

An aerial photograph of the Mumbai city skyline, featuring numerous high-rise buildings and a dense urban landscape. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The text 'Emergency manual for crisis' is centered in white.

Emergency manual for crisis

Preface

During 2020, the world faced an unprecedented challenge. The COVID-19 outbreak forced authorities to adopt very strict and restrictive measures, such as restriction of moves and trips, closure of borders, and confinement of whole neighbourhoods, cities, or even whole countries.

India has not been an exception and had to take very hard measures attempting to stop the spread of the disease, including the lockdown of the whole population of the country. These measures meant many additional difficulties for those most underprivileged sectors of the society, as staying home prevented them from earning the money they need to survive.

Hence, our organization had to adapt our intervention to this new reality that was threatening our beneficiaries, changing the scope of our projects from a development cooperation approach to a humanitarian aid intervention. This has forced us to adapt to this new reality, and learn and apply a new model of work with the communities,

This manual intends to help us, in the case of a similar situation in the future, to preview and organize the answer.

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Definitions

COVID-19

An infectious disease appeared in 2019 caused by a coronavirus, that usually causes fever, tiredness, and a cough, and can also cause breathing problems. Most often the disease is not serious but it can lead to severe illness in some people.

COVID-19 Pandemic

A pandemic caused by "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2" (SARS-CoV-2), first identified in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan and quickly spread all over the world. It was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in January 2020, and recognized as a pandemic in March.

Crisis

An extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation.

Emergency

A dangerous or serious incident happening sudden or unexpectedly, which needs fast action in order to avoid harmful results.

Lockdown

A situation in which people are not allowed to enter or leave a building or area freely because of an emergency.

Pandemic

An epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people.

Antecedents: the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020

Socio-economic context in India before the outbreak

India had a very prosperous economic situation at the beginning of 2020. For more than a decade, its GDP had been maintaining a constant growth line higher than that of most western economies, with an annual average of 7.28%. According to some analysts, this allowed India to aspire even to surpass the great powers, China and the United States.

This economic prosperity was mostly felt in the country's large cities, like Mumbai, the financial capital of India and home to many leading companies and industries. Various sources place it as one of the five most expensive cities in the world, and a good part of its inhabitants have access to all kinds of luxuries and comforts.

However, the explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent adoption, by both central and state governments, of the decision to confine the population to try to contain the contagion curve was a very hard blow to the waterline of the country's economy. Some figures speak of a 24% contraction of GDP in the second quarter of 2020, although there are estimates that raise this figure to 35%. Various analyzes predicted that India would not be able to regain pre-pandemic levels of economic development and employment until at least 2025.

In this context, another characteristic of the country's economy must be mentioned: inequality. Whereas at Mumbai an incessant and prosperous economic activity was flourishing, millions of people subsisted in poverty or extreme poverty. Before the pandemics hit India, it was estimated that 70% of its more than 20 million inhabitants lived in slums in very precarious conditions. Some estimates indicated that, out of every ten households, only two had electricity or running water, and less than half had access to toilets. Garbage and waste management was inadequate, if not non-existent. In general, living conditions in these neighbourhoods were clearly poor.

Despite this, most of these millions of families managed to survive through precarious and sporadic jobs, which allowed them to live from day to day, although without saving for the future. With salaries equivalent to 2 euros on average a day and without any certainty that the next day they would be able to go back to work, reality forced them to constantly improvise and reinvent themselves. And for this vast sector of the population, confinement has practically represented a sentence. As various analysts said, confinement would possibly save them from the virus, but at the same time left them at the mercy of a possibly more deadly enemy: hunger.

Measures adopted by the Indian and Maharashtra governments

The first confirmed case of coronavirus in India was detected on January 30th, 2020, in the state of Kerala. In Maharashtra, it was necessary to wait until March 9 for the first case to be confirmed, which occurred in the city of Pune.

On March 13th, the Maharashtra state government officially declared the existence of the coronavirus outbreak and applied the provisions of the Epidemic Diseases Act 1897, which empowered it to take various measures such as mandatorily hospitalize any person suspected of having symptoms. By means of this law, it was ordered the closure of shopping centres, cinemas, swimming pools and gyms, and prohibited meetings and celebrations in public places. The municipal authorities of the main cities joined these actions by closing various public parks. Public transportation began to be affected as well, with the cancellation of more than 20,000 bus lines across the state and 23 interstate train runs.

