

# CONCORD recommendations - EU response to the COVID-19 pandemic around the globe

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This paper highlights the urgent actions that the EU and Member States, in coordination with global and regional institutions and mechanisms, should take to support partner countries in addressing the COVID-19 crisis, helping to save lives, providing relief to the most affected and marginalised people and addressing the profound social, political and economic impacts this crisis is already having and will continue to have in the medium to longer term.

## Solidarity first

Solidarity should be the guiding force of the EU at all stages, and as plans for recovery are developed, the EU - and the global donor community - should not lose sight of its commitment to work with and to support partner countries to achieve a prosperous and sustainable future for people and planet, in line with 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement. Strengthening the resilience of societies, economies and the environment should be a primary focus of the EU's long-term support. As stated by [the European Parliament](#), we strongly believe that “[t]his is the moment to step up our solidarity and to help contain and mitigate the impact of COVID-19”.

The Coronavirus knows no borders. It is a global threat which demands a global response and requires the EU and its Member States to **allocate appropriate resources**. Solidarity is needed with all regions in the world - Africa, Asia, the Neighbourhood, Latin America, and the Caribbean and Pacific regions.

## Need for coordinated response

The EU's global response needs to be comprehensive, coherent and integrated, addressing the health, social and economic consequences of the crisis, as well as ongoing challenges such as the climate and environmental crises.

Joint analysis by partner countries, the EU and other global actors is needed to arrive at a common understanding of how resources can be best allocated to support partner countries through the multiple impacts that the new coronavirus is having on social and economic life, in the immediate through to the longer term. **However, this should not be at the expense of ongoing humanitarian crises or pre-existing development commitments.**

We urgently need the EU to use its leadership to foster **the adoption of a single, coordinated global plan of action by the 12 agencies** which undersigned the WHO Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-Being for All<sup>1</sup> in order to mitigate and contain the epidemic through support for national governments and communities. According to the Global Preparedness

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/sdg/global-action-plan>

Monitoring Board, at least \$8 billion in international funding is urgently needed for the immediate public health response with a focus on health system strengthening.<sup>2</sup>

Through political dialogue, the EU should ensure that COVID-19 response measures are designed in a way that minimises limitations on rights and freedoms and impact on civic space. Where such limitations are necessary, a fundamental requirement is that all such measures be limited to the extent strictly required by the urgency of the situation and states should, when possible, adopt short-term, renewable measures and include automatic sunset clauses.

### Universal access to health services

Developing countries face three times the risk of COVID-19 exposure, yet have *six times lower access to healthcare services*<sup>3</sup>. The reasons for this include: the lack of domestic resources; high tax avoidance and other illicit financial flows; long-standing conditions imposed on governments by the IMF and the World Bank to drastically cut spending in public services including health; and the weight of debt.<sup>4</sup>

It is in everyone's interest to **ensure universal access to health services, without discrimination**. Investing in good quality and resilient public health systems accessible to all is as important as ever, not only to respond to COVID-19, but also to ensure the continuity of other life-saving and public health interventions. The EU must prioritise funding to health systems strengthening and ensure that its support to partner countries is coordinated across all its institutions and with Member States. While COVID-19 is hitting everyone, the impacts of partner countries' government measures to contain it and ensure suitable healthcare to those who need it, might exacerbating existing inequalities. Therefore, the EU response must target support to the most marginalised people and people who are usually discriminated against in healthcare settings, such as homeless people, street vendors, workers in the informal sector, domestic workers, daily wage earners, agricultural workers, sex workers, migrants and people with disabilities. Support for refugees and those in humanitarian settings and conflict-affected countries must be boosted dramatically to slow the pace of spread were it to reach such locations.

### Food security and nutrition

An immediate concern relates to food security and nutrition, which are expected to be heavily impacted by the health crisis and the necessary responses, including limitations on travel and transportation and closure of public markets. Territorial markets through which most of the food is bought in the developing world will be affected, and small-scale farmers are already now losing the channels to sell the food they produce. It is important for the EU to support local initiatives, notably led by local authorities and producers' cooperatives, to connect local consumers and producers, as well as other initiatives to stabilise food prices on local markets and provide an enabling and stable context for smallholder farmers and other small-scale food producers.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/pdf/GPMB\\_6March2020statement.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/pdf/GPMB_6March2020statement.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> CARE Analysis: <https://www.care.org/newsroom/press/press-releases/care-analysis-vulnerable-countries-face-3-times-risk-covid-19-exposure>

<sup>4</sup> The scale of the challenge is captured in recent Imperial College modelling. If the world acts decisively, the death toll can be limited to 800,000 deaths in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Delay in suppressing coronavirus could lead to 3 million more deaths. No mitigation could lead to 2.4 million deaths in Africa alone. This is without taking into account the devastating social and economic impacts, which will add greatly to these numbers.

