



PHOTO: Natalija Gormalova for CRS

The Impact of COVID-19 on Social Cohesion Dynamics in Conflict-Affected Communities

The Philippines, Ghana, and Guatemala

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Executive Summary

Since its emergence in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on societies all over the globe. With more than 5.5 million deaths recorded by WHO and 350 million cases,¹ it has been a “shock event” with “lasting social, political, and economic effects on societies and the health of societies.”² Voluntary and nonvoluntary interventions to stop or slow the spread of the virus have been implemented by governments around the world, including the use of facemasks, regular testing, and societal restrictions, most exemplified by ‘lockdowns,’ which by April 2020 covered 3.9 billion people.³ While 2021 saw the development and approval of effective vaccines and the gradual removal of pandemic restrictions, issues of distribution, including outright hoarding, have left the Global South with markedly lower vaccination rates. The emergence of new coronavirus variants has highlighted the need for continued non-pharmaceutical interventions to protect health.

Although the pandemic necessarily has global effects, communities with a history of conflict have generally been hit harder by the shock of COVID-19 due to pre-existing vulnerabilities, and risk tens of millions of people falling into extreme poverty.⁴ As noted by UNDP, COVID-19 has “shone a harsh light on existing structural inequalities and intersectional discrimination”, with the pandemic’s effects most greatly felt by the most vulnerable and marginalized groups.⁵ Indeed, beyond the direct impact on health, the secondary impacts of the pandemic resulting from both voluntary and nonvoluntary social and governmental responses risk exacerbating conflict and undermining the social cohesion in conflict-affected communities.

As conceptualized by CRS, social cohesion refers to the strength, quality, and diversity of relationships between and among individuals, groups, and communities based on trust, respect, mutuality, and equal opportunity.⁶ It is determined by the strength and quality of horizontal (between and among equals or near equals) and vertical (across hierarchies) dimensionality, and encompasses the socio-cultural, economic, and political spheres. It both affects and is affected by shock events. Stronger horizontal social cohesion provides resilience against the social and economic consequences of shocks

- 1 World Health Organization Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed 21 February 2022).
- 2 R. L. Jewett, S. M. Mah, N. Howell, M. M. Larsen, “Social Cohesion and Community Resilience During COVID-19 and Pandemics: A Rapid Scoping Review to Inform the United Nations Research Roadmap for COVID-19 Recovery,” *International Journal of Health Services* 51(3): 325-336, 2021, p. 325.
- 3 “Covid, pandemic and lockdown: how 2020 changed the world”, France 24, 15 December 2020 <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201215-covid-pandemic-and-lockdown-how-2020-changed-the-world> (accessed 21 February 2022).
- 4 The World Bank, “COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021”, press release, 7 October 2020 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021> (accessed 21 February 2022).
- 5 United Nations Development Programme, *Overcoming the Setbacks: Understanding the Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Fragile and Conflict-affected Contexts*, UNDP Global Policy Network Brief, 9 March 2021 <https://www.undp.org/publications/overcoming-setbacks-understanding-impact-and-implications-covid-19-fragile-and> (accessed 21 February 2022).
- 6 Catholic Relief Services, *The mini-Social Cohesion Barometer: A Tool to Assess and Strengthen Social Cohesion in Divided Communities*, 2019, https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/the_mini-social_cohesion_barometer-jl-websingle.pdf (accessed 21 February 2022), p. 2.

Stronger horizontal social cohesion provides resilience against the social and economic consequences of shocks through communal solidarity, while stronger vertical social cohesion facilitates trust in governmental responses and allows better identification of needs and solutions.

through communal solidarity,⁷ while stronger vertical social cohesion facilitates trust in governmental responses and allows better identification of needs and solutions.⁸ Shock events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can highlight weaknesses in existing social contracts,⁹ fuel competition over scarce resources, and drive antagonism between groups along both horizontal and vertical dimensions, fraying social cohesion.

This report draws on data derived from qualitative interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and a quantitative survey — the CRS Social Cohesion Barometer — conducted in six locations across three countries to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social cohesion dynamics. In total, 84 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 38 FGDs were conducted for a total of 312 participants. The report assesses the impact of the pandemic, and governments' responses to it, along both horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion. It also highlights the role and community perceptions of civil society actors involved in this response. In doing so, the report draws conclusions and recommendations to support social cohesion efforts in these, and other communities.

High Level Findings

Unsurprisingly, the impacts of the pandemic on social cohesion varied by location; however, five cross-cutting findings emerged and held true in all three geographies:¹⁰

- **Perceived uneven distribution of COVID-19 aid led to increased perceptions of corruption as well as competition for limited resources.** The belief that government-provided pandemic relief was dependent on political patronage was damaging to both horizontal and vertical social cohesion. Respondents felt they needed political contacts or a particular political affiliation to access social and relief support mechanisms, fueling distrust of government as well as driving inter-communal competition over resources. This has been compounded by a lack of transparency in the pandemic response, with distribution centralized and priorities poorly communicated. In Guatemala, this has had the further effect of implicating non-political actors engaged in the distribution of government aid, for instance, civil society organizations (CSOs), of being motivated by self-serving interests.
- **Widespread lockdowns and restrictions on the movement of goods and people have further exacerbated existing economic cleavages – important barriers to social cohesion – particularly for those who work in the agricultural sector.** In Pigcawayan, Philippines, this economic distress led to an increase in communities' willingness to share resources with one another, and a wider concern for the wellbeing of more vulnerable members of the community. However, in South Upi, Philippines, as well as in Bolgatanga, Ghana, such gestures of communal solidarity have diminished as the pandemic has dragged on. School closures and the shift to distance learning have further driven divides in education, as many families lack the resources necessary to complete online learning. Missed education is likely to have long-term economic consequences, as children fall

7 F. Lalot, D. Abrams, J. Broadwood, K. Davies Hayon, I. Platts-Dunn (2020) "The social cohesion investment: Communities that invested in integration programmes are showing greater social cohesion in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic," *H Community Appl Soc Psychol*: 1-19.

8 Jewett et al. (2021) "Social Cohesion and Community Resilience", p. 326.

9 S. Razavi, C. Behrendt, M. Bierbaum, I. Orton, L. Tessier, "Reinvigorating the social contract and strengthening social cohesion: Social protection responses to COVID-19," *International Social Security Review*, 73(3): 55-80, 2021.

10 Country-level findings are detailed in the body of this report.

behind and some drop out of education altogether. School closures have also driven conflict at home, and particularly affected girls and young women, with female community members in Tamale, Ghana reporting that the closure of schools and the financial impacts on families had driven a surge in the sexual exploitation of girls, early marriages, and unwanted teenage pregnancies.

- **A lack of access to, and distribution of, accurate information from trusted sources about COVID-19 and responses to it has contributed to growing mistrust of governing authorities, undermining vertical social cohesion.** Not only has this opened space for the spread of mis- and/or disinformation but it has **also threatened horizontal social cohesion by fomenting sectionalism.** Existing weakness in vertical social cohesion linked to conflict histories in the communities of this study has also fueled mistrust in government health care providers, a particularly concerning development that has likely contributed to more serious illness and death from COVID-19, as well as vaccine hesitancy. This declining trust in health care workers and facilities, the spread of mis- and/or disinformation, and a perceived lack of government transparency are often mutually reinforcing and seem likely to affect both horizontal and vertical social cohesion for the foreseeable future.
- **Respondents were generally positive about the role of civil society in the pandemic response.** However, much of the pandemic-related response and necessary adaptations to working have created additional cost burdens for CSOs as they moved to labor-intensive smaller community meetings and door-to-door awareness raising. CSOs have been appreciated for their cooperation with authorities and communities, maintaining and strengthening both vertical and horizontal social cohesion.
- **Shifting funding priorities to ameliorating the economic impacts of the pandemic and bolster livelihoods has led to a reduction in focused social cohesion programming.** At the same time, restrictions on gatherings prevented ongoing dialogue between communities as well as the delivery of skills trainings by civil society. This has in turn **weakened key sites for social cohesion strengthening** while also stretching local capacity for responding to acute ruptures.

Recommendations

The impacts of COVID-19 as outlined above present important opportunities for improving governmental responses to the pandemic and bolstering social cohesion. Though it is critical both policy and programming remain highly sensitive to variations in context, the recommendations below can serve as overarching guidelines, to be strengthened in consultation with the country-specific recommendations detailed in the body of the report.

Policy

Conscious of the passage of the Global Fragility Act in December 2019, and the U.S. COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework published in July 2021, there are some clear lessons to be drawn from the experience of these three countries for the U.S. government in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In its whole-of-government approach to building resilience more broadly, the U.S. government should:

1. **Bolster support for social protection systems** – including through the provision of unconditional cash transfers – as a means of mitigating the economic impact of the pandemic on communities, building resilience, and allowing vulnerable families to provide for children’s basic needs and development.
 - In addition, help to support social protection systems to ensure that communities are supported in an equitable manner regardless of geography or political affiliation.
 - This could be accompanied by advocacy for and promotion of trade avenues for locally produced goods.
2. In support of the recently-published U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption - and conscious of the negative effect that the absence of government transparency has on donor-funded programming - **work with, and provide funding for, local CSOs working to mitigate and respond to corruption risks.**
 - Support the strengthening of anti-corruption mechanisms – specifically those which help to ensure oversight and accountability of public spending regarding the COVID-19 crisis response – as a means of promoting citizen-responsive governance.
3. **Work with all relevant stakeholders to disseminate information about how to protect against COVID-19** and practice safe hygiene, improving community engagement to ensure that populations have access to accurate information and to counter misinformation, in turn supporting the wider goals of the “One Health” approach to reduce the risk and impact of emerging infectious disease threats and outbreaks.
 - Attention should be paid to indigenous means of communication, including keepers of oral traditions (e.g. ‘griots’), town radio stations, and even local social media influencers.

4. Conscious of the withdrawal or redirection of funding since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, **expand funding for social cohesion programming that is both stand alone and integrated.**
 - Support and fund CSOs to undertake social cohesion work directly, providing skills training to improve CSO members' understandings of how social cohesion and inclusion of marginalized communities and individuals contributes to broader development efforts.

5. As part of the U.S. government's Advancing Women's and Girls' Civic and Political Leadership Initiative, **support local CSOs and community-based groups encouraging women's participation and leadership.**
 - This support should work in tandem with initiatives to reduce gender-based violence in order to help create the attitudinal shift necessary to promote the protection of women.
 - Furthermore, provide support for initiatives seeking to close gaps in access to quality learning opportunities exacerbated by the pandemic, and which have severely undermined the protection of girls.

6. **Commit to providing resources to addressing the psycho-social needs of vulnerable groups** — including the forcibly displaced, women, and children — in turn helping to address the secondary impacts of the pandemic, including tensions in the home.
 - Collaboration between the government, civil society, community-based and faith-based groups should be expanded and strengthened to provide psycho-social support to both survivors and perpetrators of gender-based violence, to protect vulnerable communities, and to ensure that domestic violence does not continue to undermine social cohesion moving forwards.

Programs

- **Prioritize the inclusion of community stakeholders, particularly from marginalized groups, in the project design phase.** Communities' perception of being excluded by the government in the design and implementation of COVID-19 response has badly damaged vertical social cohesion, and communities articulated a desire to continue to be brought into the conversation about projects going forward, to ensure that they are responsive to the needs as defined by communities themselves.

