

Research Study to Identify Gaps Challenges and Good Practices in Government - Civil Society Engagement and Coordination for COVID-19 Response at District Level

COVID-19 epidemic has stretched the resources of every government around the globe. The need to engage and collaborate with all humanitarian stakeholders has been crucial in this response. National Humanitarian Network (NHN) in collaboration with International Council for Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) conducted study to identify good practices and challenges that the humanitarian stakeholders faced during the COVID-19 response at district level for future learnings.

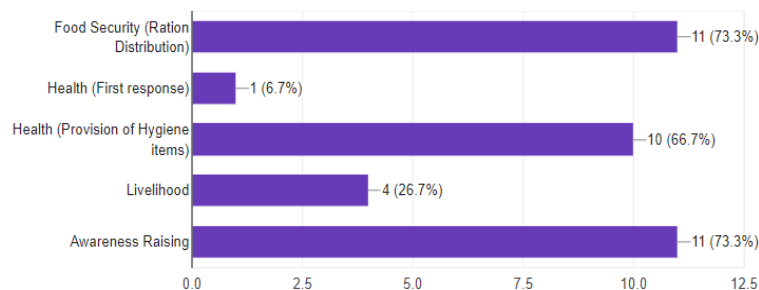
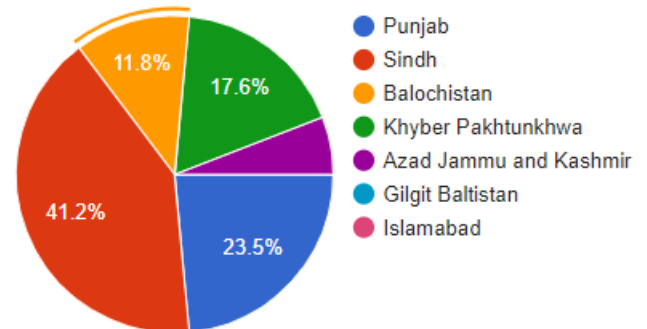
Methodology

To obtain the civil society perspective on the subject study and online survey was developed and circulated among civil society. The responses of the survey were analyzed to extract the required data which was also used to develop precise questions for interview of government officials. The combined result of the two mediums formed the basis of this paper.

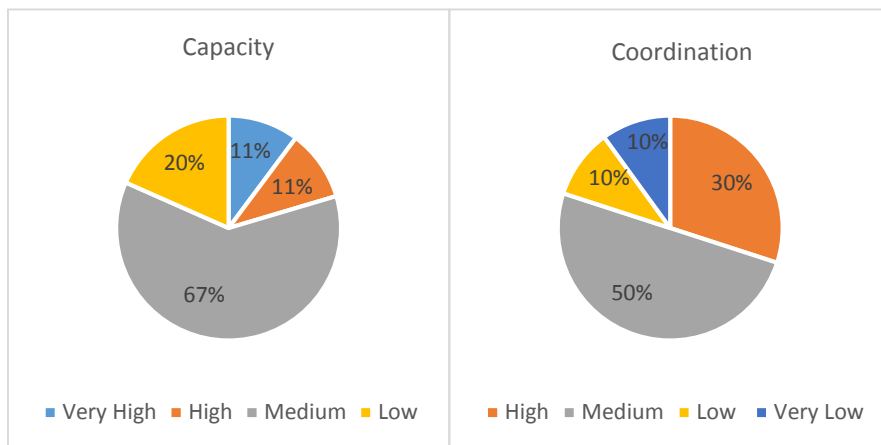
Survey Result

The responses from civil society organizations were received from all four provinces and also from Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The responding organizations were involved in Health, livelihood, Food Security and Awareness Raising as part of their COVID-19 response.

Majority of the organizations rated government's willingness to collaborate at high and medium ends.

