

COVID-19 IN CHOCHÓ, COLOMBIA: LEARNING FROM GRASSROOT RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

POLICY BRIEF

Low and Middle Income Countries Research Network (LMIC)

Policy Brief

This policy brief draws lessons from the project Responding to COVID-19 in Chocó, Colombia (Principal Investigator – Mo Hume), funded by the University of Glasgow’s GCRF Small Grants Fund, an initiative supported by an allocation of Global Challenges Research Fund from the Scottish Funding Council under agreement SFC/AN/18/2020.

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Acknowledgements: with thanks to Mary Ryan, Ben Kassous, Gary Jackson and Catriona McCallum and the Glasgow Centre for International Development, Heather Ferguson, Alicia Davis and Ana Miranda.

Executive summary

This policy brief shares insights on the Diocese of Quibdó’s grassroots response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Chocó, Colombia. COVID-19 poses significant challenges to marginalised communities living in fragile contexts, such as Chocó. The pandemic has exposed and deepened pre-existing dimensions of fragility for these communities. The brief draws lessons that may be used to inform best practice and future planning in Chocó and other fragile contexts.

The Diocese’s response was developed in partnership with the University of Glasgow and Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF) and supported by the Scottish Funding Council – Global Challenges Research Fund.¹ This international partnership combines the deep expertise and local understanding of the Diocese with the skills, knowledge and experience of the University of Glasgow and SCIAF. The partnership developed a programme of interventions in the early phases of the pandemic. The brief draws on the evaluation of this programme to share the following lessons.

- 1. Interventions must be tailored to the specific challenges of fragile contexts.** The COVID-19 pandemic intersects with pre-existing fragilities, such as poverty, limited formal healthcare systems and conflict. Dominant policy responses, such as national lockdowns, may be inappropriate in fragile contexts and generate unintended consequences. These realities demand localised, context-specific and culturally appropriate responses.
- 2. Interventions should be grounded in the expertise of trusted local actors and close consultation with communities.** Local expert actors are best placed to adapt high-level public health advice to realities on the ground. Community consultation is an important part of this process; engaging meaningfully with communities and supporting them to identify and address priorities during the crisis. Taken together, such engagement reinforces trust and solidarity in the response to the pandemic.
- 3. Interventions must be attentive to local socio-cultural practices.** Engagement with communities will also ensure that interventions are attentive to local socio-cultural practices. Integrating local socio-cultural practices builds trust with communities and moulds public health messages to target populations. It also harnesses their knowledge and experience to develop collective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4. Donor flexibility is needed to support local partners through the crisis.** The pandemic has taken priority in many fragile contexts, which places pressures on the delivery of existing NGO projects. Flexibility from donor agencies enables in-country partners to focus on the pandemic and utilise their expertise to respond quickly and efficiently to the needs of communities.
- 5. Work is needed to understand and respond to the long-term effects of COVID-19 on fragile contexts.** The pandemic is reshaping fragile contexts in multiple and complex ways. Work is needed to understand the long-term effects of COVID-19 on such contexts and support communities as they re-build after the pandemic.

¹ Project title: *Responding to COVID-19 in Chocó, Colombia* - £150,000 awarded from the Global Challenges COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund, the University of Glasgow’s GCRF Small Grants Fund, an initiative supported by an allocation of Global Challenges Research Fund from the Scottish Funding Council under agreement SFC/AN/18/ (Principal Investigator – Mo Hume).

The COVID-19 pandemic poses significant challenges to marginalised communities living in fragile contexts. There is much to learn, though, from the responses of these communities.

Introduction

COVID-19 poses significant challenges to marginalised communities living in fragile contexts. The pandemic has exposed and deepened pre-existing dimensions of fragility for these communities. Dominant policy responses, such as national lockdowns, may be inappropriate in fragile contexts and generate unintended consequences. These realities demand localised, context-specific and culturally appropriate responses. This policy brief shares insights on responding to the pandemic in one such context: Chocó, Colombia. It examines the grassroots response of the Diocese of Quibdó to COVID-19, against the background of entrenched poverty, armed conflict and socio-environmental crisis. The brief draws lessons that may be used to inform best practice and future planning in Chocó and other fragile contexts. These lessons are also relevant to high-income countries that have expended extensive resources on the crisis yet struggled to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The Diocese's response was developed in partnership with the University of Glasgow and Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCI AF) and supported by the Scottish Funding Council – Global Challenges Research Fund.² This international partnership combines the deep expertise and local understanding of the Diocese with the skills, knowledge and experience of the University of Glasgow and SCI AF. The partnership developed a programme of interventions in the early phases of the pandemic. This programme included a communications campaign on COVID-19 and messaging on preventing transmission; humanitarian aid to 1,050 at-risk families in isolated villages; the development of virtual workshops on managing grief during the curtailment of cultural mourning rituals; and information on the use of traditional medicines for treating symptoms of the virus. With support from its international partners, the Diocese of Quibdó was well-placed to deliver this programme of interventions in Chocó. The Diocese is deeply embedded in communities and a central member of the region's Emergency Response Committee.

The brief draws on the evaluation of this programme and the grey literature, as well as reflecting more widely on the impacts of COVID-19 on Chocó. From this analysis, we share the following lessons on responding to pandemics in fragile contexts.