Support for food reserves, and cash or in-kind transfers depending on the local situation, should be considered as well.

### **Social protection and living income**

The lockdowns and the closure of borders is having an immediate negative impact on the income of the poor and vulnerable households. Faced with similar scenarios, many EU Member States are strengthening their own social safety nets and providing additional financial/wage support. This is not a simple option for many countries across the world.

**Where lockdowns are in place, social protection mechanisms are needed to support borderline and vulnerable households.** This can be through cash-transfers (common in humanitarian response) or through a more sophisticated social system (if there is one in place). Here, civil society can play an important role in raising community awareness and helping to target those most in need or who might be missed by local authorities.

### **Education**

In the face of unprecedented school closures in 185 countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO estimates that around 1.54 billion children and youth are out of school or university. Many of them, especially girls, will never return to school. In contexts of extreme poverty, vulnerability or crisis, where education was already a struggle, there is even a greater need to ensure every child and youth can continue to access education and learning. Stakeholders must **prioritise education responses that keep children and youth safe, supported and learning, during and after the pandemic.** In particular, the most excluded children – including those who have never been to school and those with disabilities – must be prioritised to ensure they are not left even further behind. Teachers, non-formal education providers and communities must be supported to ensure inclusive methods of distance learning are adopted and communicated. Civil society organisations have long-standing experience in the formal, non-formal and informal education sector, including in distance learning.

Through Global Citizenship Education the EU should facilitate the adaptation of people to a longer-term systemic change brought by the COVID-19. This will promote an increased awareness and understanding of the interdependent dynamics and processes between local and global levels.

### **A gender-responsive approach to COVID-19**

69% of health sector jobs globally are held by women, and women's gender role in families which include caring for sick family members, increases their exposure to the virus. They are therefore both a high-risk population group, and an important resource to curb the spread of the disease as they are frontline responders.

In addition, increased confinement and isolation at home increases the risk of domestic and sexual violence, while women and girls are cut off from essential protection services and social networks. The economic fallout will heavily impact girls and women in the most deprived communities, with a sharp rise in the burden of unpaid domestic care work and millions of girls possibly being driven into child marriage, trafficking and survival sex by poverty and recession. Challenges with accessing sexual and reproductive health information services - including contraception, safe abortion and HIV medications- will further exacerbate the risks to girls' and

women's health and lives. Therefore, the **EU and Member States' response cannot be gender-blind: it must be informed by a gender analysis applying an intersectionality lens**. It is also crucial to engage and resource women's organisations, networks and grassroots collectives at local level, as they count large constituencies that can be quickly mobilised.

### **Interlinkages with climate change and environment**

In drawing up recovery plans to respond to the Covid-19 crisis in partner countries, there is both an opportunity and necessity to address climate change and environmental degradation, inequalities and resilience simultaneously. There is a real risk that recovery plans could exacerbate environmental crises and inequalities if badly designed. As climate change, pollution, ecosystem conversion and unsustainable land and natural resource use are increasing the frequency of global shocks and crisis, **action to tackle the drivers of nature loss and climate change should be prioritised and fully integrated into recovery packages**. Further, the EU's response packages in partner countries aimed at stimulating the economy should be aligned with ambitions on climate change, biodiversity and wider environmental protection as well as addressing inequalities and be screened for unintended negative environmental impacts.

### **Support to Civil Society Organisations**

Restrictions on civil society space are an obstacle to development and humanitarian work, stifling a successful recovery after an emergency. The EU must **promote enabling frameworks for civil society organisations to participate in the decision making and complement the governments' efforts to overcome this crisis and its socioeconomic consequences**. Where countries have instituted lockdowns, the staff and volunteers of civil society organisations, who are providing vital community services, should be included in the list of key workers. To carry out these services, freedom of operation, movement and access to affected communities should be enabled including facilitation respect of protective measures and provision of protective materials for CSOs workers. To ensure coherence of action, the participation of local CSOs in national response plans, clusters and other coordination structures will be of paramount importance.