- **Further work should be done to understand how livelihoods programming can help to encourage intra- communal bonding and inter-communal bridging.** With economic cleavages exacerbated by COVID-19, interventions should have a particular focus on building the resilience of marginalized groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, women, and youth.
 - There is a clear need to support women with further skills training. However, these efforts should remain conscious of the additional work such training creates, as it is often unaccompanied by a concomitant increase in men's domestic labor.
 - Programs should support youth and young people by helping create livelihood opportunities, including through the promotion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in high schools.

- In light of global discussion about mis-/disinformation on social media, **programs should build on its already existing work to further develop community-level messaging around fact-checking**, both in relation to COVID-19 and conflict, politics, and socio-cultural issues.
 - It is particularly important to engage with purveyors of misinformation, especially at the grassroots level, to build trust and provide these important stakeholders with accurate information.
 - Respondents voiced a desire for more robust systems of support for those parents of children learning for home.
 - The need for hygiene training is ongoing, as is programming to address emerging tensions between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals.
- **Implement programming that responds to communities' appetite for improved leadership skills and good governance.** Programs should continue to invest in capacity building initiatives that contribute to intra- and inter-communal and vertical bridging. Specifically:
 - Extend governance programming to include the establishment of groups to monitor the distribution of assistance to various communities and to press for transparency in the delivery of aid.
 - Train rapid response teams to ensure that restrictions to combat COVID-19 are proportionate and in line with best practices regarding public health.
 - Press for broader inclusivity in local governance to include women and indigenous persons. To bolster inclusivity, training on leadership and governance is needed for marginalized groups in all contexts, including women, people with disabilities, and indigenous persons.

Introduction to the Study

Though it has been more than two years since the first outbreak of COVID-19, research into the medium- and long-term consequences of the pandemic on social cohesion still lacks firm conclusions. Early analyses highlighted the risk of increased conflict,¹¹ particularly through the scapegoating of individuals and groups seen as more likely to be carriers of the disease, often building on pre-existing inter-communal tensions.¹² As the pandemic dragged on, others have noted the likelihood of “ebbs and flows of solidarity,” where social cohesion strengthens during the early part of the crisis as communities join together to support each other and the most vulnerable, and weakens as time progresses and wider economic precarity is felt.¹³

Based on qualitative interviews, FGDs, and a quantitative survey using the CRS Social Cohesion Barometer in six areas across three countries, this paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion. Following a background overview of the situation in each context – related to pre-existing tensions, the experience of COVID-19, and governmental responses – the paper assesses the key dynamics that affect intra- and inter-community relations, as well as those between state structures and the wider population. While the responses for each country are presented separately, broader conclusions and recommendations of relevance to all communities, as well as distinctions between them, are drawn in the latter part of the report.

Methodology

The study employed mixed-methods research tools, using FGDs and KIIs to develop both quantitative and qualitative findings to address the study question. FGDs and KIIs were held with members of the community in each of the target areas:

- The Philippines, South Upi and Pigcawayan
- Ghana, Bolgatanga and Tamale
- Guatemala, La Mina and Oquen

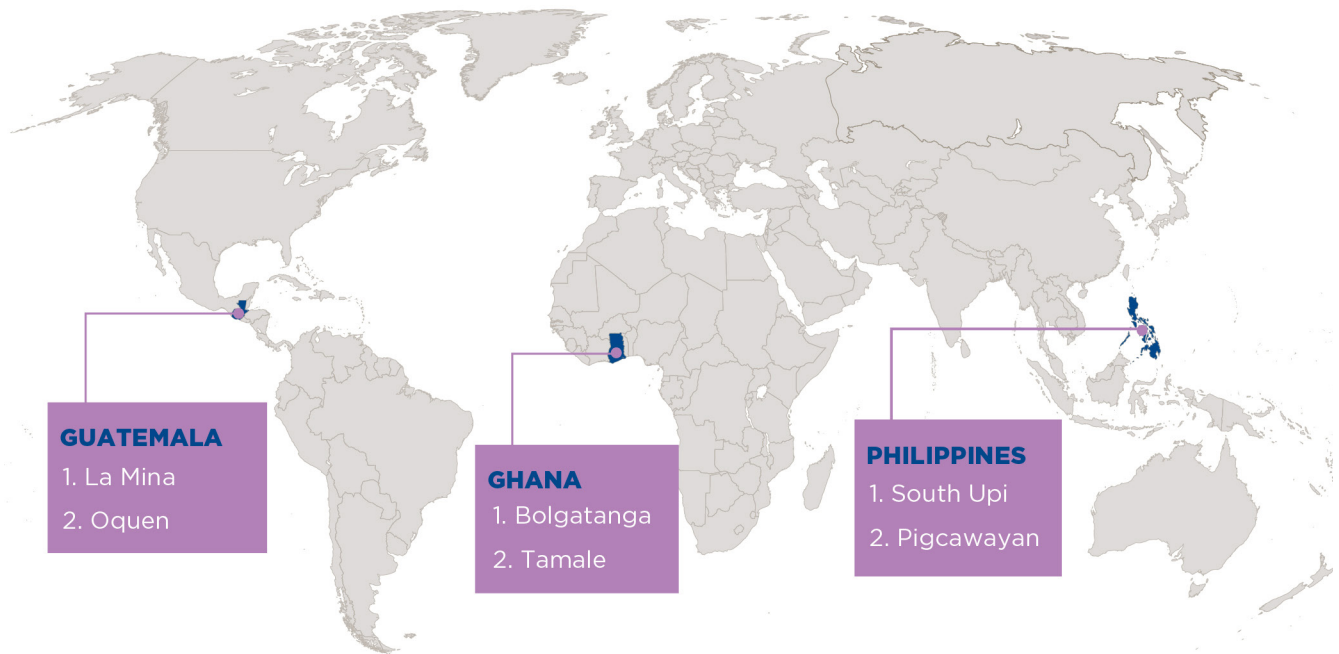
The target countries were chosen in part because of their varied experiences of the pandemic and differences in their governments’ responses to it. Additionally, each of the three countries has experienced either historic, recent, or ongoing conflict, though the nature of those conflicts varies substantially. Finally, in each of the three countries chosen, political legitimacy, land rights, class, indigeneity, ethnicity, and religion intersect in complex ways, enabling the study to understand which dimensions of social cohesion were most affected by the pandemic.

11 J. D. Meyer, O. Kaplan, “Will the Coronavirus Pandemic Fuel Conflict?”, *Foreign Policy*, 6 July 2020 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/06/coronavirus-pandemic-fuel-conflict-fragile-states-economy-food-prices/> https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/the_mini-social_cohesion_barometer-jl-websingle.pdf (accessed 21 February 2022).

12 A. M. Khan, R. Damania, J. Russ, E. D. Zaveri, “Pandemics, Poverty, and Social Cohesion: Lessons from the Past and Possible Solutions for COVID-19,” *Institute for International Economic Policy Working Paper Series*, Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University, 2020.

13 N. Banulescu-Bogdan, A. Ahad, “Solidarity in Isolation? Social cohesion at a time of physical distance,” *Integration Futures Working Group, Migration Policy Institute* https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpie_integration-futures_social-cohesion-covid_final.pdf https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/the_mini-social_cohesion_barometer-jl-websingle.pdf (accessed 21 February 2022).

MAP OF LOCATIONS



Sampling

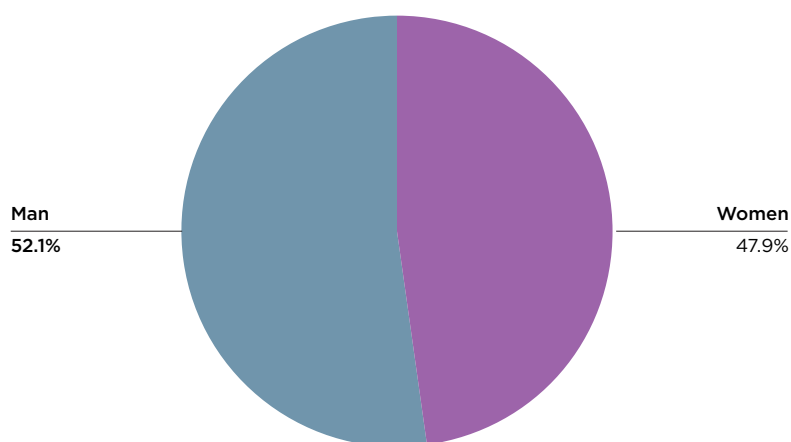
Following the selection of the study countries, CRS' local teams participated in an initial consultation to advise on the final communities for inclusion. The primary inclusion criteria included experience of conflict, and pre-existing relationships with CRS' program teams in the area, for the sake of enabling access and building off established trust. The secondary inclusion criteria were derived using CRS staff's own perspectives on the key barriers to social cohesion in their areas of work. For instance, in Ghana, CRS teams felt that class divisions constituted one of the more significant barriers to social cohesion, and as such, the teams selected one community from a more economically privileged area, and another which was more marginalized. Other secondary criteria for consideration included: ethnic and religious identities, political positions, and urban/rural divides. In all three countries the conflict and/or social cohesion dynamics are multivalent, and as such, area inclusion criteria were correspondingly overlapping. In some cases, government officials and civil society representatives based outside of the target communities - for example, in municipal offices or organization headquarters - were also interviewed. These individuals are identified as 'Other' in the table below.

Sampling Matrix

	FGDs - Male	FGDs - Female	KII - Community Representatives	KII - CSO	KII - Government
The Philippines					
South Upi	18	13	2	1	1
Pigcawayan	18	16	5	1	1
Other				4	3
Ghana					
Bolgatanga	25	22	6	7	6
Tamale	24	24	6	8	5
Guatemala					
La Mina	17	18	6	6	4
Oquen	15	18	6	6	
Sub Totals	117	111	31	33	20
Total	312 participants				

Purposeful random sampling was used to select individuals for participation in the study. A total of 228 participants were engaged in FGDs, of whom 111 were women and 117 were men. Participants were selected by CRS field staff in consultation with community leaders and included both current program beneficiaries as well as non-beneficiaries. The purposive sample was designed in each location to 'mirror' local population distributions. Additionally, 84 KIIs were undertaken with 39 women and 45 men across the three locations.

GENDER BREAKDOWN OF TOTAL PARTICIPANTS



Tools

The FGDs were used to gather community member perspectives on the pandemic and its impact on social cohesion, including horizontal and vertical schisms. Although there was thematic overlap in the questionnaires used across the FGDs and KIIs, each FGD also incorporated three interactive components:

- **The Social Cohesion Barometer**, which uses Likert scales to examine community perceptions of the strength of social cohesion in their communities.¹⁴ The Social Cohesion Barometer has been designed by CRS and implemented in numerous geographies as both a workshop tool and an assessment instrument. Three COVID-19 specific questions were added to the survey for the purpose of this study.
- **A socio-ecological model activity**, which asked participants to differentiate impacts of the pandemic as they were felt across different spheres of life, including the individual, the family, community, civil society, and the government or state.
- **A COVID-19 timeline**, in which participants mapped the pandemic's most significant changes they had experienced along a timetable.

The KIIs were used to gather the perspectives of government officials, community and civil society leaders. A bespoke tool was designed for each of these groups, providing for more focused, in-depth discussions of governmental and CSO responses to the pandemic.

The study followed CRS COVID-19 guidelines, including social distancing and mask wearing. All participants gave verbal consent to participate in the study, and were informed that their answers would be fully anonymized.