Defining 'fragile contexts'

The OECD (2020b) states that fragile contexts are characterised by 'the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, poverty, inequality, displacement, and environmental and political degradation.' Therefore, a fragile context may refer to a global region, country, national area, city, neighbourhood or community, for example, in low, middle or high-income countries.

- 1. Interventions must be tailored to the specific challenges of fragile contexts.** The COVID-19 pandemic intersects with pre-existing fragilities, such as poverty, limited formal healthcare systems and conflict. Dominant policy interventions, tailored to the capacities of high-income countries, for example, may be ineffective and cause unintended consequences. Adapting general public health guidelines to the specific and competing challenges of fragile contexts is crucial to delivering effective interventions.
- 2. Interventions should be grounded in the expertise of trusted local actors and close consultation with communities.** Local expert actors, such as the Diocese of Quibdó, are best placed to adapt high-level public health advice to realities on the ground. Community consultation is an important part of this process; engaging meaningfully with communities and supporting them to identify and address priorities during the crisis. Taken together, such engagement reinforces trust and solidarity in the response to the pandemic.
- 3. Interventions must be attentive to local socio-cultural practices.** Engagement with communities will also ensure that interventions are attentive to local socio-cultural practices. In Chocó, community engagement adhered to collective modes of decision-making in Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations. Integrating local socio-cultural practices builds trust with communities and moulds public health messages to target populations. It also harnesses their knowledges and experience to develop collective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4. Donor flexibility is needed to support local partners through the crisis.** The pandemic has taken priority in many fragile contexts, which places pressures on the delivery of existing NGO projects. In this case, the COVID response project was able to proceed as SCI AF facilitated a three-month cost extension (not just suspension) of existing projects with the Diocese of Quibdó and allowed funds for staff on other projects to be used to elsewhere. Flexibility from donor agencies enables in-country partners to focus on the pandemic and utilise their expertise to respond quickly and efficiently to the needs of communities.

² Project title: *Responding to COVID-19 in Chocó, Colombia* - £150,000 awarded from the Global Challenges COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund, administered by the University of Glasgow on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (Principal Investigator – Mo Hume).

5. Work is needed to understand and respond to the long-term effects of COVID-19 on fragile contexts. The pandemic is reshaping fragile contexts in multiple ways. In Chocó, armed groups have exploited lockdowns to tighten their grip over communities, while the rise in global gold prices due to the pandemic threatens to unleash a new wave of illegal mechanised gold mining and socio-environmental devastation. Indeed, early-analysis from the Colombia River Stories project reveals an intensification of gold mining in the Río Quito municipality in Chocó. Work is needed to understand the long-term effects of COVID-19 on such contexts and support communities as they re-build after the pandemic.

Responding to COVID-19 in fragile contexts

As COVID-19 spread through Western Europe and stretched health systems to breaking point, many feared that the pandemic would have dire consequences for fragile contexts. The IRC (2020: 1) warned that these contexts faced a 'double emergency': 'the direct health impact [of COVID-19] and its secondary devastation to these states' fragile humanitarian, economic, security and political environments'. Although many of these cases have handled the initial phases of the crisis better than first expected, fragile contexts have faced particular challenges in responding to COVID-19. National lockdown policies have stressed pre-existing dimensions of fragility, and fears remain about long-term social, political and economic impacts of the pandemic.

National lockdowns have pushed households further into poverty and increased hunger in fragile contexts, across the globe, including in high-income countries where high inequalities have come into sharp focus. Governments across the world have imposed lockdowns to suppress virus transmission rates, maintain or build extra critical healthcare capacity and implement 'track and trace' systems. The appropriateness of this model to fragile contexts may be questioned. In many high-income countries, lockdown measures have been accompanied by vast economic relief packages to support industry and protect household income. These economic supports have typically not been available to fragile contexts. For large sectors of society throughout the Global South, informal and subsistence economies provide a key means of survival. National lockdowns have hindered the function of these economies, directly through movement restrictions and indirectly by reducing markets for goods and services (Aguilera, 2020). Lockdown has also impacted on the movement of humanitarian aid and food supply chains, pushing-up food prices in some cases and further increasing precarity. These issues are especially pronounced in communities isolated by ongoing conflict.

Lockdowns have also deepened governance voids that have been filled by armed groups and organised crime (e.g. see Barnes & Albarracín, 2020). In conflict zones, for example, movement restrictions can leave communities cut-off and vulnerable to armed groups. In Colombia, murders of social leaders have increased during the pandemic, as armed groups exploit lockdowns to silence dissenting voices (Pax, 2020). The work of human rights organisations has been curtailed by social distancing guidelines, further exposing social

leaders and communities.³ Beyond the immediate effects of increased fear and violence in communities, these dynamics may entrench conflict. This deepening of conflict includes the strengthening of armed groups and consolidation of territory, as well as the loss of momentum and reversal of peacebuilding efforts. As Bahtia (2020) argues, 'social distancing carries higher economic and human costs' in these contexts.

