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A story of resilience and fragilities: the impact of COVID-19 on horizontal cohesion in conflict-affected countries

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought along with it massive challenges related to health response, socio-economic impacts, and information sharing; and communities in conflict face additional hurdles in maintaining stability during this period. To mitigate the mutual influence of conflict dynamics and COVID-19 response, Search for Common Ground (Search) has partnered with the European Union to produce research on a quarterly basis addressing key themes faced across six conflict-affected countries, namely **Kenya, Nigeria, Palestine, Tanzania, Uganda, and Yemen**. Each report includes concrete recommendations for maintaining the credibility of pandemic response efforts, minimising the negative effects of the pandemic on conflict dynamics, and identifying opportunities for collaboration. **This second thematic report is an attempt to analyse horizontal social cohesion in conflict settings throughout the pandemic**. The report builds on insights from our Quarterly Conflict Snapshot Reports.[1]

Understanding the Importance of Horizontal Cohesion During a Pandemic

For the purposes of this report, we define horizontal cohesion as the relationships between individuals and/or groups across horizontal dividing lines (i.e. ethnic, religious, geographic, and political dividing lines, etc.). During times of crisis, levels of horizontal cohesion between population groups tend to fluctuate depending on a variety of factors. ***Low or deteriorating levels of horizontal cohesion during crisis situations are often indicators of potential violence, conflict, and/or rising tensions among and between groups***. Additionally, high or increasing levels of horizontal cohesion during a crisis are often indicators of the overall resilience of a particular community during times of crisis and can reveal entry points for collaboration around crisis response.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many anticipated the virus would have disastrous effects for conflict-affected countries - well beyond the immediate health implications. There were predictions of heightened political tensions, increased polarisation between and among groups, and intensified insecurity and violence that would coincide with impending socio-economic disaster. Yet, while larger, international calls for collaboration and peace in the face of the pandemic have seen uneven success (i.e. global ceasefires, etc.), we have actually seen relative resilience and stability at the community level in relation to horizontal cohesion in our research countries. In many cases, ***our data shows that horizontal cohesion is actually increasing, albeit, with important caveats and vulnerabilities***. We find there are key opportunities around horizontal cohesion that health responders, international practitioners, civil society actors, governments, and donors can tap into for improved pandemic response. More importantly, strengthening horizontal cohesion throughout the pandemic and recovery periods, especially for conflict-affected communities, can avert longer-term crises and outbreaks of violence while ensuring diverse needs are being met.

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1. Under the research component, you can find each country's quarterly reports. Data for round 2 of our quarterly reports was collected between January-February 2021.

What Horizontal Cohesion Looks Like During a Pandemic

There are a number of indicators that measure horizontal cohesion, which can be broken down into two main categories: ***intergroup trust*** and ***intergroup collaboration***. These indicators are influenced by many contextual and pandemic-related factors and may fluctuate at different rates and during various periods of the pandemic, making it important to analyse trends closely. Graphic 1 below explores these indicators:

Graphic 1: Indicators influencing horizontal cohesion

	Intergroup Trust	Intergroup Collaboration
Positive Indicators	– high levels of solidarity and empathy; "we're in this together" sentiments – high levels of trust between groups that are resilient throughout the pandemic – high levels of perceived safety when interacting across dividing lines – reduced instances of violence or tensions when groups interact, particularly for pandemic response or other measures – low levels of GBV and violence against children	– high levels of valuing collaboration across dividing lines to respond to the pandemic – high levels of intergroup interaction – intergroup interaction is based on willingness, agency, and perceived utility – interaction across divides happens regularly or systematically throughout the pandemic; platforms for collaboration are created and sustained – reduced barriers for interaction across divides
Negative Indicators	– high levels of dehumanisation and stigmatisation of "the other," that are exacerbated by the pandemic – high levels of mistrust between groups that are exacerbated by the pandemic – reduced feelings of safety or confidence when interacting across divides – tensions and violence emerge as a "defensive" or "survival" tactic; cyclical violence between groups	– varying, low, or shifting levels of valuing collaboration across divides – individuals and groups "naturally" self-segregate within identity circles – sporadic or irregular levels of interaction across dividing lines – interaction across divides is out of necessity or circumstance – barriers and socio-cultural norms prevent or reduce opportunities to interact across groups