In Mumbai, the municipal government announced on March 18th the closure of shops and businesses in certain neighbourhoods on alternate days. On the 20th, businesses and companies whose activities were not essential were ordered to close their doors. Citizens were also urged to remain in their homes except in cases of need. On March 22nd, all commuter train, metro and monorail services in the city, as well as urban bus lines, were closed. At the national level, that same day the government of India decreed a 14 hours curfew (Janata Curfew), with the exception of "essential services".

Finally, on March 23rd, the Maharashtra government ordered a statewide lockdown, with a strict curfew and severe limitation of movement between districts, a day before the central government made the same decision at the national level. All these restrictions were applied, initially, intending them to last a period of approximately two weeks, but in practice they have had to be extended for several months due to the advance of the pandemic.

These measures represented a very important brake on the buoyant economy of the state and, particularly, that of the city of Mumbai. And, as is usual in these cases, the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including the communities with which we work, were the ones that suffered much hardest. The closure of economic activities, and the impossibility of obtaining any income, forced many thousands of workers to return to their places of origin. Given the closure of transport, this transfer was made on foot, generating scenes of thousands of people walking along the main roads of the country, despite official calls to respect confinement and return home, and promises of economic and food aid for people who needed it. The situation forced the authorities to charter special transports to help these people reach their villages, estimating that until May 1st more than 1 million people were transported.

Obviously, this exodus brought an unexpected and unwanted consequence, as the virus, which until then had only been detected in large cities, began to spread also to rural areas in the interior of the country. Instead of stopping the contagion, then, the confinement indirectly contributed to its exponential increase.

Since June 1st, different de-escalation measures started to be gradually approved, relaxing certain restrictions in order to facilitate the resumption of some economic and commercial activities. This slow deconfinement was implemented, despite the fact that health indicators had not stopped worsening, in order not to aggravate the economic deterioration. However, some measures remained in force until October, such as the stoppage of public transport, among others.

Mumbai Smiles projects status before the pandemic

During the 2019-2020 Fiscal Year, Mumbai Smiles restructured our project tree, organizing it around three major programs: the fight against trafficking, support for homeless families, and covering the basic needs of the most vulnerable population.

As the main new project, the Smiling Bus was launched, a mobile unit that has made it possible to approach the main points of the city where homeless families subsist with their sons and daughters, and provide them with non-formal educational resources, health services, as well as supporting them in realizing their right to identity.

Likewise, during this exercise, the psychological care provided to women victims of trafficking in the community centre of the Kamathipura neighbourhood was consolidated, including sessions of artistic therapy and strengthening of life skills with which helping them to bear the heavy burden they bear, and to improve their options to improve their future quality of life. These group sessions also were attended by women from the Khetwadi and Ghatkopar areas.

On the other hand, Mumbai Smiles managed our 12 own preschool centres (9 for street children, and 3 for children of victims of trafficking), and also supported 19 centres whose teachers are in the process of assuming managing them. Also in the educational field, we provided financial, material and pedagogical support to 55 elementary school students from two centres, Wilson High School and Shivajirao Shendge, in order to facilitate their access and permanence in the educational cycle.

Nor has the commitment to defend the fundamental rights of the people of the poorest communities been forgotten, through the Jump2Justice project, which for yet another year has provided the necessary information so that people can know their rights and enforce them in the cases in which they are not respected.

Mumbai Smiles had planned to move the organization's headquarters and the bulk of our projects to the Vasai area, north of the city of Mumbai, during the 2020-2021 Fiscal Year. The organization's new offices would be installed there, as well as the programmatic lines that had been implemented the previous year. The idea was based on the fact that this locality offers ideal characteristics to offer our beneficiary groups a more adequate and safe space than those of the Mumbai neighbourhoods, such as Kamathipura or Govandi, where we had been working.

These plans, however, had to be interrupted because of the pandemic and the confinement. On the one hand, the move was put on hold due to the restriction of movements, pending its definitive lifting. Likewise, the organization has had to redirect our actions towards meeting the needs of the communities with which we work and which, being unable to work, could not access any food or basic products.

In this way, since April 2020, Mumbai Smiles distributed food packages and hygiene products to help communities to cope with confinement without seeing their survival threatened, in a global action that benefited more than 23,000 people and distributed more than 240,000 meals. We also continued to serve our beneficiaries (pre-school and elementary school students, women victims of trafficking, etc.) making use of phone calls or videoconferences, so that the confinement would not prevent them from continuing to be heard and receiving the help and support they deserve.

Reacting to a crisis

A crisis is an extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation. A pandemic can be considered as a crisis in terms of its difficultness or danger. The COVID-19 outbreak was a perfect example of this. No one expected it to happen, not to mention how it spread so quickly among almost each country in the world, forcing the governments to adopt strict measures without time to prepare contingency plans. In India, this meant to declare the confinement of the whole population of the country by March 24rd, without allowing time for people to get prepared for the lockdown.