The low starting level of healthcare capacity in fragile contexts further undermines this approach to the pandemic (UNDP, 2020). Hugely inadequate healthcare systems make it unlikely that the capacity needed for COVID-19 will be reached. The OECD (2020: 3) highlights that 'hospitals and healthcare are concentrated in capitals and most of the population in fragile contexts live in rural and peripheral urban areas, meaning they have no physical or financial access to hospitals'. In high-income countries, lockdown has been used to buy time to better prepare for the virus; 'for the poorest countries, it is not always clear what they are buying time for' (Bhatia, 2020). In this sense, communities suffer the negative social and economic impacts of lockdown without the benefit of increased access to healthcare provision. These effects are exacerbated by lack of access to clean water and sanitation, with many unable to follow the hygiene measures advocated by the WHO to reduce transmission.

Public trust in government is also crucial to the adoption of public health messaging around the pandemic. Low government trust is common in marginalised communities, who experience human rights abuses and state abandonment. The IRC (2020: 3) notes that low trust in government in eastern DRC during the Ebola crisis hampered efforts to instil public health preventative measures. Some communities viewed public health messaging with suspicion: conspiracy theories circulated that Ebola was part of a government plot to retake territory; others suspected the government would exploit the crisis to syphon funds from international donors. International Crisis Group (2020) also warns that authoritarian governments may exploit COVID-19 to tighten control over society, through militarisation of public security and curtailment of civil liberties. Mercy Corps (2020: 3) states that 'fragile social contracts are further eroding where COVID-19 is seen by local populations as an opportunity for corruption, incompetence, and exclusive or repressive behaviour by governments'. As such, poor governance and low public trust does not only hamper the policy response to the pandemic. It may reduce compliance with public health guidelines and lead to higher mortality rates.

There is also much to learn, though, from the responses of governments, NGOs and communities in fragile contexts and the Global South more widely. Typically, these responses focus on community engagement and the utilisation of existing networks rather than high-tech solutions. Boland, et. al. (2020) highlight the importance of community-level responses to the pandemic: 'a top-down response guided by experts alongside a ground-up strategy of locally driven and

³ This issue is not specific to fragile contexts in the Global South. Work with vulnerable populations in Scotland, including refugees and disabled communities, were also affected by lockdown. See *Scotland in Lockdown*: <https://scotlandinlockdown.co.uk/findings/>.

owned interventions'. During the Ebola outbreak, for example, authorities trained thousands of local people in Sierra Leone and DRC to contact-trace and share public health information. The local knowledge of these contact tracers helped to build trust with communities. Decentralisation ensured sensitivity to local needs and demographics (e.g. see Parker, et. al., 2019), with recognition that 'community engagement, risk communication, psychosocial and survivor care, quarantine support (including food delivery and financial aid), logistics, planning, and partnerships were equally central to testing, surveillance, quarantine compliance, and case management' (Boland, et. al., 2020). This approach mobilised communities in the response to Ebola and helped to tailor interventions to their needs. Mormina and Nsofor (2020) argue that the failure of Global North countries to learn lessons from such examples represents historically engrained, racialised narratives about 'advanced' developed countries and 'backward' developing countries. Skills and expertise in developing country contexts of responding to multifaceted crises have been deployed effectively to the pandemic, often at much lesser expense.

These examples demonstrate the importance of avoiding 'one size fits all' policies (IRC, 2020) and instead adapting responses to the specific challenges of fragile contexts. The OECD (2020) argues that public health provisions by themselves are not enough to deal with the pandemic in these contexts: 'fragility cuts across economic, environmental, political, security, and societal dimensions and all those dimensions are important to help countries build a strengthened health system' (OECD, 2020: 7). Returning to the case of Ebola in West Africa, governments and international development actors faced severe challenges in implementing public health responses in areas of conflict and feared the crisis would in-turn destabilise the region (Moran, 2018; Wells, et. al.: 2019; Wise & Barry, 2017). International public health workers initially came under attack as they were assumed to be associated with government forces, for example. Negotiating access to conflict areas and building public trust formed a key part of the public health response to Ebola. In this sense, distinct aspects of fragility interact and complicate policy responses, making interventions that focus solely on public health measures ineffective. The multidimensional nature of fragility demands a multidimensional approach.

In this vein, the development sector warns that the pandemic is stressing these dimensions of fragility and creating new challenges for marginalised communities. Mercy Corps (2020: 1) draws links between shocks like pandemics and the intensification of conflicts, 'especially in low-income and ethno-linguistically fragmented countries'; while World Vision (2020: 1) states that 'the consequences of the COVID-19 virus are likely to be catastrophic for the protection and rights of children already living in situations of humanitarian crisis'. The gendered effects of the pandemic may also be experienced more severely by women in fragile contexts. These effects include heightened risks of interpersonal violence,⁴ restricted access to sexual and reproductive health, damage to livelihoods and increased exposure to the disease due to greater engagement in paid and unpaid care work. Looking ahead, the UN (2020a) states that insufficient attention to these

gendered impacts of the pandemic may reduce the ability of women to participate in peacebuilding efforts in fragile contexts. Such impacts may prolong or deepen conflict in these countries, while exacerbating gender inequality. This constitutes just one aspect of potential second-order effects of the pandemic on fragile contexts. Recognising these implications, the UN (2020b) has called on the world to 'build back better' in the years ahead by engaging with all aspects of fragility and the far ranging social, economic and political impacts of the pandemic.