How we are Measuring Horizontal Cohesion During COVID-19

Our research examines a core set of indicators based on Graphic 1 above, which are assessed at the individual level. Two indicators are *subjective* in nature, assessing whether respondents value collaboration across divides[2] and feel safe when interacting with others; while the third indicator is *objective* in nature, measuring levels of actual interaction across divides. The following table provides an overview of each indicator and topline trends we have identified in our research so far:

Table1: Overview of horizontal cohesion indicators in our research

INDICATOR 1: % of respondents who report valuing collaboration across dividing lines during a crisis situation like COVID-19.

What this Tells Us

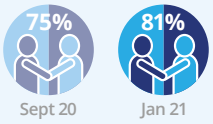
This indicator allows us to assess whether individuals value this kind of collaboration during a crisis and to draw insights on how collaboration across divides can contribute to pandemic response interventions.

This data can help us discern where there might be entry points for increased collaboration. It can also help us identify potential risk groups who might feel "threatened" by interaction across groups or by the "other" during times of crisis.

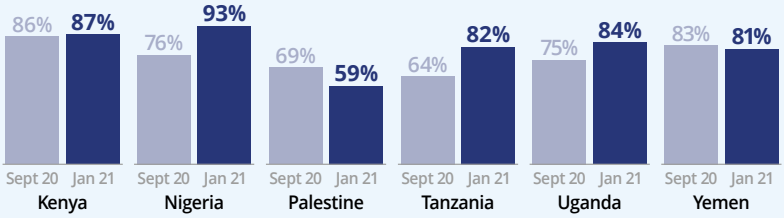
For instance, in Uganda, we saw that relationships between refugees and host communities have been particularly strained during the pandemic, so Search set up specific interventions to bring these groups together and highlight how the pandemic was impacting everyone.

Topline Trends to Watch

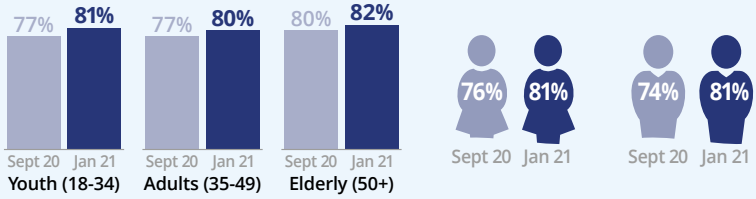
There's been an overall increase in the percentage of respondents who value this kind of collaboration in our six target countries.



Small to larger increases were noted in all countries, except Palestine and Yemen:



Moreover, when disaggregating across demographic groups, each category saw an increase between the first and second rounds:



2. "Dividing lines" or "collaboration across divides" is characterised as interaction between and among individuals and groups that cut across salient societal divisions based on things such as religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, geographic divides, and other demographic considerations. Respondents are asked about interaction and collaboration across divides based on the salient divisions in their own context.

INDICATOR 2: % of respondents who report **interacting (in-person or remotely)** with someone from another group in the last three months.

What this Tells Us

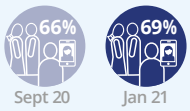
Just because respondents report valuing collaboration across divides, does not necessarily translate to actual interaction. Therefore, we are also tracking whether individuals ***are or are not*** interacting across divides throughout the pandemic, both in person and online.

The data helps us understand which groups have greater opportunity and/or willingness to interact across divides as well as those who might face barriers or be less willing to participate in this kind of interaction.