¹⁴ A Likert scale is commonly used to measure attitudes, knowledge, perceptions, values, and behavioral changes. It uses a series of responses that participants may choose from in order to measure either positive or negative response to a statement.

The Philippines

- SOUTH UPI AND PIGCAWAYAN



PHOTO: Jomari Guillermo for CRS
MAP: COAR for CRS

Context

The following section provides a brief description of the country context, looking specifically at dynamics which have played a role historically in social cohesion there. It also provides general information pertaining to the specific study areas, South Upi and Pigcawayan.

The Philippines has experienced two major armed conflicts in recent years: one in Mindanao involving the Moro ethnic armed group, and a country-wide communist insurgency. The roots of these conflicts include the dispossession of land, lack of access to services, power struggles between clans, the exclusion of certain groups from government offices, and the rise of violent extremism. In January 2019, the Bangsamoro Organic Law was ratified, giving people in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) a chance to self-govern. The BARMM was designed to provide an opportunity for communities to take ownership of local governance and build sustainable peace through social cohesion.

When the COVID-19 crisis hit the Philippines in early 2020, the government instituted a series of lockdowns. In the Bangsamoro, this resulted in the imposition of curfews, checkpoints, roving patrols, and travel passes - measures similar to those used to enforce martial law in Mindanao in previous years. The government also ordered the wearing of face masks, social distancing, and hand washing. Conscious of the dramatic effect



PHOTO: Jomari Guillermo
for CRS

of these lockdowns on working people, the national government developed the Social Amelioration Program as a means of providing aid to poor families. The Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) also established a BARMM COVID-19 Inter-Agency Task Force to provide relief assistance to residents affected by community quarantine, with Barangay¹⁵ Local Government Units (BLGUs) responsible for its distribution. An estimated PhP 155 million (around USD \$3,100,800) was allocated to BLGUs as response funds, providing medical supplies and personal protective equipment to COVID-19 referral hospitals across the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has come at a critical moment in the development of the nascent BARMM. Ministries are still recruiting staff, the BTA is in the process of configuring its administrative structure and modus operandi, and the BARMM more broadly is trying to navigate the processes of 'normalization', decommission former rebel forces, and pursue transitional justice and reconciliation. Though the BARMM government is attempting to manage the effects of COVID-19 on public health, it is also implementing policies that impair the resilience of communities. Restrictions have limited the movement of both people and goods, negatively impacting social cohesion at the community level as competition over resources has increased. The backdrop of lost or diminished livelihoods has made communities even more reliant on government relief - itself a source of tension given communities' asymmetrical access to it. Having been historically marginalized, non-Moro indigenous persons remain at a particular disadvantage, with lack of access to services, livelihoods, and information about COVID-19 complicating the issues faced by them even further.

Underpinning this is the ongoing threat of land grabbing for indigenous persons throughout the BARMM. Despite strict quarantine orders and lockdowns, localized violent

¹⁵ A barangay is the smallest administrative division in the Philippines.

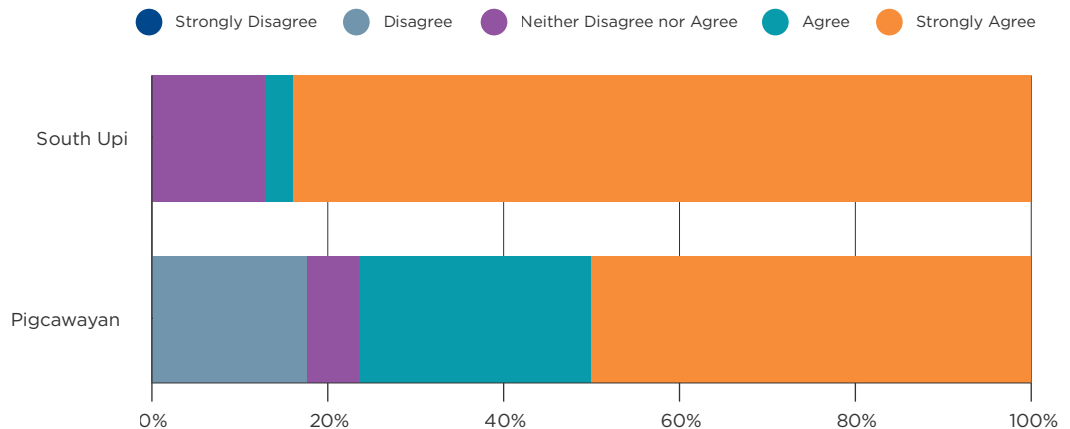
incidents resulted in the displacement of an estimated 81,000 in Mindanao between January and September 2020 alone. Disputes over land ownership – and consequently access to resources – are at the root of conflict in South Upi, and have displaced thousands of families belonging to the Teduray and other indigenous communities in recent years. Conversely, there have been very few reports of ongoing conflict in the municipality of Pigcawayan since the creation of the BARMM. Nevertheless, ahead of the Philippine general election of May 2022, there is speculation that conflict could arise in response to political candidates campaigning on the basis of who can better provide assistance to vulnerable communities in the wake of COVID-19.

Horizontal Social Cohesion Dynamics

The following section examines findings pertaining to horizontal social cohesion, particularly inter- and intra-communal relations, but also findings relating to household dynamics.

Across the communities surveyed, 82% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected relationships and levels of social cohesion. Unemployment and economic poverty remain the most often-cited barriers to social cohesion within communities in both South Upi and Pigcawayan, with COVID-19 having exacerbated these issues. The closure of schools has meant that parents are unable to work as they are required to look after their children; transport restrictions have curtailed freedom of movement and limited the movement of goods, impacting incomes; and diminished incomes have made it impossible for farmers and fishers to buy necessary inputs, resulting in worse harvests and reducing incomes further. 89% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to more competition over livelihoods and scarce resources.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED THE RELATIONSHIPS AND LEVEL OF SOCIAL COHESION IN MY COMMUNITY.

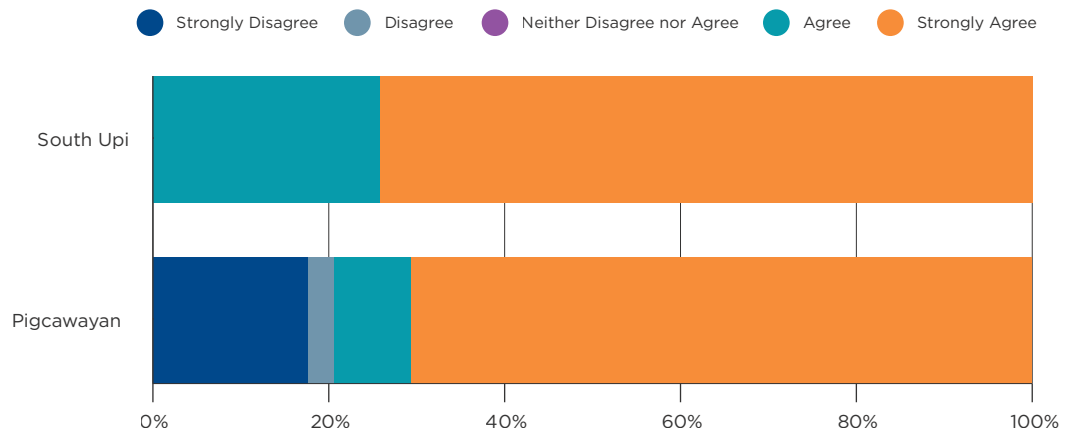


Differing responses between communities show both strengthening and fraying of social cohesion. In Pigcawayan, the response to different forms of economic poverty has been an increase in communities’ willingness to share resources with one another, and a wider concern for the wellbeing of more vulnerable members of the community. This can be explained - at least in part - by the absence of widespread conflict and displacement in the municipality in recent years. This has translated to sharing of tools needed for fishing – such as nets – as well as crowdfunding for members of the community who require hospitalization. One community member explained,

“The pandemic gave us the opportunity to realize that we need to take care of our neighbors, our friends, and our barangay officials because they are the only ones who can help us at a time when we have nothing to eat due to lockdown.”

In South Upi, however, gestures of community-level solidarity such as sharing food in times of hardship have mostly subsided, meaning that the most vulnerable have been unable to call on those mechanisms to help. Parents being forced to stay at home has driven quarreling within the family unit, while communities have had far less interaction for fear of contracting COVID-19. Nevertheless, respondents told CRS that conflicts within communities are in remission because people are focused on survival and restrictions on their movement mean they are unable to interact. While dialogue related to the peace process has been ongoing, it has only included community leaders rather than a more expansive set of participants as in the past, leading to the further exclusion of women. This has led to a breakdown of information sharing from leaders to the local level, to the frustration of affected communities.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS LED TO MORE COMPETITION OVER LIVELIHOODS AND SCARCE RESOURCES.



Impact on children is on education and internal household dynamics. The closure of schools and move to learning from home have further driven divides in access to education in both South Upi and Pigcawayan. Communities in South Upi are often unable to afford the software and internet connection necessary for at-home, online learning. Furthermore, students are expected to complete their modules whether they have understood the module properly or not. As a result, parents – and in some cases hired tutors – complete modules on children’s behalf. The effect of this time missed in education is likely to impact these students for years to come. In Pigcawayan, parents being unable to work is also driving conflict at home. Respondents told CRS that when children see their parents quarreling, they are more likely to imitate them, resulting in more disputes. Though not addressed in detail by this study, it appears that intra-family conflict resulting from COVID-19 restrictions has also led to an increase in gender-based violence.

Intersection of misinformation and negative perceptions of governance actors is a threat to social cohesion. An important threat to both horizontal and vertical social cohesion in South Upi and Pigcawayan is a lack of access to accurate information relating to COVID-19, as well as the propagation of mis- and/or disinformation in online spaces. Groups linked to extremism continue to use social media to disseminate their messaging, posing a threat to the fabric of social cohesion among Moro groups, and between Moro and non-Moro groups. With regards to COVID-19 and vaccinations, the circulation of false information has resulted in some communities being unwilling to receive the vaccine, driving tensions between those who are and are not vaccinated.

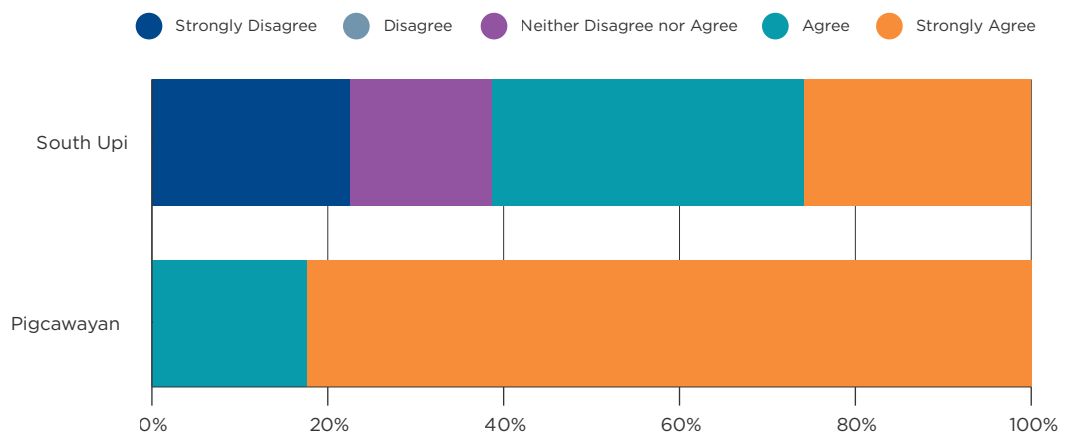
Vertical Social Cohesion Dynamics

This section discusses community perceptions of governance actors, including levels of trust affecting and affected by attitudes toward pandemic response efforts.