Background to Chocó

Communities in Chocó were already living through a humanitarian crisis when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Local ethno-territorial groups declared a humanitarian crisis in 2017, calling for peace, the full realisation of human rights in the region and an end to socio-environmental devastation from illegal, mechanised mining. Chocó is the poorest department of Colombia, with 58.7 per cent of the population living in poverty and 32.7 per cent in extreme poverty (DANE, 2017). These statistics reflect Colombia's wide socio-economic and racial inequalities. Chocó's primarily Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are denied basic rights, such as safe drinking water, sanitation and adequate healthcare. At the start of the pandemic, for example, Chocó had just 27 intensive care beds for a population of over 500,000 (Semana, 2020). The sole regional hospital was then closed on 18 April, when staff were quarantined for 14 days due to a coronavirus outbreak. Chocó's limited formal health systems, which are inaccessible for many due to poverty and lack of transport infrastructure through the remote region, made communities extremely vulnerable to the onset of COVID-19. Many communities imposed their own transmission suppression strategies in response, restricting access into their rural villages and relying on their subsistence livelihoods during lockdown, for example.

The ongoing Colombian armed conflict compounds structural inequalities in Chocó. The region has been a key arena of the conflict since the 1990s. A tradition of collective organisation in Chocó has been a source of strength and resistance for communities, as they repeatedly assert their independence from the conflict and call for respect for human rights by all combatants. The conflict, though, continues unabated. Communities have experienced violence, forced confinement and displacement due to fighting between armed groups and state forces. Social leaders have been killed for speaking out against the violence. The region's geolocation, with access to the Caribbean, the Pacific and the land border with Panama, makes it strategically important for various illicit economies. Guerrilla and paramilitary groups have sought control of these lucrative illicit economies and Chocó's rich natural resources. As the FARC guerrillas demobilised as part of the 2016 peace accords, the conflict intensified in Chocó. The remaining armed groups have scaled-up their operations to compete for control of territory and revenue streams vacated by the FARC, including drugs and arms trafficking, people smuggling and gold mining. Communities once again have been caught-up in the crossfire.

4 Again, this issue was by no means unique to fragile contexts in the Global South. See *Scotland in Lockdown*: <https://scotlandinlockdown.co.uk/findings/>.

One of these illicit economies – mechanised alluvial gold mining – has not only acted as a magnet for armed groups; it has also caused a socio-environmental catastrophe in Chocó. The rainforest region is a global biodiversity hotspot. As global gold prices increased around the time of the 2007 banking crisis, though, mining operations from across South America flocked to Chocó to exploit its rich gold deposits. Funded by national and international capital, these operations use dredgers to extract gold from riverbeds. Heavy machinery strips the banks of the river of vegetation and eats into the once pristine rainforest, causing biodiversity loss. For Chocó's riverine communities, the destruction of their ancestral collective territories represents an existential threat. Their ways of life and cultural identity are interwoven with these territories. Illegal mechanised mining has caused deforestation, destruction of river channels and contamination, as well as public health problems and loss of subsistence livelihoods, such as fishing, farming and gold panning. It has increased food insecurity and brought social problems into communities, such as prostitution and drug abuse. Armed groups have established a permanent presence in these areas to protect mining operations and extract royalties. Such groups rule by fear, supplanting local forms of collective governance. The social and cultural identity of communities is slowly being challenged as the mining destroys Afro and indigenous traditional ways of life and makes their collective territories unrecognisable.

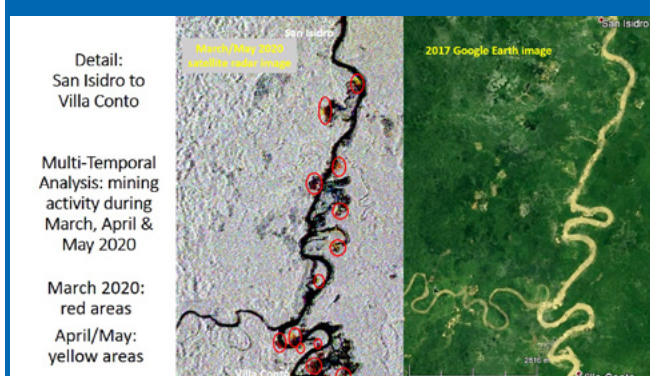
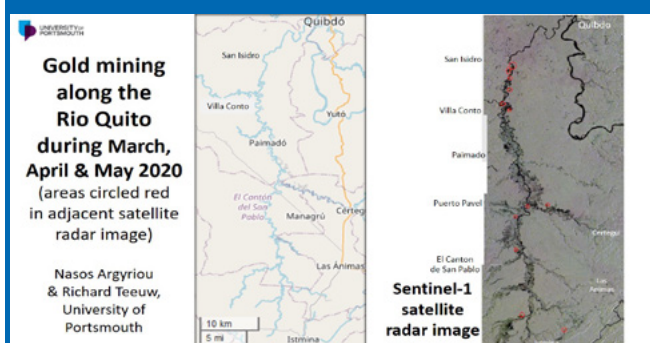
In response to this devastation, the Colombian Constitutional Court issued Ruling T-622 in 2017. T-622 demands a halt to the mining and establishes the Río Atrato – one of the major river arteries in Chocó – as a bearer of legal rights. The landmark ruling demands the river basin's protection, preservation and restoration, and recognises the inextricable relationship between the communities and their collective territories. Despite pressure from communities, implementation of the ruling remains far from complete. Now with global gold prices rising again in the wake of the global pandemic, early-reports show mining activity is expanding in Chocó once more (see box above).