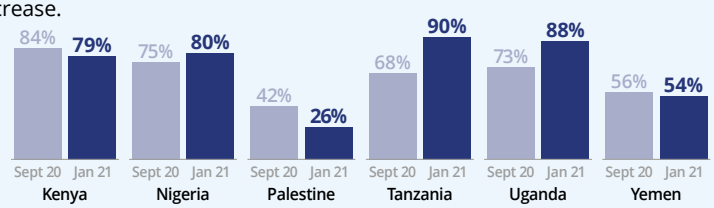
This data also helps us assess the pandemic's impact on people's opportunities to still meet and interact across dividing lines (including through formal and informal conflict mediation mechanisms) as well as identify creative ways to increase opportunities for interaction throughout the pandemic.

Topline Trends to Watch

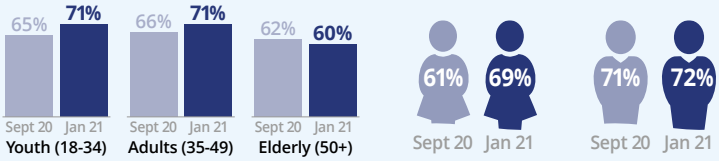
Despite various lockdown measures, ***interaction across divides slightly increased between the first and second rounds of data collection***.



Tanzania showed the largest increase in interactions, and Palestine the largest decrease.



When disaggregating the data across demographic groups, almost all groups reported an increase in actual interaction across divides between rounds, except elderly respondents. Men consistently have higher interaction rates than women.



INDICATOR 3: % of respondents who report **feeling safe when interacting** with individuals from another group.

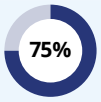
What this Tells Us

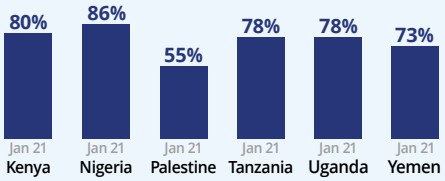
A crisis situation such as COVID-19 might shift the nature of interactions between individuals across divides. Interaction might happen out of necessity or for circumstantial reasons rather than out of agency or perceived utility.

We measure the perceived safety respondents feel when interacting across divides to help us characterise the nature of interaction. Reduced feelings of safety might indicate that, while interaction is happening (for one reason or another), there might be potential conflict triggers or tensions that exist in this interaction.

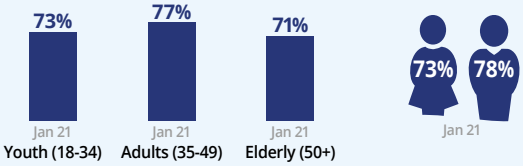
Topline Trends to Watch

We started measuring perceptions of safety in our second round of data collection. The overall average across our six target countries is 75%, with the lowest value recorded in Palestine.



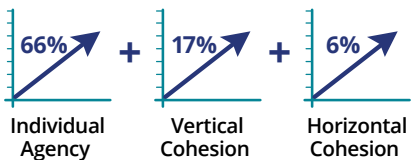


Additionally, our baseline figures indicate that ***elderly and women have the lowest rates of feeling safe when interacting across divides:***



How Horizontal Cohesion Interacts with Other Dynamics of Social Cohesion

Horizontal cohesion is just one aspect of overall ***social cohesion***, which Search defines as **individual agency + vertical cohesion + horizontal cohesion**.[3] We developed an index of indicators to track these three aspects of social cohesion throughout the pandemic and identify trends across our six research countries. Overall, all three tracks are increasing.



Percent change for each track (across the 6 target countries)

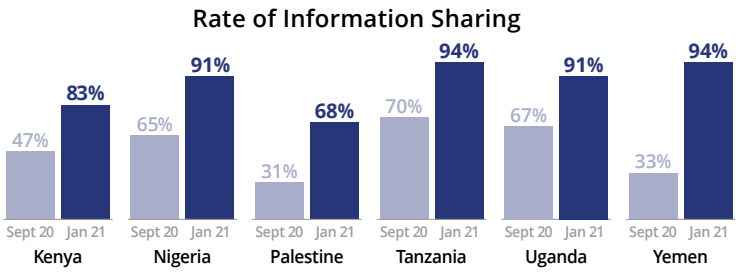
However, we can see that **horizontal cohesion is increasing at the slowest rate and is actually declining in some instances**. Table 2 below shows the percent increase or decrease for each track as well as for social cohesion overall in each country, between rounds one and two of data collection.