Government aid is seen to be politicized and targeted only to those linked to individuals in authority. Government aid has been delivered primarily to the barangay level rather than to conflict-affected – and geographically remote – communities living in mountainous areas of South Upi. The widespread perception of aid politicization has eroded trust in barangay leaders in South Upi in particular. Nevertheless, several respondents told CRS that the Ministry of Indigenous People’s Affairs (MIPA) of the BARMM had provided effective assistance. One government representative explained,

“If we are talking about the regional level, the trust of the people of BARMM is really not diminished. The only flaw is our leaders below. In the reactions and feedback gathered by the office, it was found that the people’s trust in their local leaders is really low due to the insufficient aid or supply. This is often the reason why people lose trust in our local leaders.”

MY GOVERNMENT HAS THE CAPACITY TO FAIRLY AND EFFECTIVELY RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.



In Pigcawayan, the provision of COVID-19 related assistance from the government – including cash assistance, food, and hygiene kits – has given rise to tensions among community members who also feel that certain individuals have been prioritized by barangay officials. Although authorities have given priority to those who have been unemployed for a long period, this has not been communicated to community leaders, resulting in accusations of favoritism. One respondent noted that these tensions have eroded relationships in the community, saying, “Imagine how discrimination and selfishness became rampant because of the pandemic.”

Rumors and fear of contracting COVID-19 have led to declining trust in health care facilities and workers. There is a widespread fear that being hospitalized leads to a worsening of the effects of COVID-19 on the patient, and in some cases death. The lack of trust in, and in some cases fear of, hospital workers and medical staff in South Upi appears to have been brought about by rumors relating to dead bodies being immediately cremated by hospital authorities, which has meant that people became afraid both to visit hospitals and to interact with health care workers visiting their communities, worrying they could test positive and be taken to hospital. In Pigcawayan, visiting hospitals now requires a swab test, as well as the several documents and identity papers necessary to obtain one. Indigenous persons are often not in possession of those documents – in some cases as a result of their displacement – nor of the money to pay for a swab test. As a result, the poorest members of these communities are visiting hospitals much less often. In Pigcawayan, fear of contracting COVID-19 at a hospital means that people in more remote areas avoid them, preferring to seek treatment at home or in their communities. This lack of trust in institutions – itself evidence of a lack of vertical social cohesion – coupled with the increased cost of visiting hospitals is resulting in more deaths unrelated to COVID-19. This change in communities’ trust of health care facilities and workers is one of the most damaging effects of COVID-19 on vertical social cohesion, and one of the most difficult to repair.

Civil Society Responses

The following section communicates key findings pertaining to the role of civil society, including how members have adapted to work under the new constraints imposed by safety and health regulations, as well as adapted to newly emergent needs.

In both South Upi and Pigcawayan, CSOs are widely perceived to be doing positive work and genuinely assisting their communities. CSOs operating in Pigcawayan have worked in a cooperative manner with authorities and engaged community members in their activities, resulting in improved vertical social cohesion and peaceful implementation of government orders regarding COVID-19. One community member explained, “Even before the pandemic, people here had good relationships. These good relationships became even stronger when the pandemic came. We have a stronger relationship now even with the pandemic because they (barangay captain and neighbors) actually deliver us medicines and foods, our neighbors became more caring.”

In South Upi, respondents noted that it is CSOs who have the best sense of the situation on the ground, as well as valuable voices in the Municipal Peace and Order Council (MPOC) in which peace and security issues are discussed. CSOs have worked directly with government authorities to assist in humanitarian response efforts during the pandemic, and have continued their activities in more remote areas that have been neglected by government response (see above). This reciprocal relationship between trusted CSOs and authorities provides an opportunity for the former to raise concerns around land conflict, as well as issues relating to protection and human rights of indigenous communities, directly with authorities.

In both South Upi and Pigcawayan, CRS and other CSOs' most welcomed contribution to vertical social cohesion has been its training programs among community and barangay leaders. Respondents specifically mentioned that CRS' peacebuilding programs trained barangay officials and community leaders in peacebuilding and understanding of how to govern a barangay effectively. This improved their leadership skills and resulted in the creation of policies that made the barangay a more consultative space, involving women, youth, and other marginalized communities in planning processes. These more inclusive governance structures are key for both horizontal and vertical social cohesion. One barangay councilor noted, "We are thankful that CRS is still continuing its programs to us, especially to us who are in remote areas. We really feel that they are still there for us because they continue their trainings, seminars for the barangay officials and other community leaders."

Looking Forward

This section highlights the effects of the pandemic that are likely to undermine social cohesion and efforts to address it unless adequately accounted for.

If left unaddressed, the following impacts of the pandemic appear most likely to continue to strain social cohesion:

- **Historic and ongoing grievances related to land grabbing will continue to drive conflict if left unresolved.** Access to land means access to economic resources for many indigenous communities, and failure to equitably resolve this issue will exacerbate the erosion of both vertical and horizontal social cohesion, both in South Upi and elsewhere. COVID-19 has heightened the economic precarity faced by these vulnerable communities, and could be weaponized by political candidates in the May 2022 elections and beyond by campaigning on the basis that they can better provide COVID-19 relief than the incumbent. This could drive both intra- and inter- communal conflict, as well as weaken vertical social cohesion.
- **The erosion of vertical social cohesion could further damage trust in health care facilities and workers.** The provision of COVID-19 assistance has given rise to tensions among community members who feel that certain groups are prioritized for relief without it being made clear why, and harmed communities' belief that the government is willing to fairly and effectively respond to COVID-19. This could further weaken communities' trust in public health professionals, particularly in light of the spread of mis- and/or disinformation which has resulted in some communities being unwilling to receive the vaccine.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be used to help guide responses to the persistent challenges enumerated above.

Policy

Ahead of the general election in May 2022, the BTA, in conjunction with civil society, faith leaders, humanitarian groups, and INGOs, need to address the multiple, intersecting fragilities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and governmental responses. They should:

- Create an institutional framework that builds resilience by accommodating the region's various political actors, preventing outbreaks of violence, and fostering social cohesion across BARMM to the greatest extent

possible. To the greatest extent possible, this framework should actively support local CSOs and community-based groups encouraging women's participation and leadership in civil and political spaces in particular.

- In consultation with affected communities, develop a comprehensive framework to resolve issues relating to land-titling which continue to negatively impact vertical and horizontal social cohesion. In addition, develop a debt-relief mechanism to help indigenous communities address the economic consequences of COVID-19 outlined above.

Programs

Given the effects on social cohesion resulting from economic cleavages outlined above, communities in Pigcawayan and South Upi want to have access to enough jobs and livelihood opportunities to reduce their reliance on government assistance. In addition, communities want to develop their governance capacities, both to more effectively hold different levels of government to account and to ensure that they are responsive to the needs as defined by those affected. Therefore, CSOs should:

- Explore how livelihoods programming can encourage intra- and inter-communal bonding, with a particular focus on building the resilience of women through further skills training. Support women's access to TESDA (Technological Education, Skills and Development Authority), and promote independence in sourcing livelihoods to support their families.
- Support communities to establish a mechanism to monitor the distribution of assistance to displaced communities in order to hold local barangay leaders to account. Such a mechanism can bring together different stakeholders around the shared goal of improving government transparency and responsiveness.

Uncertainty around COVID-19 and the most effective means of moving forwards out of the pandemic continue to damage social cohesion. These stressors weigh particularly heavily on parents concerned about the damage done by COVID-19 to their children's education. There is a key role for civil society to play in guiding these conversations, given the levels of trust established through their work at the community level. CSOs should:

- Implement more activities exploring how to live with the COVID-19, and potential coping mechanisms that communities can develop to build resilience to such crises. Alongside this, respondents told CRS that they want to see relevant authorities and CSOs continuing to educate people from the barangay about COVID-19 and vaccination. Importantly, data showed that when people from Pigcawayan started to be vaccinated, others followed suit because they observed that there were no negative side effects.
- Work with local and national government to provide training on parenting styles, in order to support their children's learning and manage their anger and stress more effectively, reducing the likelihood of conflict at home.

Ghana

- BOLGATANGA AND TAMALE

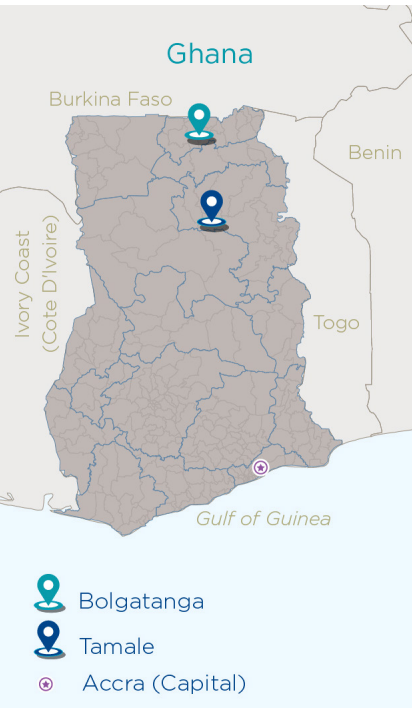


PHOTO: Natalija Gormalova
for CRS
MAP: COAR for CRS

Context

The following section provides a brief description of the country context, looking specifically at dynamics which have played a role historically in social cohesion there. It also provides general information pertaining to the specific study areas, Bolgatanga and Tamale.

Tamale is one of Ghana's largest cities and one of the fastest growing in West Africa, underpinned by its status as a regional trade hub. Despite an estimated 80% of the population living in urban areas, rural Tamale serves as the food basket for the metropolis, with pronounced disparities in access to services between the two. Although relatively diffuse linguistically, religiously, and culturally, conflict has remained largely absent in Tamale. Bolgatanga is located on Ghana's northeastern border with Burkina Faso and Togo and is home to a large number of tribes and languages. Notwithstanding concerns that extremism in neighboring countries could erode horizontal social cohesion, Bolgatanga has remained largely free from conflict – although issues relating to Chieftaincy succession could threaten this in the future.

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Government of Ghana initiated a lockdown in the urban centers of Accra and Kumasi which lasted from 30 March 2020 until 19 April 2020, as well as a nationwide closure of schools which lasted until January 2021. Restrictions on public gatherings, social distancing measures in public spaces, efforts to test and trace those who tested positive for COVID-19, and the closure of the country's

borders were all instituted by the government in an effort to stop the spread of the virus. Ghana's exposure to global economic shocks – given the country's reliance on exports of natural resources such as crude petroleum, gold, and cocoa – meant that the country's workforce was particularly badly affected, prompting a variety of interventions by the government to provide support to the most vulnerable. In the wake of the restrictions imposed in March 2020, the government committed to providing several months of free water and subsidized electricity to public utilities customers; loans to qualified micro, small, and medium sized enterprises; free food and other essential items to communities in need, specifically in Accra and Kumasi; as well as expanded social protection programs providing cash transfers and livelihoods opportunities to vulnerable communities. Nevertheless, Ghana spent less than half of the Sub-Saharan Africa regional average on social safety net programs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and only expanded the number of cash transfer beneficiaries by 5% in response. The efficacy of social safety nets has also been impaired by disparities in the protection provided between urban and rural populations.