Responding to COVID in Chocó

In Chocó, COVID-19 has intersected with pre-existing fragilities of widespread poverty, limited formal healthcare systems, the armed conflict and socio-environmental destruction. These intersections have created challenges in responding to the pandemic, while undermining the rationale of national policies to address the crisis. In June 2020, Chocó's ethno-territorial organisations and the Diocese of Quibdó issued a statement that condemned the government's handling of the pandemic. The statement denounced ongoing state abandonment of the region, corruption and violence.⁵ It stated that the pandemic had again exposed how communities were being denied their basic rights. In surveys with communities, respondents said that their greatest fear is suffering from the disease and not having anywhere to turn. Initially they tend to use traditional medicines for mild symptoms,⁶ but respondents were aware that these medicines would be insufficient to treat more severe cases of infection. There was a lack of information

Remote sensing of gold mining activity on the Río Quito

Our analysis of images from the Sentinel-1 radar satellite of the European Space Agency shows changes in the distribution and extent of alluvial gold mining on the Río Quito – a large river tributary of the Río Atrato and one of the epicentres of illegal mechanised gold mining in Chocó. In the images shown below, red circles are used to highlight areas of new mining activity along the Quito between 23 March and 21 May 2020. As the first illustration shows, there are some new mining sites in the headwaters of the Río Quito, and some new mining a few kilometres south of the village of Paimadó. However, the biggest recent increase in mining activity is further north, only a few kilometres from Quibdó; along the Quito river floodplain between San Isidro and Villa Contó. From our observations using satellite radar imagery, this shift of mining activity from Paimadó area northwards to San Isidro has been occurring since December 2019, although it seems to have accelerated during the pandemic



[Analysis conducted as part of Colombia River Stories: improving socio-environmental understandings for building sustainable peace - ES/S001883/1]

5 See <https://twitter.com/FISCHETNICO/status/1270028451135868930/photo/1>.

6 In Afro-Colombian communities, traditional medicines refer to plant and herbal remedies passed down through folk knowledge.

about the virus, which led to rumours and confusion.

Against this background, the Diocese of Quibdó, the University of Glasgow and SCIAF sought to formulate vital early interventions in the initial phases of the pandemic in Chocó. These interventions formed part of the project, *Responding to COVID-19 in Chocó, Colombia*, funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund. The project combined academic and clinical expertise, with on-the-ground understanding of traditional knowledge around health and well-being to identify and respond to the challenges of the pandemic in a context of existing humanitarian crisis and collective living. The principle of community consultation⁷ was fundamental to the project. Facilitated by the Diocese of Quibdó, the project worked closely with community leaders to ensure that interventions were driven by the needs of local people and sensitive to their socio-cultural practices. The Diocese then drew on these networks to deliver elements of the project. Indeed, it was one of the few actors permitted to mobilise in Chocó during the strictest initial stages of the government lockdown.

The project's programme of interventions had four main strands, addressing both immediate public health concerns and the psycho-social effects of the pandemic.

- **Public health communications campaign:** The project produced four videos on different themes that communicated key public health messages.⁸ These videos were posted to YouTube and Facebook, and shared widely through WhatsApp – one of the main communication platforms in Chocó. The provision of tablets to communities (see below) also facilitated access to the videos. The content was tailored to the local population, with context specific music, imaging and information. It included both general public health advice on the pandemic, as well as themes and narratives from local culture and history. The Pastor's deep embeddedness in the community informed this content. Videos included: 'Vida te quiero' – 'I love you, life', a music video for a song specially written and recorded for the project, which promoted well-being and self-care, resilience and solidarity as crucial practices during the pandemic; 'Es hora de conocer y autocuidarse' – 'It is the time to educate and take care of yourself', provided context to the pandemic and shared transmission prevention measures, such as handwashing; and 'Es hora de ayudar' – 'It is the time to help' and 'El sentido de vida' – 'The meaning of life', called on communities to bind together during the crisis by mobilising local cultural narratives from Chocó's history and firmly embedding public health messaging in ethno-territorial practices. This content was also adapted to radio spots that were broadcast throughout the region, thereby increasing penetration of public health messages. The communications campaign thus aimed to engage local communities with public health messaging, while also taking a wider view of the response to the pandemic. In the absence of the required government resources, for example, Chocó's history of solidarity, resistance and resilience would be crucial to managing the effects of the pandemic.

