



RISK ASSESSMENT

JOURNALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM IN A POST-
COVID-19 WORLD

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The SAFE Risk Assessment in Response to the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

Sometimes likened to the situation immediately after the end of World War Two, the coronavirus pandemic already has and will continue to have ripple effects on every aspect of human life, irreversibly changing the world as we know it. In their immediate reaction to the outbreak of the pandemic, most governments' responses aimed to "flatten the curve" through various means such as travel restrictions, curfews, and quarantine. Though these measures have been lifted and/or eased to various extents across the globe, in particular in those countries and territories that already weathered through the pandemic's first wave, their long-term effects are yet to fully manifest and are likely to significantly impact the global economy (see Fig. 1). This, in turn, could trigger an avalanche of trickle-down effects, such as increases in civil unrest, political instability, and food insecurity. Meanwhile, COVID-19's long-term impact on individuals' and communities' psychosocial wellbeing and health is hard to gauge at this point but will, in all likelihood, be significant. Though this global health crisis might be creating unique opportunities for some, marginalized groups will be disproportionately affected by the pandemic's negative consequences, given their already-high vulnerability prior to its outbreak, thereby amplifying pre-existing social, political, and economic inequalities.

RadarView™: Coronavirus Impact Index by Industry

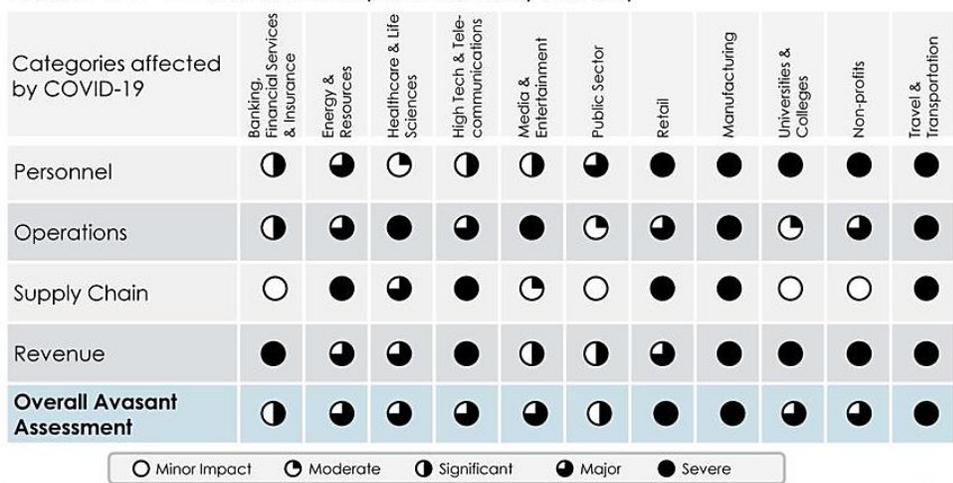


Figure 1:
Coronavirus Impact Index
by Tom Dunlap et al.

The SAFE Risk Assessment

The **Securing Access to Free Expression (SAFE)** program is IREX’s flagship effort to enable media practitioners and human rights defenders to work as safely as possible in closed and closing spaces. SAFE serves to equip media practitioners and human rights defenders with the means to resiliently continue their important work, and manage—as well as mitigate—the risks and threats they face in their day-to-day work uncovering injustices, reporting on corruption, and holding authorities accountable. SAFE addresses safety through the unique lens of digital identity, physical awareness, and psychosocial care by delivering trainings in five regions spanning the globe.

The COVID-19 pandemic (or “**coronavirus pandemic**”), is an ongoing global pandemic caused by an infectious disease that can lead to mild to severe respiratory illness. The outbreak was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a ‘Public Health Emergency of International Concern’ in late January 2020 and a pandemic in mid-March of the same year. At the time of writing (October 2020), more than 37 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported, resulting in more than one million deaths worldwide.

The **SAFE Risk Assessment** was conducted in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. The Coronavirus pandemic is the first global health crisis in modern times and SAFE and other organizations with a similar mandate therefore operate in an environment for which there are no prior experiences or data. The effects of the pandemic are far-reaching and will affect all aspects of programming for civil society organizations (CSOs), donors, and multilateral actors. This new COVID “world order” presents both challenges and opportunities that—if recognized early and addressed proactively—can be mitigated and seized.

To not only cope with the ripple effects of the pandemic, but also seize the opportunities it presents, the global SAFE team conducted an in-depth risk assessment looking at the various thematic areas where there could be effects on not only on SAFE’s own programming, but also on other actors who operate in the project’s orbit, including partner organizations with a similar mandate. The five global SAFE teams used the PESTLE approach¹ as the conceptual guidelines for their analyses, thereby taking into account political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental aspects in their respective regional contexts. The PESTLE analysis was conducted over the course of several weeks starting in July 2020 and used a short-term 6-month and medium-term 12-month mark as the framework for the assessment of future operating environments. These time frames are intended to enable SAFE and others to move from short-term contingency planning to mid- and long-term planning and understand impacts on the project itself, its beneficiaries and partners, and the operating environment.

Following this process, the aggregate data from all five SAFE centers was studied to detect overarching, potentially global trends which could be of relevance not only to SAFE and IREX, but also to others who work with journalists, activists, and/or marginalized groups. This document is the result of the analysis.

¹ Mitchell, Matthew, and Wade Brid. “Introduction to PESTLE Analysis – and Why a Systemic Approach Is Best – Bâton Global.” Batonglobal.Com, 2018, www.batonglobal.com/post/introduction-to-pestle-analysis-and-why-a-systemic-approach-is-best.

COVID-19 and its Impact on Media Support Programs

Gender and Social Inclusion

Though the COVID-19 pandemic is universal and unifying in the sense that the SARS-CoV-2 virus—in theory—has the potential to infect everyone, regardless of their class, race, religion, or sexual preference, an individual’s pre-existing level of marginalization significantly shapes the likelihood of their getting infected in the first place and of receiving adequate health care and support, as well as their ability to cope with the pandemic’s economic and/or political fallout. Journalists and social communicators belonging to vulnerable populations will most acutely experience the challenges associated with economic hardships and a rapidly transforming media landscape.

Already, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people living at the margins of society, especially on those for whom multiple identity-based disadvantages intersect.² In order to not exacerbate power imbalances that existed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, civil society groups therefore call for the increased involvement of women, members of the LGBTQ community, rural populations, environmentalists, and others in any and all emergency responses to the pandemic. In recognition of this reality, **this report considers gender and social inclusion (GESI) a front-and-center issue which will be elaborated on not only in this part of the Risk Assessment, but which will inform all subsequent sections of this document.**

Challenges

In relation to COVID-19, identity-based challenges for SAFE’s and others’ staff and beneficiaries are primarily due to two factors: their pre-existing higher vulnerability and the danger of their causes and needs being neglected or, worse still, their standing in society deteriorating even further due to the weaponization of scapegoating and ‘othering’ tactics.