For our organization, this represented a big effort to get adapted to the new situation. The main purpose was to provide an answer from a double approach: firstly, keep supporting our beneficiary families, who were suffering the consequences of the pandemic and the lockdown, adding actions specifically oriented to the COVID-19 scenario. Secondly, ensure the safety and health of our staff while being able to keep implementing the activities.

In the following chapters we'll expose the actions which were taken by our organization, and the recommendations that can be done for future situations of crisis.

Projects

Recommended actions:

1. Adapt projects' goals and activities to the changing reality.
2. Include beneficiaries' new necessities as priority actions.

Specific 2020 example:

Adapt projects' activities to the new reality

- Interventions in cases of gender violence, domestic violence and sexual abuse. Creation of protocols for gender violence and workplace harassment.
- Distribution of monetary aid to beneficiary teachers who have lost their income.
- Recharge of mobile phones for teachers, assistants and beneficiaries to guarantee their connectivity.
- Teaching Life Skills Empowerment (LSE) classes to beneficiaries through mobile devices.
- Teaching classes to preschool students through WhatsApp, creating videos, distributing material to beneficiaries.
- Creation of an online curriculum.
- Follow-up calls by the team to our beneficiaries.
- Alliances with other organizations or volunteers to carry out extra activities: Art Therapy, SlamOutLoud NGO.
- Health: Payment of medicines and / or treatments, and telephone follow-up of cases.

Include beneficiaries' new necessities as priority actions

- Readapting current infrastructure to new needs, for instance, turn preschools into community centres.
- Offering our facilities to authorities, along with our vehicles.
- Creating shelters for homeless persons.
- Distributing food packs to guarantee our beneficiaries food security.
- Distribution of hygiene products.
- Distribution of ready-to-eat meals to homeless persons.

Administration and Finance

Recommended actions:

1. Assess possible impacts generated by the crisis (e.g., possible loss of social base, supplying problems or delays).
2. Evaluate and take specific financial decisions (e.g., reformulation of budgets).
3. Launch fundraising campaigns specifically focused in addressing the crisis situation.

Specific 2020 example:

How to react to the possible loss of social base?

Loss of social base is temporary during the period of pandemic. At such times, higher visibility on online platforms can be reached to younger generation of individuals using graphic designs with the logo of the entity. Younger generation are more active during such times as they not only do things for a cause but also to add it to their Resume/ Curriculum Vitae.

Loss of donors could be not only temporary, but permanent (unfortunately) due to the lack of livelihoods. It can be difficult to get these donors back.

Banking on the pandemic, an opportunity to penetrate into the areas which were never explored may open. The current donors may be lost but this might give the entity more insights on other ways to raise funds like crowdfunding, collaborating with celebrities to raise funds and increase the strength of volunteers associated with the entity. Preference may be given to probono activities rather than paid ones.

Evaluate the need to make important financial decisions: voluntary renounce of extra pays, impossibility of raising salaries as promised

During a pandemic there may be shutdowns which may lead to job losses of the beneficiaries. Due to this, the entity may receive lesser donations and might face liquidity issues to pay its employees as well. In such a scenario, all promised increments must be deferred until the situation is normalized with respect to receipt of donations. Further, one to one meeting must be held with the employees to make them aware of the gravity of the situation. Such deferral shall be made across the organization to avoid bitter feelings for each other among the employees.

Budgets reformulating

The budgets shall be reformulated if it is viable. Matters that need to be considered before reformulating the budgets is that whether it is permitted by the statute governing the entity, whether any new projects are within the Objects of the entity as per the Articles of Association or Bye Laws of the organization. Care must be taken while redrafting the budgets that all unnecessary items are removed from the budgets and only bare essential items are included enough to fight the pandemic.

Monetary donations (special fundraising campaigns)

Fundraising campaigns may be started by the entity for collection of funds due to loss of social base. Possible ways to start a fundraising include starting them on an online portal. Care must be taken that the entity does not share its bank details on push mode but only on pull mode. The entity can even ask its employees to garner funds (if volunteers unavailable) and can pay them a commission of 2-3% of the funds raised. This can help the organization to raise funds and will also motivate the employees to help the entity in the same. Also, good publicity shall be done by everyone connected to the entity (management, employees, and consultants) about the fund raiser to create awareness on social media.