- **Humanitarian packs:** National lockdown has had severe impacts on communities in Chocó. For example, movement restrictions have impacted on traditional livelihoods and food security. The Diocese worked with community leaders to identify and deliver humanitarian packs to 1,050 at-risk families. This humanitarian support (containing hygiene products, personal protective equipment and food) met pressing needs of communities and encouraged their engagement in public health messaging. The Diocese's public health team delivered humanitarian packs to remote villages, using these visits to distribute leaflets on COVID-19 to local people and provide informal information explaining the effects of the virus, transmission prevention measures and when to seek medical help. These visits also allowed the Diocese gather on-the-ground information on the effects of the pandemic of the communities, which fed into the project's activities and evaluation.
- **Traditional medicines:** During these visits, the Diocese also distributed information leaflets on using traditional medicines to treat mild symptoms of COVID-19, emphasising the importance of prevention and seeking access to formal healthcare symptoms should symptoms worsen. For remote rural communities unable to access formal healthcare systems, traditional medicines remain central to life. Traditional medicines not only provide treatment for these communities, they also hold social and cultural importance. Communities understood both the importance of preventative measures in stopping the spread of the virus and that traditional medicines were not an adequate substitute for formal healthcare in severe cases of infection.
- **Psychosocial support:** Social distancing measures have curtailed traditional mourning rituals for Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó. Restrictions on funerals may cause deep emotional stress for grieving families. The project developed six modules on grieving for such families, which were delivered during 18 virtual workshops (approx. 100 participated in total). These modules now form an important resource for communities dealing with a key dimension of the mental health effects of the pandemic. Digital inequalities in Chocó mean that many rural communities lack the means to access the internet. To mitigate this issue, the project delivered tablets to local facilitators and purchased data for use by affected families. However, the region's network coverage lags far behind the rest of the country (e.g. see *El Espectador*, 2020a). Unreliable network coverage and wi-fi in Chocó hindered the ability of some communities to fully participate in online workshops.

The next section reflects on the project to draw wider lessons about responding to the pandemic in a fragile context. Engaging in learning from practice was built into the methodology of the project from its conception. The project – which was focused on building capacity and learning from existing practices – was informed by the methodology of 'systematisation'. It sought transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which are linked by critical reflection. 'Systematisation' draws

7 Community consultation or *consulta previa* refers to the legal right of Afro-Colombian communities to be formally consulted on issues which pertain to their ancestral, collective territories.

8 Available at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTvc7Fzqx_7faCzaZhuFAqA.

heavily from the Latin American tradition of popular education: attempting to promote progressive social change, educators, workers and activists ‘confront situations which are fluid, unstable, changing and uncertain; where everything can seem messy and confused, a collection of interacting problems’ (Barnechea et al, 1994). As a method, it also offers potential to develop useful tools for data collection and developing grassroots responses in times of crisis. Jara (1994: 24) emphasises that ‘sistematización’ should not simply be about narrating, describing and classifying events but should pay attention to ‘the interpretation which “subjects” give to these events so that a space is created in which these interpretations are discussed, shared and challenged’. This methodology was supported by 61 online surveys and three focus groups with community members, and 10 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. As a method developed in Latin America, it also offers potential to develop useful tools for data collection and developing grassroots responses in times of crisis.

Interventions must be tailored to the specific challenges of fragile contexts

As stated previously, the pandemic intersects with pre-existing dimensions of fragility. These intersections must be taken into account when designing and implementing interventions. ‘One-size-fits-all’ approaches are likely to fail. These considerations were crucial to the design and implementation of the project’s programme of interventions. For example, it was immediately clear that national lockdown policies would have major humanitarian implications in remote and neglected communities in Chocó. With food supply chains disrupted, for example, some rural communities were at risk of hunger. This risk was especially pronounced in areas most affected by mining, as farmland and fishing for subsistence economies have been decimated. According to surveys conducted by the Diocese, communities identified food insecurity as one of the main impacts of the pandemic.⁹ Food insecurity is not only due to disruption of food chains. In some places, it has been linked to movement restrictions imposed by armed groups.

The project included humanitarian support to these communities. Transporting humanitarian aid packages through Chocó, though, posed a number of challenges. For example, government approval for the Diocese’s application for special dispensation to travel during lockdown was delayed. Once cleared, Diocese teams navigated through territory controlled by armed groups. While the Diocese’s right to travel to communities has generally been respected by combatants, these trips remain dangerous. The Diocese relies on its networks in Chocó to gather up-to-date information on the status of the armed conflict in different areas to reduce risks of travel. In addition to this, the Diocese encountered issues in sourcing items for aid parcels, as supply chains to Chocó were impacted by lockdown and prices rose due to increased scarcity. Lack of support from the national government and corruption from local government compounded these issues. On this latter issue, Chocó’s local systems of governance have long been plagued by corruption that syphons central funds from government and international donors. Local stakeholders argued that the disfunction of local government and centralised governance structures created hurdles for the

realisation of humanitarian actions in Chocó. The Diocese’s networks through local parishes and expertise of operating in contexts of crises were pivotal in managing these issues.

The pandemic’s intersections with other aspects of fragility were also addressed in the project’s communication campaign. Videos considered the wider humanitarian crisis in Chocó and its impacts on the well-being of local people. In surveys, respondents were aware of the threat posed by COVID-19. However, poverty, conflict and the destruction of collective territories continue to be more immediate concerns for many. The communications campaign recognised these distinct challenges and aimed to mobilise communities in the response to the crisis.

Chocó’s experience of state abandonment means that there is often little option for these communities but to look within for strength. Communities have responded historically to this exclusion through collective organisation and struggle. As well as communicating important public health messages, the communications campaign highlighted this history of collective organisation and resilience in the region, calling for communities to unite in response in the crisis. This community mobilisation – grounded in powerful local cultural narratives – is key in responding to the multidimensional challenges of humanitarian crisis in a fragile context. Collective organisation in Chocó also critiques structural inequalities and demands action from the state to realise the rights of local communities. In this sense, community resilience sat alongside a challenge to the Colombian state and wider society to address the injustices faced by people in Chocó.