Though, on the one hand, COVID-19 has brought some parts of the global community closer together virtually and “spiritually”, through the shared experience of living during the extraordinary circumstances of a global pandemic, overall, it is likely to contribute more to **deepening intercommunal divides**, rather than building bridges. Political and economic hardships and the

² Bowleg, Lisa. “We’re Not All in This Together: On COVID-19, Intersectionality, and Structural Inequality.” American Journal of Public Health, 28 May 2020, pp. e1–e1, ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305766. Accessed 30 May 2020.

weaponization of scapegoating tactics by some political leaders have already and will further accentuate racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and nationalistic narratives against marginalized groups. The perceived or actual inability of governments in many countries to address the enormous challenges caused by the pandemic is a narrative that is often exploited by far-right groups whose message resonates much more easily with populations frustrated by economic instability and decline. There also is a risk of survivors of COVID-19 becoming a new marginalized group through stigmatization.³

Meanwhile, local and international civil society actors with a mandate in supporting these communities might not be able to meet this increased need for protection, since reduced budgets and economic recession will lead to less funds being available. CSOs supporting journalists and human rights defenders will face their own challenges of staying financially afloat, also meaning a likely reduction in staffing numbers which, overall, makes them less able to play a supportive role to GESI groups. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic and the eventual recovery from this global health crisis will dominate the conversation and the news cycle for months and years to come. This will lead to a decrease in attention (both material and discursively) to issues that are of concern to marginalized communities, whose demanding for their needs and interests to be respected already prior to the pandemic had often been perceived as “troublesome” or “threatening” by non-marginalized communities. In other cases, governments might seize this opportunity and the “distraction” caused by the pandemic to push through legislation that further infringes the rights of marginalized communities.

Members of marginalized communities also generally have a much **higher vulnerability** to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while being less able to seize the opportunities it brings. For instance, lower levels of digital literacy and/or access to technology among women journalists in rural areas will likely make it significantly more difficult for them to keep up with the sudden transition to an all-remote setting. Marginalized groups are also likely to face comparatively higher-levels of pandemic-induced stress and anxiety that find a fertile ground in their pre-existing disposition to psychosocial stressors, such as identity-based risks, lack of familial support, and insufficient access to resources.

For women, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is felt much more severely for a variety of reasons. In some contexts, societal and cultural expectations might mean that women who are working from home are facing a significantly increased workload. Given that women already shouldered a greater burden for childcare prior to the pandemic, for many of them caretaker demands will now be even greater. At the same time, lockdowns and work-from-home arrangements coupled with higher levels of emotional stress and insecurity have also led to a dramatic increase of domestic gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide.⁴ Those women who have the financial means and access to relocate most components of their personal and work life to a remote setting, meanwhile, will have to spend even more time in an arena that is notorious for exposing women to harassment and other forms of online GBV. This is also particularly relevant for members of the LGBTQ community and activists, whose increased presence

³ Bagcchi, Sanjeet. “Stigma during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, vol. 20, no. 7, July 2020, p. 782, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32592670>. Accessed 26 June 2020.

⁴ “Domestic Violence Epidemic Hits Mexico during Coronavirus Lockdown.” 2020. *America Magazine*. August 6, 2020. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/08/06/domestic-violence-epidemic-hits-mexico-during-coronavirus-lockdown>.

and activism online will likely also lead to them being even more exposed to virtual harassment. In addition, members of the LGBTQ community are also more vulnerable to the direct impact of the pandemic, as well as potentially more severely affected by the safety measures introduced to curb it.⁵

With global attention focused primarily on containing COVID-19 and recovering from its fallout, as well as likely heated political contests and elections coming up across the world, it can be expected that significantly less attention will be paid to **environmental issues**, especially since environmental protection is often regarded an obstacle to quick economic recovery. This decline in interest and protection will add to the challenges already faced by traditionally marginalized communities such as rural populations, or communities in socio-economically marginalized areas. Civil society groups point out the increase in violence against journalists and social communicators covering and denouncing exploitative practices and industries.⁶ In addition, this neglect of environmental protection will likely add to the formation of new marginalized groups, such as environmental refugees.

Opportunities

One opportunity that the pandemic presents lies in the sudden shift to online-based interactions. Though this shift is exclusionary to some (e.g. communities with low digital literacy), the rapid shift to the virtual sphere has potential for other marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities (PwD) who might now be able to participate in events that would have been inaccessible to them in the ‘analog’ world. The rapid expansion of virtual spaces will likely lead to the emergence of a plethora of new tools, some of which might be targeted at exactly the groups that had previously been neglected, such as audiences with only basic internet connectivity. In the long run, this might make services, including the news media, more accessible to diverse audience.

For SAFE and others, this forced rapid shift to online settings might eventually also open up a range of new beneficiary groups, such as the growing number of citizen journalists or freelancers; marginalized individuals among them would particularly benefit from safety trainings, especially on topics such as online harassment and digital security. For SAFE and others, existing networks and contacts in the countries they operate in could then prove instrumental in identifying and reaching these much bigger audiences. In the long run, this more extensive engagement with marginalized individuals, in turn, will promote a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that their communities face.

Recommendations

With rapidly increasing needs and risks faced by marginalized communities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, now more than ever, SAFE and others should focus their attention and adjust their work to better respond to the needs of communities who are not only disproportionately affected by the pandemic, but also often become the targets of discriminatory narratives and scapegoating.

⁵ For more information on the disproportionate vulnerability of LGBTQ individuals, see this resource: <https://lgbt.foundation/coronavirus/impact>.

⁶ Andrew Barry, and Evelina Gambino. “Unsustainable Transition? Hydropower and the Post-Covid Recovery in Georgia.” OpenDemocracy, July 30, 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/unsustainable-transition-hydropower-and-post-covid-recovery-georgia>.

Specifically, organizations which provide trainings and/or emergency assistance should invest time into updating their training content to better reflect the new reality of marginalized groups while, at the same time, be prepared to provide even more emergency support against the background of elevated threat and risks levels. The donor community and those organizations with a mandate in protecting marginalized journalists, activists, and human rights defenders should actively monitor regional developments and coordinate their responses to maximize impact and avoid duplication of efforts.

Meanwhile, narratives that focus on stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors and scapegoating should be corrected discursively and through targeted awareness and solidarity-building campaigns. As governments will continue to turn a blind eye to marginalized communities’ grievances (also including environmental issues) and/or seize the opportunity to infringe on their rights even further, activists and journalists covering these issues will become even more active and relevant. Therefore, special emphasis should be paid to media outlets, freelancers and activists whose primary work focus is on protection of marginalized groups and the environment.

At the same time, SAFE and similar programs should pay particular attention to making virtual activities as accessible as possible. For instance, for PwD remote activities can be a boon or a bane, depending on how they are implemented.⁷ On the one hand, as the transition to virtual and remote activities (and work) becomes more socially acceptable, it allows some PwD to participate in activities that would have otherwise been inaccessible to them. At the same time, however, accessible remote learning is still in its infancy and future programming should take into consideration how tools such as screen readers or closed captioning can help make presentations for accessible.