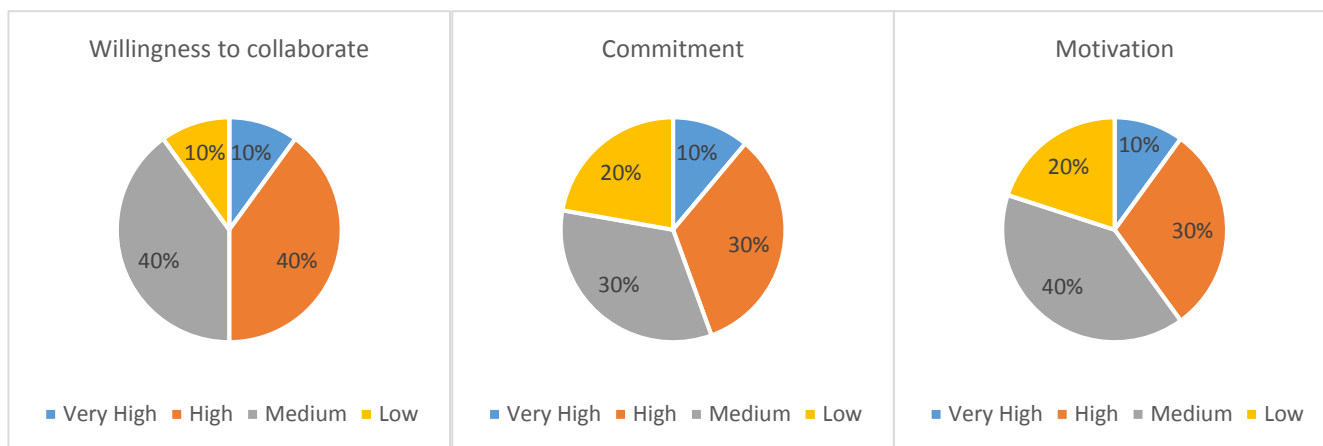


Similar trends were seen in the response to governments commitment and motivation for involving civil society in COVID-19 response.



The government's capacity and coordination with the civil society were rated to the medium and low end. This is a common understanding and observation of all that the government institution lacks the much needed capacity for any disaster response. However, this

impression has seen a change in the recent times especially after the establishment of dedicated disaster response departments at national, provincial and district level. The civil society has been instrumental in enhancing the capacity of these institution through it various interventions.



Interview Responses

The respondents from the government stakeholders acknowledged that the experience of the COVID-19 response in collaboration with civil society was very positive. The civil society was forthcoming in facilitating government departments at district level. A mix response was received on guidelines or instruction provided by the higher management or individual efforts of relevant officer for collaboration with civil society to response to COVID-19. In the province of KP, Sindh and AJK the provincial/regional government realized the importance of civil society engagement from day one therefore it was clearly communicated to the district authorities to engage civil society for COVID-19 response. Punjab and Balochistan were late to issue such guidelines. However, some officials from these provinces had early on recognized the need of collaboration with civil society therefore they had started the alliance in their respective departments. Later on the provincial governments also issued guidelines to be followed by all relevant departments of the provinces.

Most of the departments has some prior experience of working with the civil society but they admitted that the current collaboration was different in terms that it required unique implementation approaches owing to the sensitivity of the situation.

Some of the officials identified that the civil society organizations were talking in generic terms and did not have actual information for the response of the pandemic. They also reported that the organizations were not quick to response to the pandemic. These shortcomings were understandable as the movement restrictions prevented the civil society to obtain accurate ground information. These restrictions were also the reason for their late response as the government guidelines did not exempt humanitarian professionals from the travel restrictions imposed during the initial stages of the lockdown. They were later exempted from the travel restrictions.

The officers suggested that the government has developed comprehensive guidelines for government and civil society collaboration which covered all the aspects of this collaboration. If these guidelines are followed by both the parties a successful and effective partnerships can be developed.

The need for development of district level forums of civil societies was highlighted by the interviews as the most important need. The importance of district level disaster preparedness and response structures within government and civil society was identified as key for any successful future response. Both the parties i.e. government officials and civil society representatives have highlighted this need in their response.

A mixed response about misconceptions relating to working of NGOs was received from the government officials. Some of the officials were sceptic about NGOs before this pandemic and some of them realized and acknowledged the contributions of civil society towards disaster resilience and response.

Advocacy messages

After analyzing the interview and survey responses the following advocacy messages are drafted:

1. Activation and strengthening of district disaster management authorities.

This disaster has reinforced the need of district disaster management system as these are the first responders. The district level government structures are the final implementers of government policies and guidelines. Any disaster management cannot be effective until these implementing structures are strengthened.

2. Contingency planning and their review.

In Pakistan each year monsoon contingency planning is conducted in all the hazard prone areas. This district level planning forms the basis for national monsoon contingency plan. There is a need to develop contingency plans for every possible disaster that is likely to impact the country and not only for monsoon. This must include pandemics and epidemics. The developed plans should be reviewed annually to incorporate latest development.

3. Development and implementation of guidelines for government – civil society engagement

There is a dire need for clear policy and procedural guidelines highlighting the important factors and steps for government and civil society engagement. This would remove any ambiguities and misconception that any individual might have about the humanitarian actors. The guidelines will also set a clear coordination and communication channel between the two important pillars.

4. Continues coordination and engagement between government and civil society.

The coordination and engagement between government and civil society is not only necessary for disaster but also during peace time. Peace time engagement ensures a stable and effective coordination structure that can result in an efficient and timely coordination during disasters. The peace time coordination also supports the preparedness initiatives that are being implemented.