Interventions should be grounded in the expertise of trusted local actors and close consultation with communities

The Diocese of Quibdó has a long history of operating under conditions of fragility. In the context of state abandonment, the Diocese is frequently a vital support for communities. For example, as the armed conflict escalated in Chocó during the late-1990s, the Diocese accompanied communities under threat; calling on all combatants to respect the human rights of local people. The Diocese has deep connections to communities, supporting Afro and indigenous efforts to legally claim their ancestral, collective territories since the 1980s. This support included assisting communities to establish ethno-territorial organisations and community councils to represent the interests of the local population. This background gives the Diocese extensive expertise in responding to crisis and unique reach into communities, both in a physical sense and in the deep trust that has been built over decades of collaboration. The Diocese’s importance in responding to the pandemic in Chocó was recognised by its role on the region’s Emergency Response Committee. The project aimed to strengthen the Diocese’s capacity to respond to the pandemic.

During the initial phases of the pandemic, the Diocese in alliance with ethno-territorial organisation continued to travel through Chocó to support communities. The Colombian government and NGOs suspended operations due to risks over biosecurity and armed groups. The Diocese is drawn from and embedded in communities through its networks and

⁹ Recent literature suggests that the pandemic has driven food insecurity across the globe, for example, see Mishra and Rampal (2020) and Gaitán-Rossi, et. al. (2021).

so was able to continue its operations. As stated previously, these networks and the respect it is held in as a neutral actor in the conflict allowed it to navigate through areas controlled by armed groups. Without the Diocese, many communities would have been cut-off completely during the initial phases of the pandemic.

The Diocese applies a 'harmonic method' which they define as close consultation with communities: working closely with communities to ensure their voices are heard and play a key role in defining the priorities of interventions. For example, workshops with communities revealed the demand for support with grieving, underpinning the project's modules on mourning rituals during a time of COVID. At the start of the project, the Pastoral used its networks to identify needs and potential recipients in the communities. In this sense, the embeddedness of the Pastoral in communities through local networks and their links to other local organisations left them well placed to respond. Again, such consultation is crucial to mobilising communities in the response to the crisis. In the case of Chocó, mobilisation focused on the strong cultural tradition of collective living and solidarity. As evident in the communications campaign, it also ensured that high-level public advice on preventing transmission of the virus and managing the wider impacts of the pandemic was context specific. High public trust in the Diocese reinforced the authority of these messages. State abandonment of Chocó and a history of racial exclusion underpins low trust in government among local populations. The Diocese's role in communicating public health messages strengthened their credibility; countering local misinformation, such as black people are immune to the virus.

Interventions must be attentive to local socio-cultural practices.

Another crucial aspect of community engagement is ensuring that interventions are attentive to local socio-cultural factors. This aim aligns with facilitating the voices of communities in defining priorities during the crisis. Integrating aspects of local socio-cultural practices builds trust with communities and moulds public health messages to the target population. It also harnesses their knowledge and experience in the development of contextually-specific responses to the pandemic; responses that recognise, respect and learn from the common and differentiated challenges faced by different communities.

As described previously, formal healthcare systems are out of reach for much of the population of Chocó. State abandonment of the region is evident in the extent of poverty in the region and the lack of formal healthcare systems and travel infrastructure. For many rural communities especially, traditional medicines are the only treatment option. These medicines are trusted by such communities and offer vital relief from milder forms of sickness. The project thus sought to utilise the ancestral knowledge of Afro and indigenous communities around these medicines in the response to COVID-19. Information leaflets on COVID-19 were distributed with humanitarian aid packages in these communities. As well as providing WHO advice on the virus, its health impact and transmission vectors, the leaflet also provided information on the use of traditional medicines to treat mild symptoms of COVID-19, such as coughs and fever. This element of the response tailored high-level advice on the pandemic

to the needs and knowledge of the community, and the lack of access to formal healthcare. In the evaluation of the programme, this intervention reflected communities' strong ties with their territory and a desire to preserve their relationship with traditional medicine, as a source of life and health beyond Western medicine.

In addition to this, the project also supported communities impacted by the curtailment of funerals. **Public health guidelines have prevented communities from practising traditional Afro and indigenous mourning rituals.** As in societies around the world, these rituals play a crucial role in managing grief. In the wider context of the pandemic and the humanitarian crisis in Chocó, such restrictions have a severe impact on mental health. The development of psychosocial support for families recognised the impact of these restrictions on local communities. This intervention aimed to look beyond the immediate public health impacts of the pandemic, instead accounting for the priorities of local communities and the wider traumas of the crisis on mental health.

Donor flexibility is needed to support local partners through the crisis.

Donor agencies, such as SCIAF, are already working in fragile regions vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. In many cases, this work is carried out through local partner organisations, and takes the form of development programmes funded over several years. These programmes aim to deliver short, medium, and long-term impacts. In the case of this COVID-19 response project, SCIAF was already funding development work in Chocó, through their local partner, the Diocese of Quibdó. As the pandemic hit, and lockdown came into force, the Diocese was forced to pause all their development work with communities and local organisations, and redirect their efforts to awareness raising and humanitarian aid. Rather than placing development programmes on hold, SCIAF responded to this fluid situation by granting the Diocese a three-month cost extension. At the same time, SCIAF approved the Diocese's request to allow project staff funded by SCIAF to switch to humanitarian work during this three-month period. The flexibility shown by SCIAF, which was applied widely to local partners across SCIAF's programme countries, proved different to approaches adopted by many other major donors. Many of these NGOs instead favoured no-cost extensions and project suspensions, which may create limitations for the work of in-country partners. SCIAF's more flexible approach had the following positive impacts for the Diocese.