	SAFE and others with a similar mandate	Donors
Continue or start prioritizing marginalized communities in programming	✓	✓
Make online programming as accessible and inclusive as possible	✓	✓
Help prevent stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors through awareness and solidarity-building	✓	✓
Provide increased support to journalists and activists working on issues of marginalization and environmental protection	✓	✓

Journalism in a post-COVID world

Overall, the pandemic is likely to accelerate and intensify trends that had already been evident prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Major shifts will be seen in three major areas: the composition and operating models of the media sector as a whole; the day-to-day lives of journalists and the

⁷ Miller, Hawken. “For People with Disabilities, Working from Home Using Tech Is a Relief – and a Struggle | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Washington, DC Office - USA, Canada, Global Dialogue.” Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 11 Aug. 2020, us.boell.org/en/2020/08/11/people-disabilities-working-home-using-tech-relief-and-struggle.

qualifications required from them; and the relationship between the media and other stakeholders, such as governments or the general public. Though the extent and scope of these changes will be very much localized and dependent on regional contexts, there are some developments that can be expected to be somewhat universal and occur on a global scale.

Challenges

As regards the **sector** as a whole, the most consequential change will be the collapse of revenue from advertisement or its migration to other areas (e.g. from print to online), both of which caused by overall economic decline and its ripple effects. Though some of this funding deficit might be reversed eventually, by the time slow economic recovery sets in, a large amount of media houses will potentially already have closed their doors permanently and a substantial number of journalists been laid off without any chances of being rehired. The result will be a net loss in the number of media outlets globally and a reduction of the total journalist workforce. Meanwhile, “surviving” media houses will be much more prone to fall victim to private-interest influences, since politicians, governments, or businesses might try and use this opportunity to further increase their financial stakes in media houses to gain influence and be able to push their own agendas.⁸

These changes will primarily be to the detriment of print media, which can be expected to lose out to online-based news sources (or, to an extent, radio).⁹ Meanwhile, smaller media outlets with less financial “cushions” are disproportionately vulnerable and prone to be forced into bankruptcy, which is of particular concern since smaller, (hyper-)local outlets are often the prime source of information for marginalized communities, such as those living in rural or otherwise socio-economically marginalized regions. These rural, marginalized and/or small outlets will be the first to fall victim to either complete closure or having to curb to political pressure, i.e. agreeing to being funded by politicians or local businesses that have their own agenda. This is further compounded by an often massive ‘digital divide’, that makes it impossible for significant parts of rural communities to make a shift from “traditional” media (print, partly radio) to online news sources and which stresses the centrality of digital connectivity and cybersecurity. The ‘digital divide’ could effectively lead to a disenfranchisement and a media “blackout” for rural or otherwise marginalized communities whose primary sources of information are often hyperlocal media outlets that are deeply embedded in those communities.

For **individual journalists**, all of the abovementioned changes will have substantial effects. Those journalists who are able to “make the cut” and not be affected by layoffs might be expected to work extra hours and take on additional responsibilities, both of which adds to psychosocial pressure that might already be high due to other factors (job insecurity, threat to own health and health of loved ones, etc.). For instance, a journalist might not just be writing their story, but also be involved in editing, publishing, and advertising it. At the same time, the content of their work might shift significantly, which topics related to the economic and economic fallout of the pandemic needing more attention (e.g.

⁸ Ahmed, Kaamil. “Covid-19 Could Trigger ‘Media Extinction Event’ in Developing Countries.” The Guardian, 6 May 2020, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/06/coronavirus-could-trigger-media-extinction-event-in-developing-countries.

⁹ Greenslade, Roy. “Why Our Newspapers Might Not Survive the Contagion of Coronavirus.” The Guardian, 12 Apr. 2020, www.theguardian.com/media/commentisfree/2020/apr/12/newsprint-coronavirus-newspapers.

coverage of civil unrest, health-related issues), while for others there might be less of a demand (e.g. coverage of cultural or environmental topics). This will also necessitate journalists to build new reporting skills that might be in higher demand going forward, such as investigative reporting skills when writing stories about a government's (mis-)use of COVID-19 emergency funds.

Some of the journalists who have been laid off might try to earn an income as freelancers, forcing them into even more precarious working conditions (contract-based work, etc.). These challenges are particularly pronounced for women journalists whose potential transition into freelance arrangements over employment with a media outlet will increase their vulnerability. For instance, while a media outlet might be able to provide at least basic maternity leave benefits, freelance journalists have no such safety net. Generally higher pressure to earn an income could make it increasingly harder for SAFE and similar programs to motivate beneficiaries to partake in their activities, without full compensation of losses that are incurred due to their participation in the activity.

As regards the **relationship between the media and other sectors**, is it difficult to make a universal prediction on how the pandemic will shape other stakeholders' relationship with the media overall. While in some areas the pandemic and the concurrent spread of mis-/disinformation might lead to an increase in anti-media rhetoric and conspiracy theories, in other regions the media could emerge as one of or even the only reliable source of information as regards the pandemic, in particular in closed and closing spaces where the disclosure of public information is often heavily regulated and/or censored. In closed and closing spaces, meanwhile, repressive government could use the pandemic to further ramp up attacks on media professionals and undermine freedom of expression.¹⁰ Just as the “terrorism card” or, more recently, “fake news” legislation has been used previously to demonize journalists, governments across the globe are already using COVID-19 as an excuse to stifle free speech, and some of the anti-‘Freedom of Expression’ legislative changes that had been passed, might not be taken back after the end of the pandemic. For individual journalists this means that they are at a much higher risk of falling victim to government repression and security forces' excessive use of force.

Opportunities

Overall, the long-term economic effects of the pandemic on media houses and their staff are difficult to assess at the point of writing this analysis. However, the extent to which the pandemic leads to layoffs among journalists very much depends on the local or regional context and is vastly different, depending on governments' overall handling of the pandemics' economic fallout and their (non-)prioritization of media outlets for financial support and bailouts. In some contexts, though there has been a comparatively high number of layoffs among media professional since the outbreak of the pandemic, so far, these have mostly affected staff working in advertisement and marketing or otherwise supporting the operations of media professionals.

Though the transition to a new and different media landscape for journalists to operate in is likely to pose initial challenges, it also offers profound opportunities for the sector as a whole. Journalists who venture, voluntarily or involuntarily, into areas of the sector that might be unfamiliar to them initially

¹⁰ “Opinion: Tanzania’s Media Law Muzzles Free Speech.” Deutsche Welle, 11 Aug. 2020, www.dw.com/en/opinion-tanzanias-media-law-muzzles-free-speech/a-54532521. Accessed 4 Sept. 2020.

(e.g. print becoming online journalists) provide new voices and perspectives. Already, journalists and newsrooms are responding creatively to the challenges of the COVID-19 reality, by finding new ways to reach both their sources and audiences. This might lead to a rejuvenation of the media or, at the very least, provide impetus for innovative ideas.