The perceived failure of the government's efforts to support those most adversely impacted by the pandemic has prompted protests against President Nana Akufo-Addo's administration, which was narrowly re-elected in December 2020. Protests have focused on the need for the government to do more to create jobs for youth, improve health care and education standards, and bring down living costs. Protestors' grievances have also been driven by the perception that access to COVID-19 support is conditional on party political membership or contacts, driving calls for the decentralization of COVID-19 relief funds and greater transparency in their disbursal at the local level. Alongside these factors, political vigilantism has been – and continues to be – a major source of conflict in Northern Ghana.¹⁶ Finally, the government's failure to institute social distancing rules when campaigning for elections in late 2020 has driven frustration that policies to respond to the pandemic are not being universally applied, eroding trust in institutions and damaging vertical social cohesion.

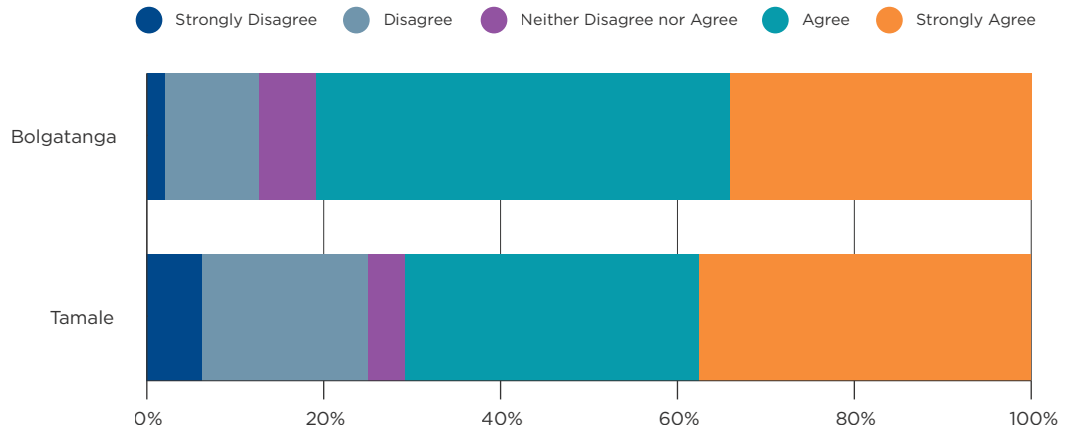
Horizontal Social Cohesion Dynamics

The following section examines findings pertaining to horizontal social cohesion, particularly inter- and intra-communal relations, but also findings relating to household dynamics.

Across communities surveyed for this study, 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected relationships and levels of social cohesion. However, while 81% surveyed in Bolgatanga agreed with the statement, this was true of only 71% surveyed in Tamale. Furthermore, 80% of respondents in Bolgatanga also agreed or strongly agreed that COVID-19 had led to more competition over livelihoods and resources, compared to 56% in Tamale. This discrepancy could be explained by the stricter enforcement of, and adherence to, COVID-19 restrictions in Bolgatanga and the erosion of communities' capacity to share resources and work together. One community leader there explained to CRS that the more people interact and share in each other's joys and sorrows, the stronger horizontal bonds they build together; when these interactions cease, people are more likely to live in an atomized way rather than seeing themselves as part of society.

¹⁶ Sampson Kwarkye, "Political vigilantism threatens stability in Ghana", *Institute for Security Studies*, 26 October 2018 <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/political-vigilantism-threatens-stability-in-ghana> (accessed 21 February 2022). See also, Justice Richard Kwabena Owusu Kyei, "Political Vigilante Groups in Ghana's Democratic Governance: Some Policy Options", *African Peacebuilding Network, APN Briefing Note, Number 26, January 2020* https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new_publication_3/political-vigilante-groups-in-ghana-s-democratic-governance-some-policy-options.pdf (accessed 21 February 2022).

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED THE RELATIONSHIPS AND LEVEL OF SOCIAL COHESION IN MY COMMUNITY.



COVID-19 restrictions have prevented the resolution of inter-community tensions.

Restrictions on group meetings and the prevailing fear of others carrying COVID-19 have meant that inter-community interactions have become more limited in both Tamale and Bolgatanga, leading to intra-community tensions when they remain unresolved. As one community member in Bolgatanga told CRS, tribalism and communities interacting only with their ethnic group has damaged horizontal social cohesion, with one visible sign of this being that people no longer shake hands to greet each other – previously a sign of trust and respect.

The presence of unresolved intra-community tensions has also impacted gender relations at the family level. Restrictions on movement which have precluded access to livelihoods, limitations on public gatherings in which communities can raise issues of concern, and the wider economic impacts of the government’s COVID-19 response have all appear to have contributed to an increase in intimate partner violence and/or domestic violence. Alongside this, the normalization of gender-based violence at the societal level – as well as the absence of women in decision making spaces that might affect policy and attitudinal change – provides the conditions for it to continue. A civil society leader in Tamale explained:

“The biggest challenge I see is that there is little or no inclusion of young people, particularly women and girls in growth processes, decision making and key spaces. Largely the contributions of women and girls and the roles they can play toward a more cohesive society are ignored.”

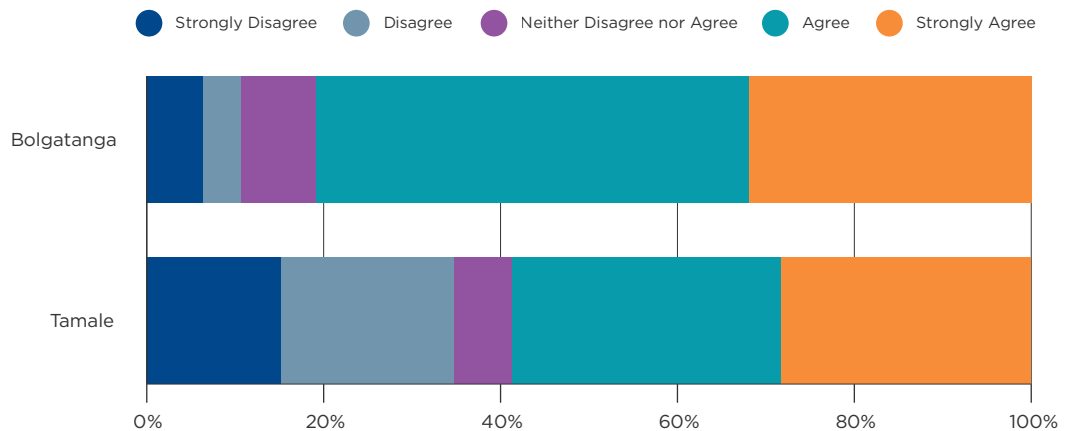
Restrictions in movement have impacted livelihoods, particularly in the agriculture sector.

This erosion in horizontal social cohesion, coupled with restrictions imposed by the government, has meant that the movement of goods, services, and people has become much more limited in both Bolgatanga and Tamale. In both communities, many business people have reduced their travel, affecting their income and thus their relationships with business partners, employees, and third parties. In Bolgatanga, where agriculture is the primary occupation, restrictions on movement and gatherings have affected farming particularly badly, driving economic inequality. Where farming communities had previously pooled labor and worked in groups to get the most fruitful harvest, this has been made much more difficult by COVID-19 and the increased fear of people working together. One community member in Bolgatanga explained to CRS,

“The pandemic has reduced the capacity of communities to share resources and support one another. It has increased pressure on household income and livelihoods.”

In Bolgatanga and Tamale, communities are reliant on political contacts to access government support mechanisms, increasing competition over scarce resources and undermining horizontal social cohesion. Differential access to services and distinct rates of COVID-19 infection across communities have driven suspicion, and in some cases antipathy, between groups. Urban/rural divides in access to services were cited by respondents in both Bolgatanga and Tamale as well as the need to ally with political leaders and integrate into their networks of patronage to access resources and opportunities, driving the growing politicization of chieftaincy disputes and exacerbating the sense that some individuals and groups are prioritized over others. Several respondents held politicians responsible for creating divisions between contestants of chieftaincy titles and their followers, which play out within the community and negatively affect horizontal social cohesion.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS LED TO MORE COMPETITION OVER LIVELIHOODS AND SCARCE RESOURCES.



The government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected children and their access to education. When schools were forced to close and students to begin virtual learning, digital divides between urban and rural communities took on a heightened significance. In Tamale, respondents noted that school closures not only affected children’s learning, but also made it more difficult to make up lost ground – something likely to affect their learning in the long term. In Bolgatanga, one respondent told CRS that following government instruction, classes were divided into smaller sizes, straining the resources of schools and teachers. Moreover, female community members in Tamale told CRS that the closure of schools and the financial impacts on families had driven a surge in the sexual exploitation of girls, early marriages, and unwanted teenage pregnancies.

COVID tests taken from northern Ghana reportedly take several days to send to Accra or Kumasi before they can be processed. In Bolgatanga, respondents told CRS that COVID relief from the government only benefited people in urban areas. Given these factors, and the greater number of livelihood opportunities available, migration to urban centers has continued. Nevertheless, people traveling to Tamale from urban centers with higher infection rates such as Kumasi or Accra create suspicion among residents there; in one case, a community in Tamale erected a physical barrier to stop people from outside entering. Female potters who work in areas where COVID-19 infections have been higher have been ostracized by their communities upon their return.

Vertical Social Cohesion Dynamics

This section discusses community perceptions of governance actors, including levels of trust affecting and affected by attitudes toward pandemic response efforts.

Despite the provision of relief support during the height of COVID-19, communities in both Bolgatanga and Tamale believe that access to this relief – in the form of personal protective equipment (PPE), soap, hand sanitizer, masks, and cash support – is conditional on networks of patronage. Respondents told CRS that access to support was dependent on political contacts, or political party membership, and that the disbursement of funds allocated at the national level was “shrouded in corruption.” The perception of government venality has badly damaged vertical social cohesion at both local and national levels. One community leader in Bolgatanga told CRS, “COVID relief packages are for specific people but ordinary or poor people cannot access the funds.” Communities frequently cited the government’s failure to publish spending figures and lack of transparency as evidence of corruption, with one government official telling CRS that COVID-relief fund spending was centralized and often did not benefit people at the local level.

Growing economic inequality in Bolgatanga and Tamale is underpinned by the absence of comprehensive social protection policies from the national government. Although the government has provided public utilities customers with several months of free water and free or subsidized electricity services, as well as an additional, one-off round of cash transfers to beneficiaries of the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) program, respondents told CRS that these social safety net programs were not sufficient to protect citizens from the economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, damaging trust in the government and eroding vertical social cohesion. Moreover, one community member in Bolgatanga explained that politicians have used COVID-19 as an excuse not to deliver on social protection commitments such as distributing subsidized fertilizer, which has impacted harvests. In Tamale, the failure of social protection policies coupled with the absence of basic infrastructure to allow people to adhere to COVID prevention measures – such as functioning water pipes – has eroded communities’ trust in the government.