Table 2: Evolution of social cohesion indicators per country

	Kenya	Nigeria	Palestine	Tanzania	Uganda	Yemen
Individual Agency	+77%	+40%	+119%	+34%	+36%	+185%
Vertical Cohesion	+ 55%	+46%	–7%	+12%	+46%	–22%
Horizontal Cohesion	–4%	+14%	–16%	+26%	+13%	No change
Social Cohesion Overall	+29%	+32%	+2%	+19%	+32%	+4%

3. For more details, see our methodological notes (round 1 and round 2) which contains further details on how we define and measure each indicator of social cohesion.

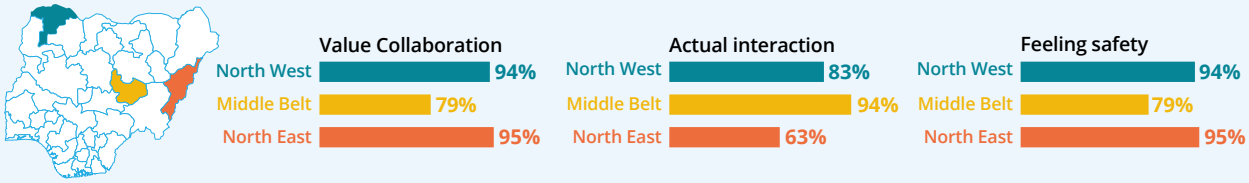
Based on these preliminary results, we can begin to make some assumptions. For instance, **there might be a link between decreased vertical cohesion and dramatic spikes in agency** (i.e. information sharing).[4] However, we also see ***increased*** information sharing where vertical cohesion has increased, albeit at more steady rates. While we are collecting more data to further unpack these trends, we know that several of our research countries experienced second or third waves of the pandemic, which may have contributed to increased concern and therefore an uptick in information sharing altogether. In subsequent sections of this report, we will further unpack the relationship between vertical and horizontal cohesion.



Horizontal Cohesion: Digging into the Complexities of the Data

While we are still unpacking the larger trends in how the three categories of social cohesion correlate, disaggregating the data can help identify micro-level trends. It then becomes clear that horizontal cohesion is often influenced by vertical cohesion,[5] as well as prevailing contextual considerations, ***creating a scenario where horizontal cohesion might be evolving unevenly across different communities within one country***. So, while overall levels of horizontal cohesion are trending upwards across our six research countries, they might actually be much more fragile when unpacking the data.

CASE STUDY: Nigeria (Round 2 Data)



In Nigeria, **different groups perceive the pandemic response differently based on considerations such as religion, location, and pre-existing conflict dynamics**, which have impacted citizen-state relationships and trust.[6] Horizontal cohesion is also evolving somewhat unevenly; for instance, collaboration across divides is valued much less in the Middle Belt than in the North East and North West. And while respondents from the Middle Belt have the highest levels of actual interaction, they also have the lowest feelings of safety while interacting across divides.

Historically, conflict and tensions between Christians and Muslims are salient across the Middle Belt, and the demographic mix of Christians and Muslims is greater in this region than in the other two regions (predominantly Muslim). These factors might influence the way citizens experience the pandemic, while pandemic-related stress factors exacerbate these pre-existing tensions. For instance, communities in the Middle Belt may be interacting out of necessity or circumstance, while prevailing conflict dynamics might be influencing perceptions of safety and low levels of valuing collaboration. Moreover, we also know that both religious groups perceive equity of pandemic response differently, with more Muslims than Christians believing the government is doing its best to consider the needs of everyone equally. In the Middle Belt, which has a higher Christian population than the other two regions, trust in the government was only 25% in round 2, while satisfaction in government services was only 2%, potentially **suggesting that low levels of vertical cohesion might be influencing lower levels of horizontal cohesion in the Middle Belt.**