At the same time, the media plays a crucial role to enable communities to understand the pandemic and be provided with reliable and independent information about it, while also covering governments' responses to it, thereby encouraging a degree of accountability. Accurate information provided by trusted media can save lives and—if the importance of the latter is communicated effectively—can improve the standing of the media that is demonized and under siege in many regions in the world.¹¹

Certain groups within the sector might actually be in a good position to weather some of the challenges presented by the pandemic. For one, this would be those outlets that had already diversified their funding models and/or made themselves largely independent from private interest funding (businesses, governments). Innovative, often smaller-scale outlets that had invested in membership funding models or operated as nonprofits prior to the pandemic, are likely to be in a much better position. Second, journalists working in smaller outlets might be already used to being “allrounders” that are working on their story from start to finish, putting them at an advantage compared to peers at larger outlets, who might have relied much more on support staff.

Recommendations

In terms of the **sector** as a whole, various steps could be taken to cushion the shocks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Donors and organizations with a mandate in media assistance should increase their support to the sector generally, but, while doing so, closely coordinate to ensure maximum outreach and efficiency of the means invested. Donors in particular should dedicate more funds to substantial and longer-term support of media outlets, rather than providing financial injections that are too limited in time and scope. To ensure the survival of a diverse and vibrant media landscape, smaller outlets that are particularly vulnerable while, at the same time, crucial to marginalized communities, should be at the center of this coordinated support. Providing this support should be in the donor community's own interest since it otherwise risks being outspent by “big business” and governments in closed and closing spaces, who could have an interest in seizing this opportunity and cornering the media market to push their own agendas. Equally, the donor community should continue investing in bridging digital divides that present a substantial threat to marginalized communities.

Meanwhile, media support organizations and donors should do more research into alternative funding models and pull in those successful outlets that already managed to diversify their income or make themselves completely independent from private-interest funding (e.g. nonprofit outlets). These “success stories” can serve as trailblazers and support others in taking similar steps.

As regards **individual journalists**, SAFE and similar programs should explore ways to reach and support the growing freelancer community. Generally, programs with a mandate in media assistance should

¹¹ Glaser, Mark. “6 Ways Local News Makes a Crucial Impact Covering COVID-19.” Knight Foundation, 20 Apr. 2020, knightfoundation.org/articles/6-ways-local-news-makes-a-crucial-impact-covering-covid-19.

dedicate training resources that make journalists’ adaptation to the realities of a profoundly changed work environment easier. This could include offering more trainings on aspects that are related to financial security for both individuals and outlets (e.g. development of business plans for freelancers, outlets, etc.), or expanding the network of advisors or partners that beneficiaries could be referred to, should they have a need in this regard. Similarly, media support organizations (and donors) should be prepared to provide more legal support and/or have the network to refer legal cases to, to thereby respond to what is a likely increase in government-sponsored legal attacks on individuals and outlets.

Since the deterioration of working conditions and the partial loss of income will hit beneficiaries hard (especially members of already marginalized communities), training programs should be ready to compensate actual losses of income through higher per diems. In cases where there are limitations on material or monetary support (e.g. amount of per diem) due to organizational or compliance-related restrictions, media support organizations should try and remove such ‘red tape’ and other rigid regulations that might not be fit to address changed beneficiary needs.

	SAFE and others with a similar mandate	Donors
Reevaluate funding priorities and provide structural funding, in particular to smaller news outlets and freelancers		✓
Highlight success stories to enable peer-to-peer learning on alternative funding models	✓	
Build expertise and networks in areas that will increase in their importance (e.g. business planning, legal support)	✓	
Increase per diems for participants in activities to better reflect loss of daily income, if possible	✓	

Physical Safety

Physical safety measures will continue to constitute the first-line defense against the direct effects of the infectious disease. COVID-19 is likely to persist for years. Even those countries and regions that deploy extensive testing, movement restrictions, and/or contact tracing will suffer waves of new outbreaks of the pandemic.¹² Now and for the coming years, tools and measures reducing the risk of infection will therefore be of high relevance and significantly shape both the content and execution of trainings and similar programs. Long-term, considerations related to physical safety will also increasingly be linked to the pandemic’s ripple effects on countries’ economic and political stability which, in turn, will likely lead to an increase in high-risk scenarios that journalists would naturally be at the forefront of (civil unrest, protests, etc.).

¹² Scribner, Herb. “Will COVID-19 Ever End? UK Scientist Predicts Virus’ Future.” Deseret News, 25 Aug. 2020, www.deseret.com/u-s-world/2020/8/25/21399443/coronavirus-mark-walport-covid-19-vaccine.

Challenges

Since there is currently no reliable information on when (if ever) a vaccine would become available and/or herd immunity be achieved at a level that effectively diminishes the pandemic's risks, COVID-19 is "here to stay", albeit at a potentially lower risk level. The **direct effect** of an infection with COVID-19 will therefore remain a key concern to both training programs' staff and beneficiaries. With growing economic concerns and "lockdown fatigue" setting in, governments could be tempted to ease restrictions on movement and assembly prematurely, which would lead to a new surge of cases. This is also of relevance in election contexts in an already volatile period, where protesters or opposition movements might decide to ignore restrictions which could lead to further spread of the virus.

Meanwhile, pre-existing power imbalances will continue to contribute to a differential spread of the virus and its effects by factors such as gender, age, geography, and social class. For instance, poorer communities often live in under-resourced areas, earn less, and have fewer savings, and therefore simply cannot afford to abide to physical distancing rules and/or curfew because their socio-economic disadvantages force them to leave the security of their homes in search for income. Once infected, their lower economic status might make it unaffordable for them to seek medical treatment or they might be receiving medical care of lower quality because of their financial means and/or identity-related factors. For instance, a female journalist from an indigenous group might not have the financial means to seek treatment and, even if she does, bias in the treatment provided might lead to her not receiving optimal care, thus increasing her risk of having to face severe and potentially fatal symptoms.¹³

The pandemic's potential **indirect effects** on staff's and beneficiaries' physical safety are manifold. COVID-19 will inarguably have significant global impact on economic development and political stability. In all likelihood, the global recession caused by the pandemic will significantly exceed the severity of the 2008 Financial Crisis, with dramatic and far-reaching effect. In particular in the so-called Global South, shrinking trade and tourism, rising commodity prices, loss of investments, and reductions in remittances sent could lead to a steep rise in the number of individuals, households, and whole communities living below the poverty line. In this environment, media houses that are facing challenges to remain financially operable, as well as individual (freelance) journalist might chose to deprioritize spending funds on physical safety equipment such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or first-aid kits, making them even more vulnerable to the pandemic's direct threats.

Economic decline, in turn, has the potential to lead to various secondary phenomena related to communities' hardship, such as civil unrest, political instability, and protests. Early signs of this trajectory can already be seen and are often linked to a public dissatisfaction and opposition to either unpopular measure introduced to curb the spread of the pandemic (e.g. curfews) and/or the mismanagement of the crisis (e.g. embezzlement of support funds).¹⁴ Journalists will therefore be exposed much more frequently to high-risk reporting scenarios. These events' risk levels will be

¹³ For more on an example in the US context, see this source on COVID-19 treatment bias: Eligon, John, and Audra. "Questions of Bias in Covid-19 Treatment Add to the Mourning for Black Families." The New York Times. The New York Times, May 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/us/coronavirus-african-americans-bias.html>.