**As civil society actors are already mobilising and supporting communities during this pandemic, it is essential that they are supported financially with additional and flexible funding**. Therefore, the EU must ensure that CSOs can also access funds through direct donor funding and not, for example, through pooled fund mechanisms. For example, within the global UN appeal of US\$2.01 billion, only \$100 million is set aside for NGOs, which is highly insufficient, given that in many places only CSOs, and in particular local CSOs, are able to reach the populations most left behind.

### **Civic space and human rights**

Freedom of expression, access to information, transparency and civic participation are more important than ever in times of pandemics, where states of emergency and exceptional restrictions on fundamental rights are being adopted in the name of protecting public health. Some governments are taking opportunistic advantage of the crisis to restrict civic freedoms, close civic space and criminalise criticism and dissent. At the beginning of the outbreak, some governments silenced doctors and whistleblowers and did not communicate in a timely and transparent manner the actual number of cases. Support to human rights, civic space, the rule of law and a participatory democracy therefore needs to be crucially continued, during and after

the crisis. Moreover, EU Delegations should **evaluate whether the extraordinary measures necessary to stop the spread of the virus are proportionate, non-discriminatory, time-bounded and balanced** by extraordinary protections. Control mechanisms should also be strengthened when security forces are given exceptional powers.

Any COVID-19 response platforms should include civil society representatives, be gender-balanced and make deliberate efforts to create conditions conducive to women confidently and safely speaking out and contributing their views and expertise. Such measures are not to replace the state or local authorities, but to **ensure the response to the pandemic reaches the most marginalised, and is equitable, fair and non-discriminatory**. Civil society should also have space to support greater accountability of state institutions to all citizens, demanding that the authorities fulfil their obligations with regards to the emergency, including the protection of human rights.

Worldwide, many important political processes are being either cancelled, or turned into virtual assemblies or meetings, with the risk of excluding many parts of the population. It is paramount to ensure that COVID-19 does not exacerbate shrinking space, and step up efforts to maintain meaningful consultations with civil society where they were foreseen.

At EU level, this includes consultations **on the programming of EU aid for the coming 2021-2027 period**. COVID-19 must not undermine consultation processes. There are many innovative digital ways of ensuring diverse civil society input, which is essential for the ongoing pre-programming process for the NDICI. Without it, the development effectiveness principle of ownership cannot be respected and decisionmaking will be fundamentally flawed.

### **Possible financial solutions**

At the very least, the EU and Member States need to maintain or where not achieved, realise their current ODA commitments. CONCORD sees a risk that donors may wish to prioritise post-COVID-19 domestic recovery plans, to the detriment of international solidarity. To make a real difference, we call for an increase in ODA.

At present there are calls to look for funding under the existing margin of heading 4, as well as to use reserves of the EDF. While we understand these calls, this is worrying in the light of the significant delay in the adoption of the new MFF, as use of these funds would mean that they are no longer available for use in 2021. As a result, we reiterate our **urgent call to come to an agreement on the MFF 2021-2027**, and support the [call of the Parliament](#) to have a contingency plan ready by 15 June “to provide a safety net to protect the beneficiaries of Union programmes”.

We recommend that any multilateral efforts focus on providing *debt relief* and aid with the highest degree of concessionality, prioritising grant-based finance over loans for highly indebted countries and ensuring that there are *no grant/loan conditionalities* that would impose further cuts in public services. We encourage the **EU and MS to speak with one voice in the IMF and World Bank** to ensure that all principal, interest and charges on sovereign external debt due in 2020 are permanently cancelled for all countries in need. Developing countries should be allowed to stop observing IMF policy conditions where they undermine a government’s capacity to mobilise resources to protect citizens from grave health risks, including hunger, thirst, and unsanitary conditions.

Any mid- to long-term recovery plans should **maintain and strengthen existing environmental and climate standards and policies**, and should avoid environmentally harmful activities. A transparent and complete screening of the environmental impacts of stimulus measures in partner countries would significantly add coherence to those measures and avoid creating perverse and unintended environmental consequences that could damage the future resilience and environmental health of societies.

At all stages, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impacts should **respect the development effectiveness principles** and ensure there is **no tied aid**, in particular concerning the purchasing of medical supplies, medication and vaccines.

Support provided with blending facilities, guarantee funds and other incentives to the private sector should address the needs of local small-scale economic actors and producers and should *not contribute to the privatisation of public services* such as health and education. In addition, CONCORD strongly encourages the European Commission to **redirect some of the private finance instruments towards grant-based support** for countries most in need.