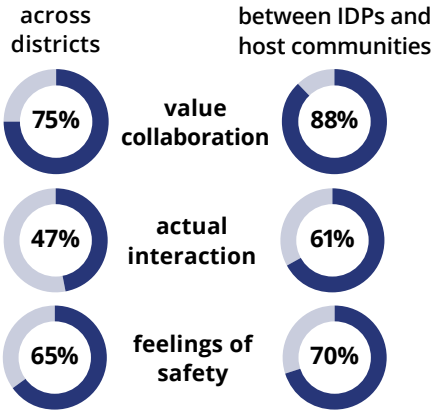
We can see more examples of this in some countries. In **Kenya**, Mombasa county has the lowest levels of trust and satisfaction in government compared to the five other Kenyan counties where we are carrying out this research. Reports from Search's early warning system reveal that, while there are many services offered in Mombasa, they are often of poor quality and many people report that they are given based on bribes, corruption, and tribal affiliation. Our data shows that Mombasa also has the lowest levels of horizontal cohesion. Again, lower levels of vertical and horizontal cohesion seem to be linked here, although more research is needed to better understand this relationship.[7]

4. Search is only measuring a specific aspect of agency in relation to the pandemic, assessing whether respondents feel ownership over trusted information and therefore share it with others in an attempt to play a positive role in sharing accurate information about COVID-19. However, in some instances, increased information sharing could actually be linked to decreasing trust in government and/or official information sources and channels.
5. And in particular by the four determinants of trust in authorities discussed in our previous report: (i) access to information, (ii) governmental service provision, (iii) pandemic response measures and enforcement, and (iv) socio-economic resilience. See Search for Common Ground, Trust in authorities – the golden ticket to successful COVID-19 vaccine roll-out in conflict settings, January 2021.
6. See latest Nigeria snapshot here.
7. See latest Kenya snapshot here.

value collaboration across divides

In **Yemen**, our research looks at horizontal cohesion between IDPs and host communities as well as between citizens living in different districts.

Host community members value collaboration less than IDPs, which may be fuelled by grievances related to shared resources as well as perceptions that IDPs are prioritised for humanitarian assistance. On the other hand, IDPs feel less safe when interacting with host community members; negative perceptions by host community members towards IDPs might drive reduced feelings of safety.[8]



Gender and Age Dynamics in Horizontal Cohesion[9]

The gendered impact of the pandemic is severe, creating major setbacks in gender equality gains. Women and girls face rising gender based violence and insecurity, including rape, physical abuse, forced and early marriage, teenage pregnancies, increased FGM, and other consequences. Additionally, ***our data shows that women have fewer opportunities to interact with other groups (in person or remotely) and are therefore more likely to feel the effects of social isolation, creating a situation where gender norms and barriers are becoming more entrenched***.[10] However, the slight rise in interaction across divides among women respondents between the first and second rounds might be a positive indicator and opportunity for women's increased involvement in pandemic response efforts.

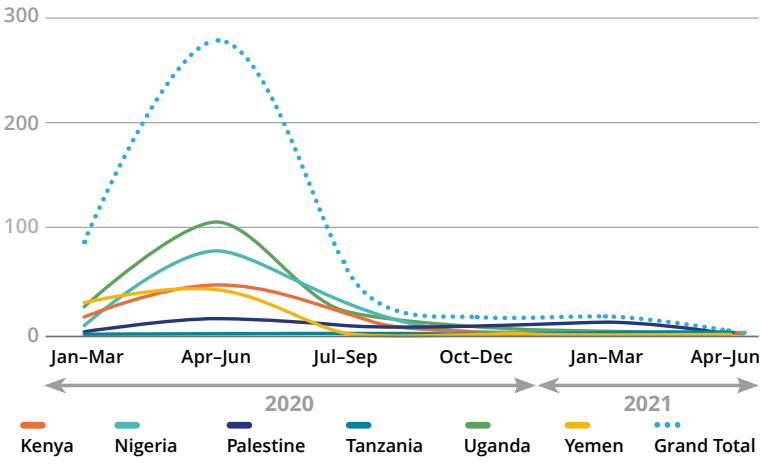
Overall, women value collaboration across divides highly, often more so than men. Our experience on the ground also shows that ***women are setting aside pre-existing tensions and conflicts more easily in order to address common needs during the pandemic***. In many places, they have been among the first responders to support their communities by producing face masks, distributing food aid, and troubleshooting challenges such as water shortages. However, women have lower feelings of safety when interacting across divides as well as actual interaction across divides.