¹⁴ BBC News. 2020. "Coronavirus Corruption in Kenya: Officials and Businesspeople Targeted," September 24, 2020, sec. Africa. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54278417>.

exacerbated by the likely increase of violent responses at the hands of security forces that, in particular in closed and closing civic spaces, are mandated to enforce repressive anti-‘Freedom of Expression and Assembly’ legislation. Other effects of higher poverty rates will be a rise in crimes, in particular petty and property crimes, which might affect staff and beneficiaries alike.

Vulnerable populations will be disproportionately affected by these ripple effects. The pandemic could become an excuse for scapegoating, further ‘othering’ of entire communities, anti-immigrant policies, and institutionalized racism, all of which have the potential to lead to a significant increase of threats, harassment, and attacks (physical and otherwise) directed at marginalized communities.

COVID-19 and its aftermath also look set to affect disaster preparedness and recovery as it relates to environmental catastrophes, meaning that the impact and hardships caused by events such as floods, droughts, or earthquakes will be even more extreme in a post-COVID world and felt particularly hard by rural communities that are disproportionately vulnerable to natural disasters.¹⁵ For instance, recurring severe flooding in some places during the rainy season will be coupled with effects of the pandemic, leaving a disproportionately high number of individuals vulnerable to existential threats to their physical safety and well-being. In general, the pandemic is likely to lead to the global focus on climate change and environmental protection being deemphasized, while economic recovery is prioritized. In the medium- to long-term future, marginalized communities in particular will suffer the consequences of this neglect in the form of very substantial threats to their lives and properties.

Opportunities

Overall, the pandemic could lead to heightened awareness of physical safety issues and crisis preparedness. For instance, the outcry in many countries at the beginning of the crisis over the lack of protective equipment might lead media outlets and individuals to reexamine their supply with PPE, first aid kits, and other equipment, and pay closer attention to its availability in the future, thereby preventing similar shortages in acute times of crises. Among the wider population, the sheer duration of physical distancing measures currently could lead to long-term behavioral shifts and a new cautiousness about health and physical safety.

Recommendations

For media support organizations, changes in the physical risk landscape first and foremost lead to a need to adapt their operations accordingly and address new or changing risks that are due to a) a continuing direct threat posed by infection with the COVID-19 virus and b) an increase in violent conflict, protests, and crimes. These changes can range from avoiding actual physical contact in training lessons to allow for physical distancing (e.g. no demonstrations of first aid techniques with volunteers), to adding new lessons, based on which content might be of higher relevance in a (post-)COVID world, such as “How to maintain physical distance in protests situations”. New lesson plans could also look at topics such as “De-escalation Techniques”, to better manage interactions with increasingly repressive security

¹⁵ Quigley, Mark C., et al. “A Multi-Hazards Earth Science Perspective on the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Potential for Concurrent and Cascading Crises.” *Environment Systems & Decisions*, 16 May 2020, pp. 1–17, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7229439/, 10.1007/s10669-020-09772-1.

forces. To most effectively address changes in the operating environment for organizations, media support organizations could also look into following up with alumni to establish whether or not they are still adequate and sufficient in light of a plethora of newly-emerged risks.

Donors and media support organizations should be prepared to dedicate funding to providing beneficiaries with basic physical safety equipment, such as masks, hand sanitizers, or first-aid kits, in particular when working with socio-economically marginalized beneficiaries. An important aspect to this is actively working on convincing staff in managerial positions of the importance of this type of equipment. Education about physical risks will be particularly relevant in rural or otherwise marginalized regions where reliable and consistent health information is not always available.¹⁶ When working with journalists from these areas, particular emphasis should be placed on how beneficiaries can not only use physical safety measures in their own work and for their own safety, but also how basic physical risk mitigation measures can be effectively communicated to their respective audiences.

Both media support organizations and news outlets should be ready to dedicate more funding to protect their equipment and property, e.g. through auditing existing safety measures (CCTV, secure locks, etc.) and, if needed, upgrading these systems. At the same time, they might want to expand and formalize their mitigation plans for cases where staff members or beneficiaries are infected with COVID-19. This also includes devising backup plans for when a team member is temporarily or permanently unable to perform their job, such as maintaining a list of staff members or consultants that could gap-fill on short-notice, but also proactively identifying partners or external services that could provide psychosocial support to staff and teams affected by the pandemic. Those media support organizations and media outlets that had extended periods of remote work should develop guidelines for a safe return to their offices, as well as which steps to follow in cases where staff members or beneficiaries contract the disease while or after participating in program activities.

	SAFE and others with a similar mandate	Donors
Adapt and update existing training content; create new lesson plans	✓	
Provide beneficiaries with basic physical safety equipment (including masks, hand sanitizers)	✓	✓
Audit and, if needed, upgrade physical safety equipment for the protection of staff and property	✓	
Devise or revise risk mitigation plans and procedures related to infection with virus	✓	
Raise awareness on risks related to physical safety, particularly in rural or otherwise marginalized regions	✓	

¹⁶ Williams, Peter. “Opinion: COVID-19 in Rural Communities — Building Back Better in the Global South.” Devex, 8 July 2020, www.devex.com/news/opinion-covid-19-in-rural-communities-building-back-better-in-the-global-south-97583.

Digital Safety

The work-from-home reality for many, while initially seen as a temporary response to the COVID-19 pandemic, will likely not only continue to define our lives for the next few months, but have an irreversible and permanent impact on media support organizations and their beneficiaries. A drastic shift from in-person to online activities redefines our presence online and exposes us to new risks as well as opportunities. For those who are lucky to be on the right side of the ‘digital divide’, the accelerated shift to the online sphere has redefined work culture and changed the ways they engage with each other, how they manage tasks, and their ways to form and maintain partnerships. For them, an increased online presence will lead to more collaboration and provide them with more opportunities for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and innovation. On the other hand, the significant number of individuals and entire communities without sufficient access to technology and/or low digital literacy will mostly be excluded from this process. Increased activity in virtual spaces will likely also lead to much more instances of online harassment, attacks, bullying, and surveillance, especially among journalists and human rights defenders belonging to marginalized communities and/or those covering sensitive issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. use and efficiency of emergency relief funds).

Challenges

With more time spent online, journalists and social communicators, as well as ordinary citizens have become targets of increased digital attacks and mis-/disinformation. The rapid increase of online activities, presents windows of opportunities for malicious actors who use phishing, scams, hijacking of online communication, and social engineering to exploit “weak points” in the system for their own gain.¹⁷ Journalists and social communicators working on sensitive issues and who might all of a sudden be forced to work from home are now reliant on the safety of their home internet or—in cases where they do not have a reliable internet connection at home— on public networks, both of which are often much less secure than the internet connection at their office, where dedicated IT staff would in most cases ensure a protected and secure connection. It is safe to assume that the increased dependence on the internet and a lack of digital literacy will increase the risks for journalists and social communicators. Freelancers, environmentalists, independent and citizen journalists, and social communicators who might have a comparatively low digital awareness are at risk the most.

