SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES WITHOUT INTERNET ACCESS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

Learnings from the Fight for Peace Alliance

One of the benefits of the Fight for Peace Alliance is the opportunity it provides to exchange insight and knowledge between organisations to enhance the work we all do in our communities around the world. Fight for Peace (FFP) provides support by facilitating exchange of knowledge around key topics, and then compiling learnings in a format that can be shared.

This paper presents ideas and practices from Latin American organisations based in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico to support their communities in responding to the pandemic crisis. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, the organisations have not only faced issues directly related to the virus, but also challenges in accessing their participants and properly supporting them, due to the lack of connectivity in their communities.

Their experiences and solutions could support other organisations around the world who are facing the same issues and help us to start a really important conversation around the "digital divide" and how this pandemic revealed another layer of vulnerability and exclusion within our communities, leaving children and young people behind again.

Thank you to all those partner organisations who came to the discussion and shared their experience on this topic, especially those who presented alternatives such as Utopia from México, INDER Medellín and Paz y Bien from Colombia, and CONACREJE and ASCOPP from Brazil. If your organisation has done something effective and you want to share it with us, please do - the conversation has only just started.

If there is a topic you would like FFP to gather learnings from across the Alliance, please contact carolina@lutapelapaz.org. Together we are stronger!

Reality for Latin American Partners

The coronavirus crisis has been global and as such, it has affected us all. However, it has disproportionately affected those communities around the world living in extreme poverty without access to water, basic sanitation, or living in overcrowded households and those depending on the informal market to make a living - the type of communities many of the Alliance Partners work with.

Moreover, this crisis has revealed another issue, the digital divide: whilst information and communication technology strategies are allowing many sectors to respond effectively to the crisis, those with low or no access to equipment and internet connection or digital illiteracy are being left behind.

To give an indication of the issue, in the case of the 26 participants from 12 organisations who took part in this discussion, we found that:

All organisations are implementing online services and trying to adapt to the new reality: as table 1 shows, around 50% of the participants are providing half or more of their activities online, through open sessions by Zoom, social media livestreams, and mainly pre-recorded videos published on their social media.

Table 1: Percentage of organisations' activities that are running online

0% - 10%	11% -30%	31% - 50%	51% - 70%	71% - 100%
5	2	5	6	6
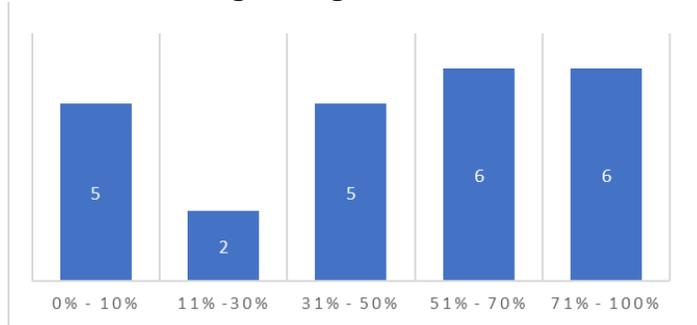
This is very positive, as it shows how organisations have adapted to the new reality. Many of them have negotiated with funders to be able to change the format of their activities or refocus them to respond to basic needs, however around 80% of the organizations said that half or more of their participants/beneficiaries are not accessing the support provided online.

Table 2: Percentage of participants/beneficiaries not accessing

0% - 10%	11% -30%	31% - 50%	51% - 70%	71% - 100%
3	1	10	5	5
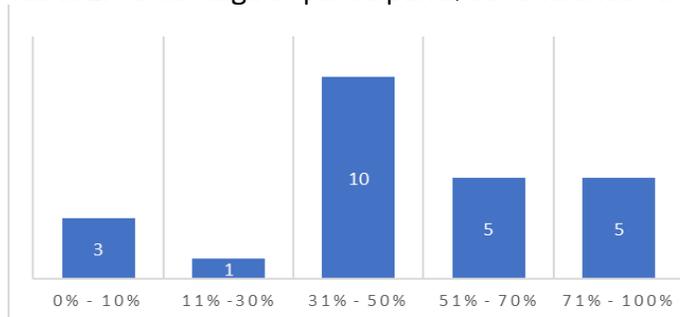
This means that their efforts and investments in terms of adapting to a digital provision are not cost effective, and that those communities are not being provided with the basic services these organisations used to bring.

The organisations reflected on the issue and concluded that a sustainable solution is out of their influence as 40% of their participants live in geographical areas that are not connected at all. 50% said that even when the area is well connected, their young people and beneficiaries in general do not have adequate equipment or enough data to access sessions, leaving the organisation with few options to reach out and support in times of social distancing and restrictions on movement.

