

COVID-19 in East Africa: trust in a time of crisis – enabling continuity of essential health services within a missionary approach to development

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Key Learning Themes

- Trust, built up over years of presence in a community, was an essential element in maintaining essential health services as the challenges of COVID-19 unfolded.
- In the early weeks of the crisis, donor flexibility was vital in allowing projects to pivot funds and activities towards responding to COVID-19, principally in safeguarding health workers from infection, so that essential services could continue.
- The provision of clear, objective, scientifically sound and, above all, consistent information to the community was key to maintaining trust in health facilities and their staff, ensuring that people continued to present to the facilities for essential services and engage with health-seeking behaviours.
- In the under-resourced rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, primary health care facilities were at the forefront, in terms of confronting the COVID-19 crisis and continuing to provide basic essential services.
- The hiring of non-clinical staff to help with patient flows and the maintenance of IPC protocols enabled clinical staff to concentrate on health service delivery.

Missionary development work

Established in 2004, Misesan Cara is an Irish and international faith-based missionary development organization, made up of 88 member organizations working with some of the most marginalized and vulnerable people in over 50 countries across the world. At times of humanitarian crisis, the trusted and long-term presence of this organization in affected communities has allowed for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

Over the many generations of Irish missionary involvement across many countries, the provision of health care has been an area of particular focus. The long-term presence mentioned above is also a key feature: one of the clinics included in the research described in this Brief was set up in 1885 by the missionary congregation that is still there today.

The emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020 brought new challenges to the provision of health care in poor communities in East Africa. Uncertainty, fear and misinformation all conspired to exacerbate a scenario which countries across all regions and resource levels were finding difficult to manage.

Misesan Cara member organizations involved in the delivery of health care at primary, secondary and tertiary levels struggled to come to grips with the challenges they were facing: people were not presenting for routine health services as the perception spread that health facilities were the source of this new, unknown illness; health workers felt vulnerable to infection; and, in some instances, measures brought in by the Government to inhibit the spread of the virus added to the sense of panic and fear. Member organizations appealed to Misesan Cara's head office in Ireland for assistance.

Misesan Cara's first response was to listen to what members were saying. It became clear that radical and rapid measures were necessary. Immediately, Misesan Cara permitted all projects, and not only those involved directly in health care, to pivot activities and funds towards responding to the crisis.