In closed and closing spaces with rampant government surveillance, those journalists and social communicators whose work criticizes their government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis and/or the recovery from it will likely be the prime targets of excessive internet policing, including through digital attacks. With heated upcoming political contests in a number of countries worldwide, the overall increase in criticism against governments’ and security forces’ responses to dissenting voices pose significant risks for those who challenge official government narratives. Journalists and social communicators who predominantly work in critical and investigative media might therefore need additional digital security assistance as they become targets of authorities in heightened political and economic environments.

¹⁷ “The Rise of COVID-19 Phishing Attacks: How Cyber Adversaries Are Adopting Phishing to Generate New Threat Vectors.” Cyber Defense Magazine, 26 July 2020, www.cyberdefensemagazine.com/the-rise-of-covid-19.

Meanwhile, it is likely that the overall extent of **digital surveillance** will rise, in particular as most countries use some form of digital location control system as part of their epidemiological response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to be better able to trace (and, therefore, reduce) the transmission of the virus. Countries have already introduced mobile applications to track COVID-19 patients and thereby gather detailed data on individuals' movement and whereabouts. These apps typically issue wide-ranging permissions to location and other data on the users' mobile devices. Though introduced as measures to curb the spread of the virus, security forces can easily misuse this data to track movements and gatherings of its citizens and/or continue using this mass data collection tool after the pandemic, both of which pose immense risks to our beneficiaries and their privacy.¹⁸

Marginalized groups who lack the financial means to afford technological equipment and/or a stable internet connection will face challenges of a very different nature, since they likely will not be able to keep up with the rapid shift to the only sphere in the first place. This is further compounded by a likely rise in costs for technology with a concurrent increase in poverty levels. The COVID-19 pandemic therefore has an alarmingly high potential to **further widen the 'digital gap'**. This effectively excludes large swaths of the global community from the online world, in particular those who had traditionally been affected by the 'digital gap' (e.g. rural and indigenous communities, women).

The transition to remote work and the overall surge in online learning opportunities is also likely to eventually cause **"virtual training fatigue"** among beneficiaries. With the majority of journalists' and human rights defenders' work performed remotely, beneficiaries might lose interest in attending long remote sessions such as online trainings or other web-based events.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges that an increased digital presence poses, it also creates various opportunities. The strengthened focus on virtual and online interactions might potentially lead to increased internet accessibility due to governments and businesses being incentivized to invest into affordable connectivity for its citizens to thereby meet a growing demand. It is likely that, in the long run, the increased demand for online tools and virtual spaces will further push innovations and the development of new tools and platforms, thereby creating a wider-range of opportunities for online engagement which is likely to be sustained post-COVID-19. For online journalists, news outlets, and activists, the proliferation of online tools and increased availability of the internet will increase their potential audience and, thus, importance.

Equally, the new focus on work-from-home and remote work arrangements, as well as the switch to remote learning in most educational institutions, might motivate governments to invest more in digital infrastructure overall (though likely, to a lesser extent, in remote or marginalized areas), thereby improving the availability of the internet and, in turn, providing more individuals with the opportunity to partake in the online arena and enhance their technological awareness and digital literacy in the long run. While some philanthropic actors have already started providing marginalized communities with

¹⁸ "Covid-19 Apps Pose Serious Human Rights Risks." Human Rights Watch, 13 May 2020, www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/13/covid-19-apps-pose-serious-human-rights-risks.

technological equipment and internet infrastructure, marginalized communities should be at the center of a larger effort to include them in this process.

The forced and rapid increase in the use of online meetings and other forms of remote collaboration has the positive side-effect of having “forced” many journalists and social communicators to build their skills in this regard. This change will likely be permanent and make collaborations between individuals much easier and effective in the future. Rendering physical distance and natural or physical borders largely meaningless, the more pronounced focus on remote collaboration post the pandemic, will likely contribute to the formation of new networks and forms of collaboration¹⁹. Provided that these new, innovative networks have sufficient financial support and planning, they have the potential to more effectively assume their “watchdog” function and counter misleading official narratives, and dis-/misinformation.

Recommendations

Those organizations that support journalists’ digital safety through trainings or emergency assistance should update their tools and training content based on a new COVID-19 digital risk landscape. This should include considerations of how to remotely reach beneficiaries with relatively low levels of digital awareness and/or unstable internet connectivity. For instance, media support organizations (and donors) might want to consider alternative support and teaching methods apart from synchronous training, e.g. through WhatsApp or secured chat and/or providing “liter” versions of training content that require less bandwidth.

Marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by slow or unstable internet connections and lower levels of digital literacy.²⁰ Those communities with lower income and poor access to the internet also experience challenges accessing news and making informed decisions. For SAFE and others, this makes reaching these groups challenging, thus, potentially compounding their marginalization even further. With an increased urgency of “being connected”, especially for marginalized groups, media support organizations and donors should be prepared to address these challenges by allocating funds for devices, licenses, or internet costs for participants. Donors should also support local civil society organizations who work with marginalized communities and who have a mandate in digital literacy skills trainings and support. When providing funding or providing trainings, donors and organizations should also consider the fact that smartphones have become more common tool to engage with audiences than personal computers, especially with marginalized communities.

With increased online demands and “training fatigue,” all training programs will need to be creative in their methodologies and make trainings more interactive and engaging, for instance by introducing assignments that participants can do offline or in-between lessons.

¹⁹ For an example from the US context, see Quackenbush, Casey. “Collaboration Is the Future of Journalism.” Nieman Reports, 11 Aug. 2020, niemanreports.org/articles/collaboration-is-the-future-of-journalism.

²⁰ Mlambo-Ngcuka, Phumzile, and Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen. “Op-Ed: We Cannot Allow COVID-19 to Reinforce the Digital Gender Divide.” UN Women, 6 May 2020, www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/5/op-ed-ed-phumzile-covid-19-and-the-digital-gender-divide.

A rapidly changing digital environment might also require media support organizations and media outlets to conduct internal audits and expand their in-house digital safety expertise, e.g. through hiring or professional development. Meanwhile, newly-emerged tools and platforms should be vetted before recommending them to beneficiaries.

	SAFE and others with a similar mandate	Donors
Where needed, allocate funds and provide devices, licenses, and financial support for internet costs to beneficiaries	✓	✓
Find ways to reach beneficiaries with lower levels of digital literacy and/or poor internet connectivity	✓	✓
Adapt and update existing training content; create new lesson plans	✓	
Carefully vet new tools and platforms	✓	✓
Expand in-house digital safety capacities (e.g. through hiring or professional development)	✓	✓

Psychosocial Safety

The COVID-19 pandemic will considerably impact media support organizations and their beneficiaries, both now and for years to come. This is primarily due to the novelty of the pandemic reality, the plethora of unknowns it brings with it, and the tremendous impact it has on all aspects of every single individual's life. This enormous need for psychosocial awareness and safety and the increased attention it receives, presents an opportunity to, on a larger scale, increase awareness about the importance of psychosocial well-being and continue to impart proven best practices, skills, and tools on its beneficiaries and others.