Donations in kind

Details of all non-monetary donors shall be compiled by the admin or project team to send a Thank you letter with photographs of the beneficiaries using their donations. Such letters may be sent after 6 months of the receipt of donation. This way the donor may be willing to engage again with the entity in some or the other way. Further, such donations received shall be recorded by the admin describing the item received, number of units, place where stored, and details of the beneficiary if already distributed. This improves transparency of the organization.

Suppliers: possibility of logistic problems, suppliers closed, lack of employees, delays, etc.

During the pandemic many suppliers may not be able to pay their rents and hence may close down operations. It is pertinent for the Purchase Department to be in contact with the regular suppliers to maintain good relations with them and understand the impact of pandemic on them too. The entity may have to make a difficult choice between the current supplier supplying the materials at normal rates and a new supplier supplying the materials at a much cheaper rate. Due to lack of funds, the entity may choose the new supplier but care must be taken that the existing supplier is contacted regularly by the Purchase Department to know about their well-being.

In case the suppliers are not working due to the pandemic, it may affect the projects of the entity. In such a scenario, the entity may have to postpone its projects or search amongst its beneficiaries itself if anyone supplies the required materials.

Proper planning must be done by the Purchase Department if giving any job order to a supplier. Due to pandemic and shut down of offices, many migrant workers would flee to their hometown and would lead to labour crisis. Hence the Purchase Department shall be diligent and plan the timeline of the job order to fit into timeline of the projects.

Need of special objects at home (for instance, Mumbai Smiles stamp, printer, etc.)

Basic office materials shall be provided by the entity to the Administration and Purchase Departments including stamps, envelopes, letterheads, cheque books etc. Further, all the employees not already having a personal computer at his residence, shall be provided a laptop/desktop (depending on feasibility of the entity) so that project work is not affected due to the pandemic.

Legal

Recommended actions:

1. Adapt actions to changing schedules of official bodies and authorities.
2. Do all possible efforts to solve pending issues in an amicable way, considering the peculiarity of the context.
3. Have all actions vetted and validated by statutory consultants in order to avoid future legal problems.

Specific 2020 example:

How do affect that official offices are closed? For instance, registration offices, etc. Which are the steps to be followed?

If the registered office is closed, the same can be informed on the official website of the entity as well as on the social media handles of the entity.

Further, a contact number maybe provided (other than the landline number of the registered office) so that anyone willing to make a donation or willing to volunteer may contact the new contact number. In case the rent agreement with the landlord expires during the period of shutdown, proper MOU must be exchanged between the parties on email at least to avoid confusion in future.

Intern document between Mumbai Smiles and landlords if we are negotiating, both parts should commit with each other and resolve bureaucratic problems ASAP

An internal MOU must be prepared between the landlords and the entity so as to enter into a mutual agreement on the increment or reduction or maintaining status quo. In case of disagreement, the entity may give a termination notice to the landlords if feasible as per the agreement entered into. All communication between the parties shall be documented and attested by both the parties to avoid legal problems.

All pending legal issues shall be resolved amicably by the parties considering the pandemic hits everyone equally. Suitable extension of grace period shall be provided so as to avoid legal cost and waste of time and energy in legal proceedings.

For ongoing litigations, the legal consultant may suggest a suitable procedure which does not hamper the financial stability of the entity.

For regulatory compliances, all the actions taken by the company shall be vetted by the statutory consultants of the company so as to avoid problems in the future with respect to any registrations/ certifications/ MOUs entered into.

Bank

Recommended actions:

1. Have all banking procedures digitalized to avoid depending on visits to the branch office.
2. Make sure all management and admin staffs have online banking credentials.

Specific 2020 example:

All the banking procedures must be digitalised to avoid visits to the bank. Role of the relationship manager is crucial in such times. Good relations with the RM can speed up the documentation part required for digitization.

Any instance of online banking requires online authentication. Hence all the management and admin personal must have online banking credentials. Further, it is pertinent that the credentials are linked with the email id and mobile number of the entity and not personal email id and mobile number of the employee.

Staff

Recommended actions:

1. Facilitate flexible options for staff to work adapting to the current reality (e.g., telecommuting, consider personal circumstances).
2. Provide the staff with materials and resources needed to work in the new context.
3. Readapt functions and responsibilities if needed.
4. Add, cancel or postpone activities as needed and depending on the possibilities (celebrations, trainings, etc.).

Specific 2020 example:

Telecommuting

The first measure that was taken with respect to the team, a week before the confinement was officially decreed in India, was the obligation for everyone to work from home.