Although closing the digital divide is not something any of the organisations directly work with, there is a need amongst partners to find out how we can influence public policy together with sectors such as education to advocate for universal digital access - this question remains open. What the organisations shared was how they are facing this challenge now in an effort to mitigate the impact of the crisis. Here some of the highlights:

Key Highlights of the Conversation

Merge your information or activities plan with the delivery of basics
Organisations shared how the first strategy to provide information, important materials and even activity plans and development tools was to include them as part of the essential kits delivered to families. Organisations provided examples of the kind of things they are delivering right now, from basic information about government guidelines and protective measures to templates for activities and family games.

People can multiply the reach of the organisation's actions
As the organisations' actions are not having the expected reach in terms of numbers, they have found that the little contact they manage to have with some of their members has a multiplier effect. One of the organisations

shared how the activities packages included with the delivery of food or sanitising material always include a request for the recipient to pass it on to other community members or family, of course instructing how to do so under safety parameters.

Another example is the direct work with the youth council (small group of young people), through which the organisation manages to reach localities and distribute information, provide support and collect evidence. In this case, the organisation, together with the local school, is working with the youth councillors to distribute student plans and homework as well as collecting their results to send back to school through pictures.

Promote self-discipline through sports plans, and involve family members
Organisations keep promoting physical activities but due to the impossibility of running live sessions and guiding young people through them, some are implementing simple sports plans that are distributed directly to young people and families (through the delivery of food or sanitising material). This is an opportunity to develop children and young people's self-discipline and also involve families in the monitoring of the activities.

Go back to the traditional ways of doing things
Organisations shared how effective (although not perfect) the traditional means of communication are in communities, such as radio, loudspeaker and leafleting. All of these can keep the community informed and even engaged in an educational or development process. Some of the organisations shared how they run educational, cultural and informative programmes through the radio, involving young people and families. In some contexts, the radio is the only way children and young people are being schooled so it is important to use it as an example and build on the activities.

Maximise the technologies available
Although the problem here is the lack of access to equipment and internet, organisations reflected on the impact of the maximisation of the little access they have, for example equipping the youth councillors or some leaders in different localities with good internet packages so they can go around the community, with safety precautions, and distribute information or collect evidence for school. Or using WhatsApp (in some contexts WhatsApp is accessible as it does not consume much data) and send voice messages or reflections that can generate discussion amongst the groups.

Facilitate interaction as much as possible
Clearly, the issue with online provision of activities is the lack of interaction; even when the connection is possible, nothing replaces the face to face relationship and the interactions it facilitates. With the new situation and the barriers the organisations are already facing to reach out to their communities, this is even more challenging. Some organisations share how they build interaction into their activities by asking participants to respond to them for example by writing a letter where they answer a question or report the impact of the activity etc.

Use this time to connect with the communities
Despite all the barriers and challenges the lack of connectivity is presenting to organisations, they reflected on the fact that these new ways of reaching out to their communities have increased their awareness and closeness to the community realities. Organisations are receiving increased and clearer information directly from their communities.

Respect the moment we are living in and slow the pace
All the initiatives to connect the community are valid, but organisations invited us to reflect on what this means for communities that have been traditionally marginalised, those who have always been fighting against something worse than the virus: violence and the high probability of being caught by a bullet every time they leave home. The role of the organisations now should remain to support their communities, and refrain from adding to the already stressful moment of the pandemic by creating activities that might not be needed now.

Question our hurry to introduce connectivity to the communities - is that what they want?
The access to new technologies and ways of communications is an indispensable thing for us, but is it for the communities we work with? The organisations believe we need to find out more about what it is the communities want and follow their rhythm, adapting to the communities instead of asking them to adapt to our ways.

Go back to the basics
Organisations reflected on the learnings this pandemic has brought to all humans and how we have gone back to appreciating the basic things in life, and have recovered a sense of family that many had lost. These same learnings should apply to the organisation's life and relationship with their communities. We should go back to those conversations we stopped having, and those traditional games and activities that used to be vital for community development.

Start planning the return to "normality"
Organisations conclude that what we should be doing now is to start planning a strategy once things begin to return to 'normal', taking into account that this pandemic has had a huge impact on our children and young people, so organisations have to be ready to invest in mental health programmes. This should be a very important part of organisational strategies in the years to come.

The conversation was closed with the commitment to continuing the conversation and to continue sharing ideas and strategies to face this pandemic and its effects on the communities we work with.