So far, we see there are not huge generational differences in horizontal cohesion. However, ***actual rates of interaction are relatively low among the elderly, indicating they may have fewer opportunities to interact across divides***. Elderly respondents also report the lowest feelings of safety during intergroup interaction, which might be an indicator of potential vulnerabilities among this category of respondents. There is an ***important opportunity for multi-generational collaboration across divides***, which can build on relatively high levels of valuing collaboration among all groups as well as potentially increase overall feelings of safety and improve opportunities for the elderly to interact across divides.

Horizontal Cohesion Remains Fragile amid Rising Case Numbers and Increasing Secondary Impacts, Increasing the Potential for Violence

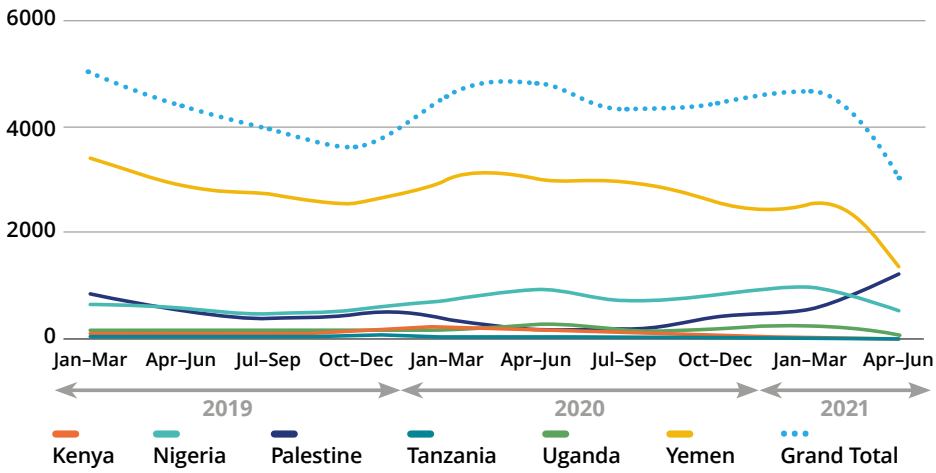
Lower levels of horizontal cohesion in some places can be an important indicator for potential future violence and conflict to erupt. As noted above, some of our research countries have seen declines in horizontal cohesion and overall, horizontal cohesion saw the smallest increase between rounds compared to vertical cohesion and agency. Research shows that pandemics can precipitate social unrest and violence.[11] As we continue to see second and third waves proliferate around the world, and as needs become increasingly dire, ***pandemic-related stress factors can unravel higher levels of horizontal cohesion or trigger violence and conflict where lower levels of horizontal cohesion exist***.

Graphic 2: Violent Events, related directly to COVID-19, since the pandemic outbreak. Source: ACLED



8. See latest Yemen snapshot here.
9. See table 1 above for detailed statistics on age and gender differences in the horizontal cohesion indicators.
10. Our research also shows that women have faced increased online harassment during the pandemic, creating an additional barrier for women to interact with others via online and virtual platforms.
11. Philip Barrett and Sophia Chen, "Social Repercussions of Pandemics," International Monetary Fund, (January 2021).