Provide computers and connectivity if necessary

During the first six months (March to September) a total of six laptops and five desktops were provided. In addition, the internet connection to a worker is paid monthly. It is important to take into account the connectivity and means available to the team in their homes so that they can carry out their tasks in the most effective way.

Readaptation of functions if necessary

It may be the case that some functions cannot be developed in the new scenario. For example, the first measure that the Indian government launched in its attempt to curb the COVID-19 pandemic was to order the closure of its borders, thus cancelling the entry of international passengers. Thus, all scheduled visits were cancelled, so the person responsible for the Awareness Department in Mumbai saw her activity drastically reduced. It was then proceeded to assign communication tasks in coordination with the Spanish team and management (blog update and social networks, content creation, etc.) and also support tasks for human resources and management (update and order documentation of employees online, search for possible collaborating organizations, etc.).

Take into account the personal circumstances of the team

The family unit in India, traditionally, consists of more members than the European ones. It is common for married couples, in-laws and children to live in the same house. As gender inequality is a reality in Indian society, women are in charge of domestic chores and caring for children and adults. Working all day from home, added to the fact that domestic workers cannot travel to their workplace due to the cancellation of means of transportation, can cause women employees of the organization to leave aside her profession to occupy her time with housework and care. This can cause stress and frustration impacting their mental health. The organization must know as much as possible the personal circumstances of its team, especially the most vulnerable people, in order to understand eventual changes in work dynamics.

Extra-motivational activities

It is important to encourage and offer activities that may have a positive impact on the physical and emotional health of the team. That is why voluntary assistance activities were offered, such as Spanish classes, stress management workshops, online fitness trainings, etc.

Cancellation of team celebrations

Following one of the key recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO), about avoiding the celebration of group events, the traditional Diwali festival proposed by the organization was suspended, as well as other collective actions.

Communication and awareness

Recommended actions:

1. Make sure all the staff and board are informed on the situation and the relevant decisions taken are communicated in a timely manner.
2. Keep the partners, donors and stakeholders informed about the actions taken to deal with the crisis.
3. Maintain a fluid communication with our communities in order to learn the needs they have because of the crisis, as well as have them be aware of the recommendations they should take into account.

Specific 2020 example:

A. Internal Communication

- Board of Trustees: constant updating of the situation and consultation of the steps to take.
- Team: Continuously report on the decisions taken and other general information that to one extent or another may affect the organization.
- Visits: Cancellation of visits due to the closure of borders in the first place, the impossibility of obtaining tourist visas and the health emergency situation that exists in the world. Tour 'tourist' in video once the projects to share have been resumed.

B. External Communication (General Public)

- General Communications (office closure, project changes).
- Social networks and web.
- Media.

C. Partners and Donors

- Biweekly video of Jaume broadcast on social networks.
- Contact all donor companies personally, interested in their particular situation and, in particular, if the relationship with Mumbai Smiles was going to be affected by the economic consequences that the pandemic could bring.
- Adaptation of the Emotional Gift to the context.
- Physical communications become online communications.
- Tips for confinement.

D. Awareness for our communities

- Initial visits before the imposition of confinement:
 - Informing about the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19: importance of hygiene, especially of the hands, always maintaining a minimum safety distance of 1.5 meters between people, use of a mask, etc.
- Explanation of the usual symptoms of the disease: Cough, fever, fatigue, etc.
- Subsequently, awareness was made through voice messages, telephone calls, sending of graphic information and telephone numbers of interest through WhatsApp.
- Messages of support for Spanish society.

Institutional

Recommended actions:

1. Keep a constant communication and coordination with relevant authorities, making sure our actions are aligned with their policies and recommendations, and joining efforts whenever it is feasible.

Specific 2020 example:

We have kept and improved our links with key authorities in the city of Mumbai:

BMC

At first, all our facilities and resources were offered to the local authorities to be put at the service of the community: nursery schools, community centres and organization vehicles were made available to the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (BMC).

In addition, in an attempt to alleviate the food needs of a group of people with physical disabilities in the Mulund West neighbourhood, a donation was made to this institution with which it was possible to provide 165 food and sanitary material packages to the families.

Spanish Consulate in Mumbai and Indian Embassy in Spain

In order for the organization to be constantly informed of any changes related to the health emergency situation, particularly in India and Spain, as well as of its bilateral relations, an attempt has been made to strengthen relations both with the Consulate General of Spain in Mumbai as with the Indian Embassy in Madrid. Through the first, we were able to manage the mobility of our vehicles, which was very useful for the mobility of at least a part of the team. Thanks to this, it was possible to attend food distributions, make visits to the communities and countless other steps.



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