MY GOVERNMENT HAS THE CAPACITY TO FAIRLY AND EFFECTIVELY RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

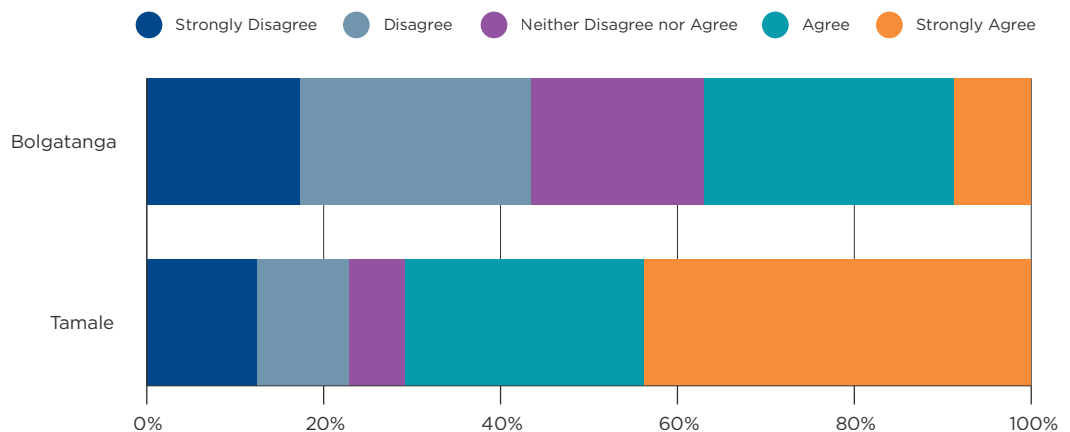




PHOTO: Natalija Gormalova for CRS

In both Bolgatanga and Tamale, the loss of trust in the government has been exacerbated by conflicting messaging in relation to COVID-19 protocols. Although the government-imposed restrictions on movement and numbers of people allowed to gather, in the run up to elections in December 2020, restrictions were temporarily lifted to allow for voter registration drives and for people to cast their ballots. This created confusion as to exactly how COVID-19 restrictions were being applied, and why. In addition to this, while vertical social cohesion has historically been cultivated by members of Parliament attending ceremonies and festivals, and in some cases financially supporting them, this has now ceased. The cancellation of assembly and other in-person meetings by government representatives during the height of restrictions, as well as the failure of officials to reach out in other ways, has contributed to the belief that officials have used the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to bypass communities on issues of concern. In Tamale, one civil society leader explained that this, coupled with unfulfilled promises made with regard to the delivery of COVID-19 relief, has damaged vertical social cohesion there.

Although the Government of Ghana has instituted mandatory vaccines for government officials, health sector workers, people attending public spaces such as night clubs, and visitors traveling to Ghana from abroad from January 2022, vaccine hesitancy is still prevalent. Despite widespread public messaging campaigns by the government, as well as an increase in the use of social media by political candidates to evade COVID-19 restrictions, one important corollary of the erosion of trust in the government's response to the pandemic has been public engagement with misinformation and/or disinformation. Explaining the origin of their distrust of government messaging on COVID-19, one respondent in Bolgatanga told CRS, "The white man wants to kill Africans because we are overpopulated." Similarly, respondents in Tamale told CRS that people feel that COVID-19 does not actually exist, and that vaccines brought to Africa from Europe cause impotence in the male population. In substantiating these views, respondents cited the lack of transparency in figures relating to COVID-19 infections and deaths as evidence that they were being lied to.

Declining trust in health professionals and facilities has not only resulted in sick people staying at home rather than seeking help, but also in keeping their illness secret so as to avoid other community members believing they have COVID-19. Alongside this, reported incidents of neglect in health care facilities – including one case in Bolgatanga in which health care workers reportedly claimed an individual had died of COVID-19 and then extorted their family in order to release the body – have driven the belief among some that it is better to avoid health care facilities altogether. This decline in trust of health care workers and facilities, the spread of misinformation and/or disinformation, and the perception of the lack of government transparency are often mutually reinforcing and seem likely to affect both horizontal and vertical social cohesion for the foreseeable future.

Civil Society Responses

The following section communicates key findings pertaining to the role of civil society, including how members have adapted to work under the new constraints imposed by safety and health regulations, as well as adapted to newly emergent needs.

The response to COVID-19 in both Bolgatanga and Tamale has relied on strong collaboration between the government and civil society. Key informants in both communities noted that the attention of civil society and the focus of their programming quickly shifted to COVID-19, and that this allowed stronger collaboration with government departments as well as better information sharing to respond to the pandemic. Given that civil society has established networks of contacts in many communities where the government's footprint is smaller, the two were able to work together to spread COVID-19 safety information. In Tamale, one civil society leader noted that their relationships with communities improved as a result of this collaboration. However, in undertaking these activities and adapting their ways of working – including holding training online, smaller community meetings, and conducting door-to-door campaigns to spread COVID-19 messaging – the financial burden has fallen on civil society, straining already tight budgets.

Despite challenges relating to funding, the attention of donors shifting to COVID-19 response, and operational restrictions, civil society has continued to encourage social cohesion through its work in both Bolgatanga and Tamale. Respondents told CRS that this work currently includes educating people about peace building, promoting cultural activities which bring diverse communities together, and sponsoring drama programs to strengthen bonds at the intra-community level. In Tamale, civil society has supported communities in establishing task forces to build their resilience to withstanding shocks from disasters and pandemics. Alongside this, civil society actors there have continued to provide platforms for community engagement – an increasingly important service given the damage done to vertical and horizontal social cohesion by the pandemic. In addition, in Bolgatanga some CSOs have provided small grants for community activities to encourage social cohesion.

Although government-imposed restrictions on the number of people allowed to congregate for worship in churches and masjids have created some tensions with congregants and their faith leaders, respondents told CRS that the latter's role in spreading information about COVID-19 safety protocols has been important. The level of trust which communities have in faith leaders means that their messaging relating to COVID-19, observing safety protocols, and getting the vaccine can influence large numbers of people. Conscious of the impacts of the pandemic on horizontal social cohesion, faith leaders have been preaching about the value of unity and have brought together different groups to discuss these issues. In addition, some faith leaders in Tamale have been providing psycho-social support or counseling to individuals struggling with the negative impacts of COVID-19, helping to reaffirm their roles in their communities.

These responses, however, are set against an increasingly challenging backdrop for civil society and other actors engaged in work unrelated to COVID-19. Numerous respondents across this study told CRS that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic international partners and donors have withdrawn or redirected funding supporting social cohesion, access to services such as water and sanitation, and development programming. One of the impacts of this has been civil society groups having to abandon work that was at an early stage of development – such as programming relating to gender and child protection – affecting trust with affected communities. In Tamale, one government representative told CRS that the government’s response plan focused entirely on the provision of PPE and other medical issues, rather than taking a broader approach that includes funding for environmental health, community volunteer networks, and water and sanitation. As a result, there is a growing need for CSOs and community groups to take a more holistic approach to protecting communities during the COVID-19 era, including through the establishment of mechanisms to hold the government accountable.

Looking Forward

This section highlights the effects of the pandemic that are likely to undermine social cohesion and efforts to address it unless adequately accounted for.

If left unaddressed, the following impacts of the pandemic appear most likely to continue to strain social cohesion:

Communities’ faith in the government’s ability to effectively respond to public health crises and shocks will not be repaired without improved operational transparency. The government’s failure to be more consultative and decentralized in the way it allocates and spends funding has undermined trust in their performance, and created competition among and between communities for COVID relief. If unaddressed, intra-community tensions resulting from the government’s COVID-19 response coupled with a lack of trust in its ability to operate fairly and effectively could further exacerbate political vigilantism in Northern Ghana.

Competition over scarce resources underpinned by a lack of adequate social protection policies will continue to drive inter- and intra- community tensions. The perception that access to the government’s COVID-19 support is reliant on networks of patronage has eroded both vertical and horizontal social cohesion, and driven economic inequality. With the economic shocks of COVID-19 likely to reverberate for the foreseeable future, the absence of social protection policies to protect the most vulnerable will drive competition - and antipathy - between and among communities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be used to help guide responses to the persistent challenges enumerated above.

Policy

The clearest way to repair public trust in the government’s ability to effectively respond to COVID-19 - as well as future public health crises and shocks - is by practicing transparency and accountability both in policy-making and budgeting. Respondents in Bolgatanga and Tamale noted that they wanted community members to be involved in the planning and budgeting processes, as well as in monitoring government officials and other parties responsible for distributing relief. Vertical social cohesion specifically would also be encouraged by the government clearly and transparently budgeting for

commitments to support frontline workers and other critical care professionals, as well as disseminating accurate information about COVID-19, its effects, and the efficacy of vaccines. Therefore local and national government offices should:

- Publish the data relating to COVID-19 expenditure, a breakdown of the parties responsible for ensuring this funding is distributed as stipulated, and a timeline for when the public can expect support in a manner which is easily accessible.
- Establish mechanisms to ensure intra- and inter-community-level monitoring of government action to cultivate trust in those in office and to encourage diverse communities to work together, as a means of promoting citizen-responsive governance.
- Continue to disseminate information about COVID-19 in the public domain - including infection rates, hospitalization rates, the health-related effects of contracting COVID-19, and the efficacy of vaccines in mitigating against these effects - in collaboration with civil society, faith leaders, and other stakeholders to combat the spread of mis- and/or disinformation.

While at the macro-level the government is implementing a range of social protection policies to provide support, respondents in Bolgatanga and Tamale want to see these become more targeted to those genuinely in need, rather than those connected to the government in some way. It is vital that the government is clear about the eligibility criteria for this support so as not to increase the perception that some groups are favored as a result of their political connections. This support to offset those worst affected by COVID-19 should go hand in hand with investment in public infrastructure - such as stand-pipes, boreholes, public toilets and sanitation facilities, roadways, and health care - to mitigate against inter- and intra- community competition over scarce resources. Alongside this, groups who are particularly at risk - such as youth - should be targeted specifically by policy making. The Government of Ghana should:

- Ensure that social protection policies have the effect of supporting those most in need in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic through consultation with communities, and by making the eligibility criteria public.
- Recognizing that the systemic impacts of COVID-19 cannot be addressed only by vaccinating populations; need to redouble investment in public infrastructure to prevent conflict over scarce resources.

Programs

The increase in conflict at home - in part driven by restrictions on freedom of movement and economic strain - and the attendant rise in gender-based violence requires action to help address the secondary impacts of the pandemic. Community stakeholders must be included in the design and implementation of projects to address these secondary impacts, especially given the absence of consultation with communities in the government's COVID-19 response. Further:

- Collaboration between civil society and communities should be expanded and strengthened to provide psycho-social support to both survivors and perpetrators, to protect vulnerable communities and to ensure that domestic violence does not continue to undermine social cohesion moving forwards.
- Livelihood opportunities for youth, including through the promotion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in high schools, should be developed as a means of mitigating the financial impact on families most negatively affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19.

Guatemala

- LA MINA AND OQUEN

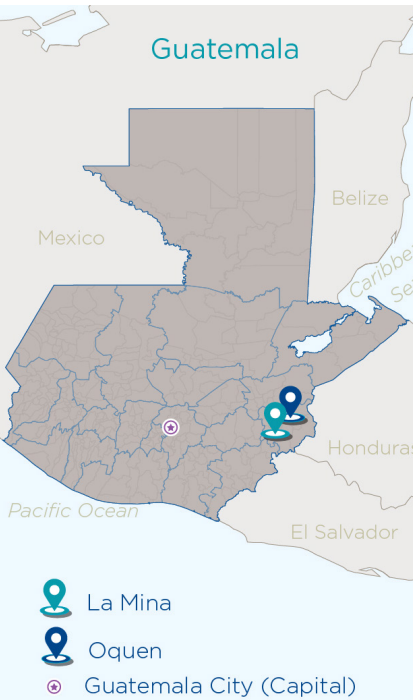


PHOTO: Dinorah Lorenzana
for CRS
MAP: COAR for CRS

Context

The following section provides a brief description of the country context, looking specifically at dynamics which have played a role historically in social cohesion there. It also provides general information pertaining to the specific study areas, La Mina and Oquen.