Graphic 3: All Violent Events, (2019–2021). Source: ACLED

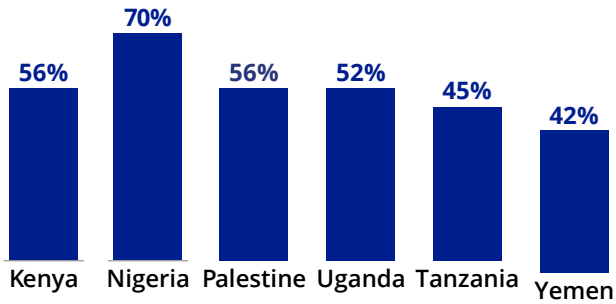


Additionally, many of our target countries are experiencing heightened levels of conflict, violence, and insecurity in general, such as Nigeria, Yemen, and Palestine. Many respondents report that COVID-19 is not a top priority for them amid increased violence and insecurity, while others feel resources should be channelled to address insecurity rather than the pandemic. As the security situation deteriorates in many places, and grievances about the pandemic response efforts increase, we can anticipate reduced levels of horizontal cohesion as a result. Yet, as noted above, some increased insecurity, violence, and conflict are directly or indirectly linked to the pandemic, demonstrating the need for holistic pandemic response measures that go beyond the primary health concerns to also combat the ongoing secondary effects, including increased insecurity, conflict and violence.

In Western and Northern **Uganda**, we have already seen clashes and tensions between refugees and host community members over land and resources triggered by pandemic related needs and a cut-back in humanitarian aid. In **Yemen**, host community members tend to perceive that IDPs are prioritised for services over them by humanitarian agencies. These are important trends to track as pandemic response efforts continue and the secondary impacts of the pandemic become more acute. Additionally, while vaccine hesitancy is salient in many countries, if demand increases (and cannot be met by limited supply), we might see a breakdown in social cohesion in general, if some groups are perceived to get quicker access to the vaccine than others. This is particularly true if these perceptions play out across ethno-religious, political, IDP-host community, and/or other salient dividing lines.

Additionally, if groups are seen as "competing" for scarce resources and services, we might see increased instances of violence and conflict between groups as COVID-19 cases increase, lockdown measures continue, or the secondary impacts of the pandemic are felt more sharply. To put things in perspective, research in Eastern DRC reveals that the Ebola outbreak had far less socio-economic impacts on affected populations compared to COVID-19.[12] Moreover, across our six research countries, a ***majority of respondents report a full or partial loss of income in their household during the pandemic.***

Report a full or partial loss of income in household during the pandemic



WHAT WORKS: Improving Access to Information can also Improve Horizontal Cohesion

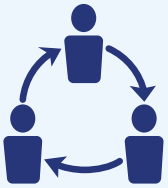
Communication platforms such as social media, radio, and television are serving as platforms for collaboration across divides. For instance, Search's radio programming provides opportunities for dialogue and engagement on pandemic-related concerns and needs.

In **Western Uganda**, Search trains journalists from refugee and host communities jointly. Refugees and host community members then develop joint broadcasts to disseminate information about the pandemic and provide an opportunity for dialogue and engagement on how the pandemic is impacting different groups.

In **Kenya**, Search supports interreligious dialogues to facilitate interfaith collaboration for pandemic response. These efforts help religious leaders take a stronger lead in communicating reliable information about the pandemic to their faith community.

12. Sébastien Desbureaux, Audacieux Kaota, Elie Lunanga, Nik Stoop, and Marijke Verpoorten, "Covid-19 vs. Ebola: impact on households and SMEs in Nord Kivu, DR Congo," Institute of Development Policy, University of Antwerp, (June 2020). The paper highlights that 85% of respondents in Eastern DRC experienced decreased revenue due to COVID-19 compared to only 14% due to Ebola. Additionally, 58% compared to 8% experienced food insecurity, and 33% compared to 11% increased criminality, respectively.