Challenges

Regardless of their profession, the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to severely affect every individual's mental well-being. First and foremost, the potentially damaging effects of the pandemic on global psychosocial well-being are caused by **heightened stressors**. In addition to the fear of potentially getting infected and therefore for one's own physical safety, there is an element of insecurity and fear of the unknown. The novelty of the virus and of living in a pandemic reality is coupled with limited knowledge about the virus' incubation period, transmission, and treatment, as well as the "big unknown" of what the long-term ripple effects of the pandemic will be (politically, economically, etc.). These fears are typically projected not only to one's self, but also to encompass fears over the safety and well-being of loved ones, including family and friends.

Meanwhile, research also documented the negative impacts of measures implemented to curb the spread of the virus (e.g. lockdowns). Many individuals' well-being is negatively influenced by the monotony of lockdowns and/or work-from-home, which can lead to reduced productivity, disappointment, and irritability. These and other effects are particularly pronounced for members of marginalized communities. For instance, women are exposed to additional stressors due to them often

having primary responsibility for child and dependent care. At the same time, women and members of the LGBTQ community are disproportionately vulnerable to domestic violence in lockdown situations.

Taken all together, these combined stressors can lead to a variety of negative effects on psychosocial well-being and resilience. New research argues that the COVID-19 pandemic can both precipitate new mental health disorders and exacerbate existing ones. Effects can include everything from depression, anxiety, panic disorders, self-blame, to “survivor’s guilt”²¹, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), delirium, and psychosis.²²

Journalists and human rights defenders meanwhile are confronted with additional challenges that are often unique to their profession, adding further to increased levels of stress and anxiety. These feelings are often heightened since many frontline journalists are expected to cover the pandemic in the field and are thereby forced to expose themselves to a higher risk of getting infected. At the same time, changes in the media landscape, economic hardship, job insecurity, increased digital threats and harassment, increased workloads and responsibilities, government-imposed restrictions, and heavy-handed security forces are all additional stress factors which can lead to burnout and other work-related mental health problems.

Many communities around the world will be disproportionately affected psychosocially, with the effects on marginalized groups such as women and LGBTQ individuals already having been mentioned. Marginalized communities, who are usually first to be affected by economic hardships, including job loss or the inability to purchase essentials such as food, water, masks, and PPE, experience higher stress and anxiety levels which affects not just themselves, but also their work and family relationships. In addition, the growing number of freelancers will be exposed to even higher levels of insecurity (and, hence, stress and anxiety), given their comparatively lower job security and an often forced transition from employment with a media house to self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, media professionals working with smaller and under-resourced organizations (e.g. in rural areas) might have challenges accessing mental health services and even in larger media houses, psychosocial support services might be the first to fall victim to financial constraints and subsequent budget cuts. In many places, upcoming elections will further elevate risk levels related to increasingly heavy-handed responses by security forces, further affecting mental wellbeing of journalists and exacerbating psychosocial vulnerabilities.

The psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect organizations’ staff and beneficiaries for years and years to come. Even after the end of the current period of acute emergency (e.g. once a vaccine is found), mental health issues will persist, in line with other developments whose consequences will materialize longer-term, e.g. increased political and economic instability. “Going back to normal” —whenever this will happen and whatever it will look like—will be a tremendously slow

²¹ Davis, Shirley. “Survivor’s Guilt, the Coronavirus and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”, CPTSDfoundation.Org. 6 Apr. 2020, cptsdfoundation.org/2020/04/06/survivors-guilt-the-coronavirus-and-complex-post-traumatic-stress-disorder.

²² Kar, Sujita Kumar, S. M. Yasir Arafat, Russell Kabir, Pawan Sharma, and Shailendra K. Saxena. 2020. “Coping with Mental Health Challenges During COVID-19.” *Medical Virology: From Pathogenesis to Disease Control*, 199–213. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4814-7_16.

process. This long-term increased demand for psychosocial support will, in turn, place a higher burden on mental health professionals, including support staff, which will then put them at a higher risk of exhaustion, stress, and burnout.

Opportunities

The higher need for psychosocial support and, hence, demand for such services mean that holistic approach to safety (physical, digital and psychosocial) becomes all the more important and attractive, potentially resulting in increased interest from beneficiaries, partners, and donors. In an ideal case, the COVID-19 pandemic might cause an increase in overall attention devoted to questions of mental health by governments and civil society. Those organizations who have the expertise and an already established reputation as a go-to source for information on psychosocial wellbeing for journalists and human rights defenders might then be in a good position to leverage this standing and serve as an advocate, mobilize resources, and coordinate others in responding to beneficiaries' growing needs in this regard.

Recommendations

To meet the increasing psychosocial demands specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, first and foremost, SAFE and similar holistic or psychosocial-focused training programs should update psychosocial lessons to respond to mental health outcomes caused or exacerbated by the pandemic (e.g. "How to deal with loss of one's life, financial security, job, etc.?"). At the same time, psychosocial trainers and other support staff should audit existing training content and tools to decide whether they generally meet beneficiaries' need or whether new lessons and/or tools should be devised.

SAFE and other training programs could also explore looking at incorporating into their portfolio lessons that might not be directly related to psychosocial well-being and resilience-building, but nonetheless have enormous influence over beneficiaries' mental health through reducing root causes of stress and fears over job security or insecurities related to sudden professional changes. These hands-on lessons could touch on a variety of skills and tools, such as workload management strategies, business plan development for freelancers, or effective remote-working skills. In cases where these topics can not be covered by in-house trainers and support staff and/or fall outside of an organization's mandate, time and resources should be invested into reaching out to other organizations who do work on these issues and who beneficiaries could be referred to.

Overall, solution-based trainings and online tools for psychosocial resilience-building will be at a much higher demand, in particular as regards marginalized communities. For easier accessibility and usability, it could prove helpful to have as many of these tools and resources as possible available in beneficiaries' primary languages, which could be achieved either through reaching out to organizations who already have resources available in those languages or, in the long run, developing and/or translating tools and resources targeted at specific language communities.

Other preventive measures incorporated by donors, SAFE, and other media support organizations could include mental health awareness raising targeted at media outlets and individual beneficiaries. It is particularly important that staff in management or editorial positions is aware of existing and future

psychosocial challenges for journalists and human rights defenders. Therefore, the media assistance community should devote particular attention to reaching those types of beneficiaries and to initiating and facilitating open discussions on the importance of wellbeing and selfcare, as well as on preventive measures that staff in leadership positions can undertake to reduce the challenges that lie ahead.

Considering the increased demand and potential for subsequent exhaustion and burnout among organizations with a mandate in providing psychosocial support (including SAFE), media support organizations should prioritize investing in preventive measures and extending collaborations to “share the burden” and render support provided more effective. Increased cooperation should aim to target and mobilize organizations and watchdog groups who work with minority communities in particular, to thereby gain better understanding of their specific needs.