The two areas of study, La Mina and Oquen, are both located in Chiquimula department in the east of the country. Chiquimula is part of the Guatemalan dry zone, in which livelihoods are based primarily on the sale of agricultural labor, mainly coffee, sugar cane, and to a lesser extent, other crops such as melon and tomato, and rain-dependent subsistence agricultural production of corn and beans. Since 2012, OXFAM notes, multiple rainfall deficits have caused losses greater than 80% of production for self-consumption, leaving the most vulnerable households without 30% or 40% of their needed annual caloric intake.¹⁷ Many of the country's structural inequalities originate from its colonial and conflict history. The Guatemalan Civil War, which lasted 36 years, saw widespread

¹⁷ Oxfam, "El hambre es la medida del COVID-19: Incremento de la población que requiere asistencia alimentaria en el Corredor Seco de Guatemala", 2020 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/EI%20hambre%20es%20la%20medida%20del%20COVID-19.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2022).

killings and displacement; indigenous Mayans made up 83% of the casualties while 93% of human rights violations were perpetrated by state or paramilitary forces.¹⁸

In March 2020, the Government of Guatemala announced a 'State of Emergency' allowing the government to limit different rights and take actions to protect the health and safety of citizens. Following an extension of the State of Emergency and the formation of a steering committee, with the objective of advising the President about mechanisms and protocols that the Executive Branch could implement to mitigate the pandemic, several policies and interventions were announced.¹⁹

In recognition of the pandemic's likely economic impacts, the Government of Guatemala also put into place policies to strengthen supply chains, focusing on production and employment, as well as interventions aimed at sustaining incomes and demand through the establishment of more extensive social safety nets. Nevertheless, Guatemala is highly dependent on agriculture and small householder farms, and COVID-19 restrictions targeting domestic movement have placed an extraordinary burden on communities, limiting household incomes substantially. Underpinning much of the pandemic response are 'COCODEs' (*Consejos Comunitarios de Desarrollo Urbano y Rural* - Community Councils for Urban and Rural Development) system at the municipal level. These dual bodies have been responsible for implementing COVID-19 restrictions and distributing aid at the local level.

Horizontal Social Cohesion Dynamics

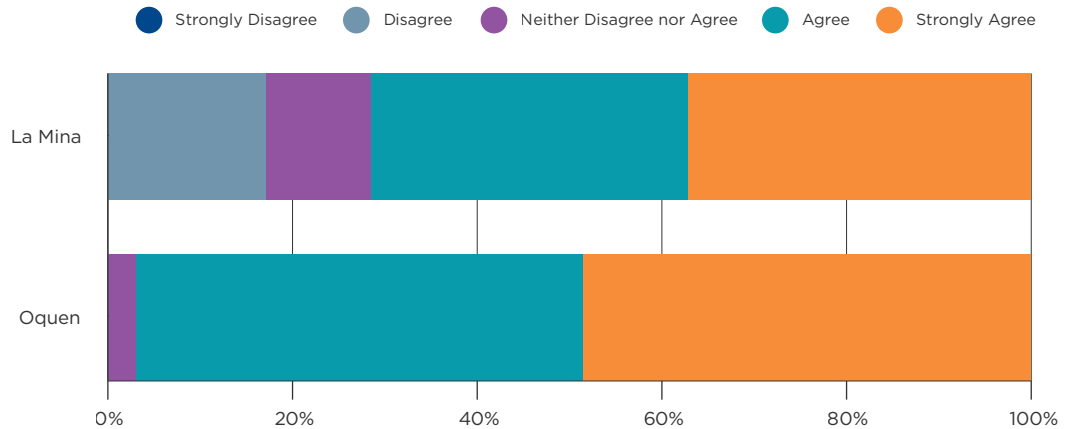
The following section examines findings pertaining to horizontal social cohesion, particularly inter- and intra-communal relations, but also findings relating to household dynamics.

Eighty four percent of survey respondents believed the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively affected relationships and the level of social cohesion in their community. Participants felt the pandemic had improved cohesiveness within the family unit, but decreased inter- and intra-communal trust. This was in part due to fear of contagion, as people began to worry that others in their community could be carriers of the disease. Notwithstanding these trends, there is no evidence drawn from either the Social Cohesion Barometer or the qualitative research to suggest any particular segment of Guatemalan society was seen as more likely to be carrying the disease. Among respondents, there was no perception that ethnic identities had become a greater source of social tension as a result of the pandemic. Rather, the social cohesion schisms noted in both locations were primarily political, and specifically linked to deep and often conflictual political party allegiances. Competition for scarce resources and general economic deprivation was also commonly noted by participants as a further stressor. Indeed, 57% of survey participants agreed the COVID-19 pandemic had led to more competition over livelihoods and scarce resources. Respondents told CRS that access to support was dependent on political party membership, which in turn deepened existing horizontal social cohesion cleavages between those supporting opposing political parties.

18 R. Bodenheimer, "The Guatemalan Civil War: History and Impact", *ThoughtCo*, 21 March 2020 <https://www.thoughtco.com/guatemalan-civil-war-history-and-impact-4800364> (accessed 21 February 2022).

19 These policies and interventions included, "...a shutdown of economic activities; curfew, restrictions of movement and transportation, internally and externally; closure of schools, universities and public places; restrictions on religious gatherings, sport and entertainment events, and public gatherings in general; sanitary practices in workplaces, and precautionary measures such as masks and social distancing.". See for more: E. Díaz-Bonilla, D. Laborde, V. Piñero, "Guatemala: The Impact of COVID-19 and Preliminary Policy Implications," LAC Working Paper 16, *International Food Policy Research Institute*, 2021 <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/utils/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/134410/filename/134622.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2022), p.7.

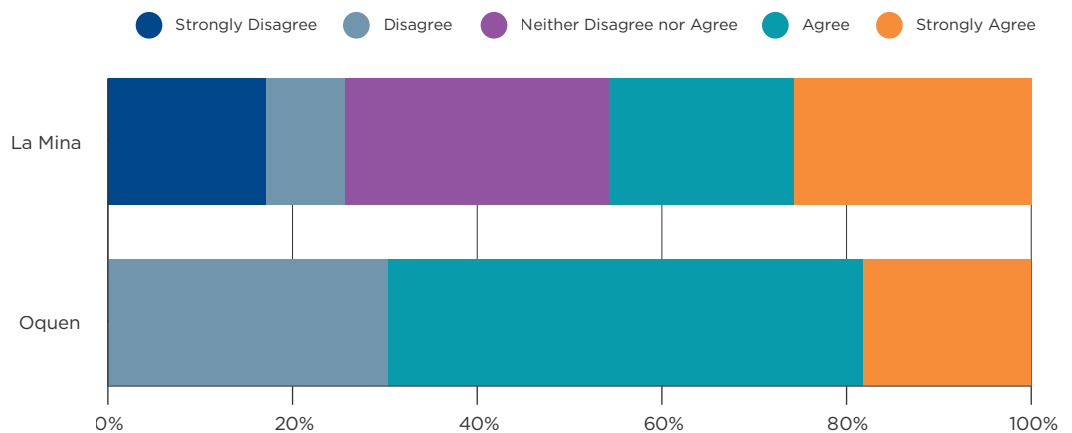
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED THE RELATIONSHIPS AND LEVEL OF SOCIAL COHESION IN MY COMMUNITY.



Across both communities, the government’s COVID-19 response was seen as having a negative impact on horizontal social cohesion, in large part because of the restrictions imposed on gatherings. In particular, participants cited the lack of church services, which are seen as crucial to the strengthening of horizontal social cohesion. Limiting community participation in COCODE meetings decreased government transparency and increased the perception that such meetings were rife with favoritism and political deal making. As one respondent commented:

“During the COVID-19 pandemic social ties were affected by the restrictions imposed by the government, those drastic measures caused distrust between neighbors, unemployment, food shortages... the government did not take it as a problem to solve, but as a business that arose from the shortcomings of the vulnerable population.”

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS LED TO MORE COMPETITION OVER LIVELIHOODS AND SCARCE RESOURCES.



Alongside this, there have also been problems in crops that generate high demand for labor, especially coffee cultivation. Coffee leaf rust, which is caused by the fungus *Hemileia vastatrix*, has caused billions of dollars in damage to farms in Central and South America since 2011. This, paired with an international drop in prices, has dramatically limited opportunities for temporary or seasonal labor. This progressive deterioration of livelihoods in the dry zone has now been magnified by COVID-19. Containment measures to stop the progress of the pandemic, especially those related to mobility restrictions and social distancing (such as curfews, prohibition of meetings of more than 20 people, limitation of vehicle circulation, and the suspension of the public transport), although necessary, have had a devastating impact.

Relatedly, vaccination status is increasingly becoming a source of contention between and among communities, having a negative impact on horizontal social cohesion. Interpersonal and intra-communal tensions arising from disagreements over the relative necessity or benefit of vaccination are magnified by government statements and policies aimed at encouraging vaccination, which the unvaccinated take as proof of their emergent 'second class' status.

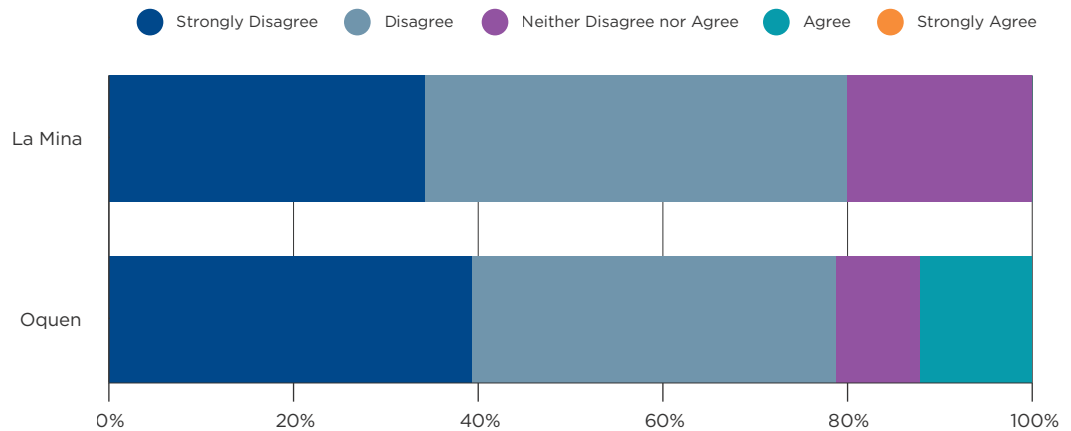
Vertical Social Cohesion Dynamics

This section discusses community perceptions of governance actors, including levels of trust affecting and affected by attitudes toward pandemic response efforts.

Communities in both locations felt the pandemic had an extremely negative impact on vertical social cohesion due to the perception that pandemic relief provided by the state was distributed unfairly. Only 4% of survey respondents believed their government had the capacity to respond fairly and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, trust in the government appears to have fallen precipitously on account of the widespread belief that preferential treatment was given to political supporters and the family members of those on municipal government councils. At least one government participant in this research appeared to be aware of how the pandemic response had been perceived: "Government programs are not shaped on the basis of community efforts but on the convenience of the central government." The vast majority of participants believed the distribution of pandemic relief was biased and that some communities benefited more than others. The country's history of political conflict continues to affect linkages between governance structures at the local and national levels, which in turn have caused communities to struggle to access the funds and programs designed to alleviate the pandemic's economic impacts. As a result, the pandemic has had a deleterious effect on communities' trust in local and national governance actors, as well as in those community-based organizations which have collaborated with the government on relief distribution.

