. Especially, the top three risks, in CSOs opinion, included: Facing internet overuse and threats online (74.54% of surveyed CSOs considered this risk is high or very high); and Deteriorating living due to economic insecurity among family (70.71% of high and very high risk); and Poor learning productivity due to learning online or learning from home (68.37% of high and very high risk). However, there are also some high potential risks regarding to the issues that children are being unable to access adequate education on COVID-19; Lacking positive parenting (or positive interactions between parents and children with; and Increasing incidence of violence and abuse at home.

Furthermore, CSOs also added other consequences for children as a result of long-time indoor confinement as follows:

- Spending less time in nature and the community will hold back child mental and physical development;
- Being disconnected from the friendship circles (classmates, neighboring children, and clubs, etc.) can result in the devastating feelings for children. Children can be otherwise can be “hyper-interactive” when seeing their friends again. Some children have to drop out of school after the outbreak;
- Children can get involved in social evils due to difficulties with social communications and life skills;
- Lacking technology equipment and facility to study online efficiently;
- Children with disabilities can forget the language, regress, and struggle to catch up with the curriculum in the next student’s year. Sick children cannot visit clinics and hospitals to collect prescription drugs and get health check-ups. Children with autism don’t often follow disciplines and rules and longtime confinement often prompt hyperactive, annoying and disruptive behaviors among them. Education (online learning) and information are inaccessible for deaf children, and children with visual impairment and learning disabilities owing to the fact that platforms compatible with their special needs are not available.

3.6.2. Initiatives/solutions to mitigate the risks for children

CSOs also suggested a number of solutions/ initiatives to advance child rights protection as below:

- The Government should put in place more legislation and action: introducing support packages for poor households, speeding up the implementation of digitalized education, promoting child safety communication;
- Improve awareness and capacity among parents: providing them with knowledge and psychological counselling and advices so that parents can better take care of children during the pandemic; equipping parents and caregivers with hands-on tips and practices so that they can help children with their learning and study, and psychological issues during home confinement; engaging children in family activities to promote their participation;

- Promote awareness and positive practices among children: disseminating Child rights, promoting child participation in the outbreak to help children stay confident and understand the matter properly; organizing online life skills courses, online meetings with the participation of children; enhancing teaching and learning of the outbreak prevention and control through innovative visual and sound contents;
- Improve awareness communication through mass media, social networks; introducing relevant programs; launching virtual book fairs; updating media channels with child-friendly programs;
- Provide direct aids: CSOs should mobilize resources to hand out medical preventive equipment (face masks, hand sanitizer, food, and other necessities) to disadvantaged children and households;
- Raise funds for activities and initiatives to support children (from vulnerable groups) in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period: renewing operational strategies and plans to offer donors, diversify fundraising methods, discuss solutions with partners;
- Conduct surveys to understand specific issues faced by children from vulnerable groups to come up with relevant solutions.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcomes of the survey shed a light on the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the operations and activities of CSOs in Vietnam. Almost all the CSOs urgently need lifelines to stay afloat during the pandemic crisis. More importantly, enhancing the adaptive capacity among the CSOs are tasks in the long run. The survey recommendations are involved in:

- The CSOs emphasize the Government's role in implementing policies and supports in the state of emergency to address social issues. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic demands the co-operation between the Government and CSOs in response to the crisis challenges. Moreover, given the monitoring and reporting role of CSOs, the community of CSOs can develop together a joint Statement to the Government to claim for the support for CSOs and support and protect their constituencies, especially children and their families during and after the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Promote capacity building and information, solution and experience sharing activities among CSOs to help them develop effective contingency strategies and plans, enhance adaptive skills to overcome the crisis;
- Research and develop strategies for fund mobilization and diversification for CSOs, enhancing strategic partnership with the business sector for better financial sustainability and operations;
- Promote CSOs partnership to share resources and take joint actions to maximize its impacts. The bigger organizations should support the smaller ones;
- Accelerating the investment and application of technological solutions for organizations' transformation and improve the efficiency of CSOs in digital age;
- Enhance CSOs' joint efforts to ensure the timely, meaningful and accountable action to support the vulnerable groups to overcome the COVID-19 crisis;

- Conduct assessment on how the COVID-19 affects marginalized, vulnerable groups and children, identifying specific problems facing every single group in the community, especially children groups to adopt relevant support solutions;
- The network of CSOs working in Children rights protection should take joint actions to minimize and eliminate the risks that the children face during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, calling on the Government to support and protect children especially those from vulnerable groups, and make sure no child is left behind.

This rapid assessment report will be widely publicized by MSD among the community of CSOs, state regulators, the investors, and the partners operating in the field of sustainable development in Vietnam and overseas. The findings could provide the baseline for further research in order to support, accompany and promote the status and the capacity of CSOs in common socio-economic development.

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