	SAFE and others with a similar mandate	Donors
Address psychological challenges caused or exacerbated by COVID-19 (anxiety, depression, stress, etc.)	✓	
Incorporate other relevant skills training (e.g. business planning), where appropriate; or build networks with other organizations who can provide this support and be referred to	✓	
Provide coping and other online-based solution tools in native languages	✓	✓
Facilitate discussion around self-care and mental health awareness among decision-makers in media houses and CSOs	✓	✓

Logistics and Operations

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented area of uncertainty for the donor community, media support organizations, and their beneficiaries. Amid these uncharted waters, actors in the media support sector should be prepared for and accept a working environment that is unpredictable and can change on a whim, which makes contingency planning for finance and logistics all the more important, but that also already has caused a wave of new and innovative ideas related to the administration, planning, and conduct of activities. Decision-makers should be aware of this new way to operate and have the confidence and vigilance to make decision quickly and change course rapidly, if needed.

Challenges

In the short-term, some governments have provided extensive tax reliefs and economic stimuli that might lead to decreased operating costs for many organizations and outlets. In all likelihood, however, these will be only temporary reductions that countries in the Global South in particular might not be able to afford for an extended period of time. Rather, it is likely that the pandemic’s economic effects

will lead to a **net increase of operating costs** that would be caused, inter alia, by inflation, lower investments, reduced trade, dwindling remittances, and mounting public debt.²³

While for the remaining months of 2020, costs related to travel and the organization of in-person events will remain low, this trend might be reversed in the following year. **Higher travel costs** will be due in particular to the increased expenses per participant at in-person events where the need for social distancing will increase costs for travel and venues. For SAFE and other training programs, there might be scenarios where a smaller number of participants shares a significantly larger conference room than usual and where participants travel to the venue individually, instead of in a group car. Equally, long-distance travel will be more expensive than in pre-COVID-19 times, since airlines will have to make up for the limited “headcount” that is due to social distancing requirements and less people traveling in the first place.

Opportunities

Already, the pandemic has led to staff finding **creative and more time-efficient solutions for every-day tasks**. At the same time, there is an increased use of remote tools for finance and management support (e.g. financial transactions) that had already been available prior to the pandemic, but which had not been as widely used previously. For instance, staff might now be almost exclusively using electronic signatures instead of physically signing documents, or be exploring alternative ways to transfer per diems to participants, other than cash transfers. These changes to operating procedures will, in all likelihood, be permanent and kept being used even after the pandemic.

Another example of this would be the collection of participant data for monitoring, evaluation, and learning purposes. The sudden impossibility to administer paper-based surveys when interacting with beneficiaries face-to-face, might lead to a rapid shift to the exclusive use of remote surveys. This transition to a predominantly remote data collection system might make it easier for media support organizations to systematize and increase the reach of their data collection, thereby making their data more comprehensive and reliable.

The reality of all-remote work for many organizations might have come abruptly but has nonetheless shown that a substantial part of day-to-day work can often be done remotely. For the future, this will likely lead to more acceptance for remote work for existing staff. This increased flexibility in schedules and in terms of locations will make it easier for some marginalized communities to take up employment (e.g. PwD, women or men with caretaker responsibilities) and therefore, overall, expand the recruitment pool for new staff or consultants who might join existing in-person teams remotely.

Recommendations

Given the overall volatility of the economic landscape now and after the pandemic, future planning processes will have to accept a certain degree of unpredictability and, in some cases, be ready to make

²³ Shretta, Rima. “The Economic Impact of COVID-19.” www.research.ox.ac.uk, 7 Apr. 2020, www.research.ox.ac.uk/Article/2020-04-07-the-economic-impact-of-covid-19.

sudden programmatic changes that might have an effect on spending. New budgets should reflect this flexibility and plan for additional “emergency” budget pools that could cushion these changes.

SAFE and others should also, to the extent possible, be prepared for substantial and sudden changes to the logistical operating environment in the countries they work in. Violent unrest or sudden changes to countries’ political configuration can pose potential threats to organizations’ registration status or otherwise ability to operate in a country. Risk mitigation and contingency plans will therefore become even more crucial to an organization’s adaptability. In other scenarios, economic effects similar to the 2008 Financial Crisis might lead to the collapse of banks or whole financial sectors. Media support organizations should therefore proactively explore alternative ways for financial transfers (payment of salaries, vendors, etc.), to be able to better respond to such emergencies, should they occur.

Meanwhile, media support organizations and media outlets should dedicate time to closely evaluating how, where, and when teams will work together in the future, including questions such as whether in-person or remote work is more productive and desirable for team members. This analysis should also include the discussion of whether or not team members could work remotely entirely (with the exception of travel for in-person events and key meetings).

At the same time, media support organizations should have a thorough and honest discussion on whether the combined skill sets in existing teams is sufficient and ready to meet the challenges of a post-COVID-19 world, or whether there is a need to complement teams with additional skills in areas that might be of higher demand in the future (e.g. virtual learning professionals, legal assistance). The expansion of skills can happen either through professional development opportunities, or the hiring of additional staff members, for both of which there should be increased funds allocated in program budgets.

	SAFE and others with a similar mandate	Donors
Allow for flexibility in budget planning and accept unpredictability and sudden changes	✓	✓
Have assessment of whether teams’ skill sets meet requirements of new reality; if not, build skills through professional development and/or hiring	✓	
Evaluate and find a permanent system for how, where, and when teams will work collaboratively in the future	✓	

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has irreversibly changed the environment that SAFE, donors, and other media support organizations operate in. Though its impact has already been felt by everyone everywhere, the extent of its long-term effects is hard to predict. The donor community and staff at media support organizations will have to observe, learn, and adapt to a new reality. Meanwhile, the brunt of the pandemic’s negative side-effects will be borne by the global community’s most vulnerable, making it all the more important to support those whose gender, race, location, or economic background puts them at a disadvantage to cope with the pandemic’s effects compared to their non-marginalized peers.

At the same time, the pandemic and ensuing changes to the world we operate in presents unique opportunities for SAFE and others, their beneficiaries, and the donor community. For journalists and human rights defenders, the further increase and focus on virtual arenas (for those who are on the right side of the ‘digital divide’) means the potential to reach even broader audiences. Meanwhile, virtual connections will enable media actors and others to connect much more easily with others, thereby fostering collaboration and the exchange of innovative ideas. For the donor community and ‘big business’, the pandemic and its effects provide a unique opportunity to reassess past approaches and funding priorities and, instead, re-build and “regroup” in a more sustainable, resilient, just, and inclusive way.²⁴

	SAFE and others with a similar mandate	Donors
Now more than ever, prioritize marginalized communities in programming	✓	✓
Adapt and update media support (e.g. training content, emergency funds) to better meet new or increased needs	✓	
Audit internally available knowledge and skills and fill “gaps” through professional development, hiring, or expanded networks	✓	
Mobilize resources and coordinate/engage in collaborative responses to emerging challenges	✓	

²⁴ “Building Back Better: A Sustainable, Resilient Recovery after COVID-19.” OECD, 5 June 2020, www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-back-better-a-sustainable-resilient-recovery-after-covid-19-52b869f5. Accessed 10 Sept. 2020.