In particular, in La Mina, confusion over the 'COCODEs', one of which is elected and the other appointed by the mayor, has seriously undermined vertical social cohesion in that community. Both COCODEs are seen by communities there as using COVID-19 aid distribution to jostle for greater political and social power, undermining trust in their capacities to act fairly in implementing government programs or in speaking on behalf of local communities. At a minimum, the dual power structure is confusing, making it hard for communities to know when and how to access the bodies, or to whom they should be submitting proposals for community issues.

MY GOVERNMENT HAS THE CAPACITY TO FAIRLY AND EFFECTIVELY RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.



In both locations participants made repeated mention of the fact that pandemic aid interventions were worthless if they failed to take into account communities' overall economic conditions, which themselves lay at the heart of many issues relating to social cohesion (i.e., competition over limited resources, jobs, and growing inequality). Housing, in particular, was regularly cited as an example of how the government's assistance overlooked the underlying contextual issues affecting COVID-19 safety.

Several female participants also noted that the political exclusion of women — a problem predating the emergence of COVID-19 — has been worsened by the pandemic, having the effect of further distancing women from centers of power and decision making. Already occupying peripheral roles, restrictions on the size of gatherings provided a public health justification for limiting participation in key meetings to 'core' stakeholders, most of which have historically been men.

The long shadow of the conflict's history also serves to undermine trust in government health measures, including hygiene drives and vaccination programs, despite the fact that vaccines have been made free and widely available, and represent a positive element of the government's COVID-19 response. In addition to many communities' long standing association of the central government with state security forces, mis/disinformation, intimidation, and inadequate messaging have served to cast doubt on government motives — despite communities voicing otherwise fairly positive views of the health sector.

Civil Society Responses

The following section communicates key findings pertaining to the role of civil society, including how members have adapted to work under the new constraints imposed by safety and health regulations, as well as adapted to newly emergent needs.

The pandemic greatly affected how community activists carried out their work. In addition to reviving existing informal groups, networks, and organizations, horizontal and vertical social cohesion can be further cultivated through civil society strengthening. Although participants did not believe that the pandemic played a negative role in limiting civil spaces, or in the diversity of voices participating in such spaces, some respondents told CRS that communities feel a general lack of opportunities for coming together and raising concerns, hinting at growing limitations on space for broader civil participation.

CSOs that engaged in the distribution of government COVID-19 relief may now be perceived more negatively than they were before the pandemic. The perception that

aid has been politicized is widespread in La Mina and Oquen and, as a result, local non-political actors engaged in the distribution of aid – from community leaders to CSOs – struggle to demonstrate that their programs are not motivated by political or self-serving interests. Participants in this research suggested such CSOs may have been instrumentalized by those in power, or that they have struck bargains with political actors in exchange for benefits.

Respondents in both La Mina and Oquen noted that CSOs had to limit the number of meetings carried out and participants in them. As the primary ‘need’ identified by participants was for skills training, it can be surmised that some of the ways CSOs had to adapt to the pandemic have also slowed their ability to meet community expectations related to their work. The dire economic consequences of the pandemic have made it difficult for CSOs to focus on anything but the amelioration of food and livelihoods needs. This is likely to be an ongoing issue, making it difficult to justify budgets for addressing issues such as lack of representation and good governance.

CSO members themselves reported fear and frustration, including with low levels of health protocol adherence, citing low compliance with mask wearing, distancing, and hand washing. At the same time, the lack of opportunities for carrying out trainings, meetings, and other work were their own cause for concern, as noted by one female community leader:

“When they called me to attend to a pregnant woman, I was afraid because of everything they announced in the news. It also affected us in the group of CARITAS, because we no longer met and they did not come to train because it was forbidden to meet. In those moments it was critical because we had no way to be united or to support each other.”

Looking Forward

This section highlights the effects of the pandemic that are likely to undermine social cohesion and efforts to address it unless adequately accounted for.

If left unaddressed, the following impacts of the pandemic appear most likely to continue to strain social cohesion:

- **It will be very difficult to build social cohesion in Guatemala unless mechanisms are put in place to improve government transparency and hold bad actors accountable for the siphoning of resources.** It is clear the pandemic has had a negative impact on social cohesion in Guatemala, particularly at the intersection of vertical and horizontal cohesion. Specifically, the perceived politicization of government pandemic relief has deepened inter- and intra-communal political tensions, which in turn has undermined trust in all levels of government’s capacity to respond fairly and effectively to local needs.
- **Social cohesion schisms related to political affiliation are highly likely to continue to play a lasting role in post-COVID-19 efforts.** As in many parts of the world, politicization of the pandemic response has not only created new tensions, but rather appears to have magnified existing issues and contributed to the ossification of both political positions and identities. Power jostling at the COCODE level has undermined horizontal social cohesion, translating political schisms at the national level down into communities. Lack of good governance capacity amongst the COCODEs is likely to have the effect of ensuring that shortcomings – both real and perceived – will be interpreted as further evidence of corruption, as opposed to a problem of members’ leadership skills and experience.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be used to help guide responses to the persistent challenges enumerated above.

Policy

Persistent economic and political cleavages have undermined citizens' confidence in the state's capacity to respond equitably and effectively to the pandemic. Indigenous communities continue to lack representation, which in turn has exacerbated issues in accessing government-provided COVID-19 relief. In both locations participants made repeated mention of the fact that pandemic aid interventions were worthless if they failed to take into account communities' overall economic conditions, which themselves lay at the heart of many issues relating to social cohesion (such as competition over limited resources, jobs, and growing inequality). Housing, in particular, was regularly cited as an example of how the government's assistance overlooked the underlying contextual issues affecting COVID-19 safety. Therefore the government of Guatemala should:

- Work with, and provide funding for, local civil society and community based groups working to mitigate and respond to corruption risks. Support the strengthening of anti-corruption mechanisms - specifically those which help to ensure oversight and accountability of public spending regarding the COVID-19 crisis response - as a means of promoting citizen-responsive governance.

The government's pandemic restrictions have slowed or altogether halted ongoing and planned development activities, a mutually reinforcing dynamic that looks set to continue in the future. Addressing the rising cost of living will assuage some pressures, but without a longer-term improvement in access to better, more lucrative markets for goods produced, improvements will be limited and communities will see broader economic recovery in Guatemala as further proof of government corruption. The government should also:

- Bolster support for social protection systems as a means of mitigating the economic impact of the pandemic on communities, and building resilience. In addition, help to support social protection systems to ensure that community needs are addressed in an equitable manner regardless of geography or political affiliation.

Programs

There is a risk that communities will remain hyper-attuned to any perceived inequities in the future, making it essential that programs carefully consider how activities — and communication about them — may exacerbate such sentiments. The pervasive belief that pandemic aid distribution has been politicized is likely to haunt response actors for years to come; negotiating program sustainability directives will be a complex undertaking as engaging government stakeholders may undermine community support for programs. Managing intra-communal power dynamics will involve 'serving two masters' while maintaining neutrality and open dialogue with communities themselves. CSOs like CRS should work towards:

- Improving the participation of communities in the delivery of COVID-19 relief, in particular, would go some way to addressing some of the immediate issues of trust raised by the pandemic response.

- Opportunities for CSO capacity strengthening should be considered in current and future programs, particularly in support of improving skills related to needs assessments and the development of two way communications mechanisms.

Maya Chorti communities were more likely to mention the environment in their definitions of social cohesion, as many see the environment (weather systems, animals, plants, etc.) as a network of active and agentive actors in their social worlds. Therefore:

- Environmental impact assessments should be mainstreamed into all livelihoods program planning. Guatemala is already vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and efforts which undermine environmental sustainability further will likely drive a wedge between those who benefit (the upper, business classes) and those who see the environment as part of their social community (indigenous communities). There will be pressure to move quickly toward improving agricultural outputs in order to meet food and livelihood needs. This cannot be done in ways which undermine the natural environment.

There are issues related to religious tolerance between groups; religious discrimination and intolerance was mentioned by participants in both La Mina and Oquen, suggesting there are opportunities for building horizontal social cohesion by encouraging exchanges.

- Acknowledging the potential for ongoing accounting, at least in the short term, for government restrictions affecting movement and gatherings, other opportunities for developing better understanding between religious communities should also be explored.

Conclusions

Despite their different contexts and conflict backgrounds, **COVID-19 has similarly affected both horizontal and vertical social cohesion in all three studied geographies.** Governmental responses to the pandemic, which largely shut down economies and restricted the movement of goods and people, have exacerbated structural inequalities and caused increased poverty, while also putting on hold many civil society initiatives for building social cohesion. School closures and moves to distance learning have increased household and intra-community tensions as well as inequalities in education, with particularly deleterious impacts on women and girls. Declining trust in health care professionals is a particularly worrying consequence of this broader frustration with state institutions and their responses to the pandemic, a dynamic which is underpinned by the spread of mis-/disinformation, continuing to fuel fear.

Of particular concern is the finding that **government-provided pandemic aid has by-in-large been perceived to have been delivered unfairly and inequitably**, to be characterized by rampant corruption, and to require political contacts to access. **This has further frayed vertical cohesion** – a particularly concerning development in the study areas, where historical grievances have long undermined community trust in state institutions. A lack of community involvement in decision making and unpublished spending figures have especially contributed to these suspicions of corruption, undermining trust in a broad array of government and non-government structures. Responses from Guatemala, for instance, are concerning in this regard as non-governmental civil society actors have lost trust due to perceptions surrounding their involvement in the inequitable distribution of aid.

However, the most significant worry is that **this lack of trust in government has extended to the health sector**, which is exacerbated by the spread of dis-/misinformation regarding vaccines and medical treatment. Despite government information campaigns and vaccine drives, rumors and conspiracies remain with respondents reporting fear or hesitation to engage with the health care sector. Conflicting messaging and inconsistency in applying rules have also led to the perception that governments are using COVID-19 as an excuse to bypass communities, opening space for extremist groups to spread dis-/misinformation.

However, perceived **discrimination in the distribution of aid has also negatively impacted horizontal social cohesion**, driving competition over scarce resources and highlighting pre-existing tensions related to perceived favoritism. Governmental transparency and neutrality in the delivery of aid must be a priority going forward, and can be facilitated through further efforts to include all communities in decision-making processes and ensuring the representation of marginalized groups.

The **direct economic impacts of the restricted movement of goods and people have exacerbated structural inequalities**, particularly in rural areas dependent on agriculture and the pooling of labor and resources. In two of the areas studied, respondents said that mechanisms of communal solidarity and the sharing of resources had largely ceased, though Pigcawayan in the Philippines provides a notable exception, where respondents reported an increase in willingness to share resources and concerns for the wellbeing of more vulnerable members of the community. A majority of respondents to the Social Cohesion Barometer survey in each locality said that COVID-19 has led to an increase in competition over resources, driving conflict and undermining horizontal social cohesion.

With in-person meetings and gatherings restricted, and the prevailing fear of others spreading COVID-19, **initiatives to bolster social cohesion have been largely put on hold. In all three contexts, inter-community interactions have become more limited, restricting space for important dialogue.** For example, dialogue related to the peace process in South Upi, the Philippines, has continued only with community leaders, leading to a reduction in information sharing from leaders to the local level and undermining both horizontal and vertical social cohesion and fueling tensions.



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