Job security for project staff: During the enforced lockdown period, partners and their staff were ensured job security, knowing that their salaries would be met even if project work was not possible. This approach created a level of certainty for in-country partners, reduced stress and allowed them to focus on the challenges of the pandemic.

Efficient mobilisation of resources: Ability to switch human resources from one project to another enabled a more effective humanitarian response. In places like Chocó, local partners are adept at utilising the resources available to them to best respond to rapidly changing needs of the communities they serve. SCIAF's approach recognised this expertise and sought to facilitate the Diocese's grassroots response to the pandemic.

Reduced pressure on achieving project targets: Cost extensions gave partners the ability to place their existing development projects on hold, safe in the knowledge that they could recover lost time later without having to cut short project activities, reduce targets, or cram activities into a shorter time-frame.

Work is needed to understand and respond to the long-term effects of COVID-19 on fragile contexts

The long-term effects of COVID-19 across different dimensions of fragility are already beginning to emerge. Local stakeholders argue that the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated Chocó's pre-existing vulnerabilities: institutional crisis and corruption of public funds, the armed conflict, historic poverty, exploitation of natural resources with the complicity of the Colombian state, the vulnerability of the rights of children and the rest of the population.

Early reports from across Colombia suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened insecurity for many communities (Calderón & Urbina G., 2020; Garzón & Silva, 2020; Llorente, 2020). Armed groups have exploited the lockdown to expand territory and target social leaders. Communities in lockdown are particularly exposed due to movement restrictions and the impediment of reporting mechanisms for threats and human rights abuses. In Chocó, rural communities have experienced heightened conflict, forced recruitment and harassment from armed groups (e.g. see *El Espectador*, 2020b and 2020c). According to surveys conducted by the Diocese, families and communities feel fear and insecurity. This stress includes not only the conflict but increased intra-family abuse due to movement restrictions imposed by the government and armed groups. In the regional capital Quibdó, violence has increased between urban gangs linked to paramilitaries, guerrillas and drug trafficking organisations, as they fight for control of drug routes. These developments all suggest a deepening of the conflict in Chocó, which further stunts efforts to implement the 2016 peace accords.

The pandemic may also have lasting effects on the environment and efforts towards socio-environmental justice in Chocó. Following the 2008 banking crisis, for example, global gold prices rose rapidly; stimulating a mining boom in Colombia and resultant socio-environmental catastrophes in places such as Chocó. As gold prices rise again due to the economic fallout of the pandemic (FIP, 2020), 'licit' capital, criminal organisations and armed groups may shift greater resources to gold mining. As described previously, early remote sensing analysis from the region suggest that mining has continued throughout the pandemic. Such shifts in illicit economic activity are also likely due to a fall in cocaine wholesale prices as supply outstrips demand in consumer markets due to lockdowns (UNODC, 2020). These changes may trigger not only a new phase of socio-environmental

destruction, but further intense conflict between armed groups for control of new and/or diminishing revenue sources. Recession in Colombia and pressures on those who work in the informal economy may also weaken government policy towards illegal mining. Indeed, illicit economic activity may be viewed as a key driver of economic recovery in marginalised areas of the country. With state capacity weakened due to the crisis, armed actors are already filling governance voids and tightening their grip over communities.

An escalation of the conflict and increased mining are just two potential second order effects of the pandemic in Chocó. In order to address these challenges, gaps in knowledge of how the pandemic has begun to reshape fragility in contexts such as Chocó remain. A stronger evidence base is needed to inform future policy development and support communities as they recover from the effects of the pandemic and continue their struggle for peace, human rights and socio-environmental justice.

Conclusion

The UNAIDS report *Rights in the time of COVID-19 (2020)* sought to share lessons from the HIV epidemic that might inform responses to coronavirus. The report emphasised the importance of engaging 'affected communities from the beginning in all response measures—to build trust, ensure suitability and effectiveness' and argued that 'empowered communities are crucial to an effective response'. These principles are evident in the grassroots response of the Diocese of Quibdó to the pandemic in Chocó. In this fragile context, COVID-19 has created new challenges for communities and deepened pre-existing vulnerabilities. The partnership between the Diocese, the University of Glasgow and SCIAF sought to harness and strengthen the resilience of communities. The project drew on the Latin American popular education method of systematisation to review and assess the effectiveness of interventions: learning from action research through simultaneous processes of reflection and discussion with 'participants'. Reflecting the fusion of 'action' and 'research', these processes are crucial to developing effective grassroots responses.

In Chocó, local forms of collective organisation and solidarity have been a source of strength for communities through intersecting challenges of poverty, conflict, socio-environmental destruction and structural inequality. Through the networks of the Diocese, the project engaged communities to identify priorities and reinforce collaboration in the delivery of effective interventions. This engagement with communities was vital to the adaptation of public health guidelines to the particular dimensions of fragility in Chocó and the delivery of interventions that are attentive to – and draw on the expertise of – local socio-cultural practices. As the lasting impacts of the pandemic become clear in Chocó and beyond, a similar approach will be needed to support communities and their long-term goals of peace and socio-environmental justice.

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