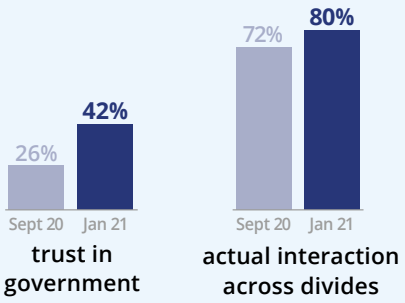
WHAT WORKS: Linking Vertical and Horizontal Cohesion



Regular collaboration between citizens and authorities on common issues of concern, such as COVID-19, can build two-way confidence and create wider credibility and acceptance of pandemic response measures among communities. This kind of collaboration can also help to improve horizontal cohesion if it is inclusive of diverse groups and ignites collaboration across divides (i.e. collaboration between IDPs, host communities, and government authorities).

In **Kenya**, Search supports early warning and response platforms for citizens, government, civil society, health officials, and law enforcement to collaborate around emerging pandemic-related needs and concerns. As a consequence, in our target counties, trust in government and actual interaction across divides both rose.

Overall percentage across target counties in Kenya



Recommendations

Response providers should pay attention to early warning signs and sudden drops in horizontal cohesion indicators. As we described in our findings above, overall increases in horizontal cohesion can hide important vulnerabilities or local conflict dynamics. These are important to monitor in the pandemic response, as they could potentially indicate future triggers of violence. Responders should understand these inter-group dynamics and how the pandemic response - and in particular the vaccine roll-out - impact on these dynamics, and develop tailored approaches that mitigate risk factors.

Response efforts should integrate local leaders and provide opportunities for collaboration across groups, but these efforts must be adapted to local conflict dynamics. Health respondents can help strengthen horizontal cohesion by adopting response strategies that promote engagement and collaboration across divides. They should carefully map out a diversity of actors (i.e. religious, women, youth, and civil society leaders, etc.) to play a key role in response efforts, serve as trusted interlocutors between groups, and model collaboration across divides. However, conflict dynamics should be sufficiently understood when doing this; for instance, in some contexts, political, traditional, or religious leaders might be trusted in certain localities and rejected in others.

Anticipate rising needs - and potential "competition" among groups - as COVID-19 cases increase. We have seen second and third waves of COVID-19 proliferate around the world, often with more force than first waves. In our second reports, we have seen an increase in COVID-19 related service requests, especially health services, indicating a rise in case numbers. Additionally, the secondary effects (i.e. economic, educational, psychosocial, etc.) of the pandemic are taking root everywhere. As needs continue to rise, pandemic-related services and response measures must be responsive to the growing needs of all groups. Moreover, as vaccines are rolled out, responders should be mindful that creating heightened demand for the vaccine could potentially backfire or create unintended consequences, as many people won't have access to the vaccine for years to come. Perceived "competition" among and between groups can emerge if pandemic-related service delivery, enforcement, and vaccination strategies are not seen as equitable, responsive, and fair.

Women can improve horizontal cohesion and should be integrated in every stage of pandemic response efforts. Women are playing a leading role within their communities to respond to the pandemic, and are collaborating across dividing lines to do so. These efforts should be amplified and replicated. Not only will this ensure response efforts are integrating women's needs and considerations, women can serve as positive role models for their communities to facilitate collaboration across divides and reduce conflict and tensions between groups through pandemic response efforts. Moreover, when looking at demographic trends, opportunities for intergenerational engagement, particularly to increase opportunities for the elderly to interact across divides, stands out as a clear entry point to improve the pandemic response.

Integrate messaging that promotes social cohesion and dialogue within larger pandemic response and vaccination communication campaigns and strategies. As information trends might indicate a rise in rumours and misinformation, response providers should anticipate that this kind of information may be causing tension among groups, particularly as needs increase. In addition to timely, accurate, and equitable information on the pandemic, responders should incorporate messaging that promotes resilience, trust, unity, and social cohesion. Communication efforts can also provide platforms for regular dialogue across divides so that communities can cope with the effects of the pandemic, understand how the pandemic affects other groups and build solidarity, and discuss joint solutions to emerging needs.