



No One Is Safe Until Everyone Is Safe

Advocacy and Policy Engagement on the
COVID-19 Pandemic



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Communion
of Churches

*Through Action for Justice,
the LWF brings the witness,
voice and experience
of its member churches
and country programs to
decision-making platforms
and processes at national,
regional and global levels.*

The Lutheran World Federation, 2023

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LWF and its partners were involved in many different types of advocacy and policy engagement.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and its partners and examines their advocacy and policy engagement work during the pandemic. It is based on 13 interviews conducted in October 2021 and June, July, and October 2022 with staff members of LWF and seven of its partners. A qualitative approach using semi-guided interviews as the main data collection method was used.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on faith actors

The first main section of this report focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on faith actors. LWF and its partners specifically mentioned the following impacts:

Churches: The pandemic changed the way churches were able to reach their members and make community. A substantial online offer was developed, but was not accessible for every church and member. Those changes led some churches to question what it means to be a church at the present time.

Resources: Face-to-face gathering of congregations and regular offerings and income-generating activities were not possible anymore and resulted in a steep decrease in income for some churches, threatening their survival.

Humanitarian and development activities: Faith actors had to rethink their way of working and replan their projects and activities when the pandemic started. Some activities were delayed, moved online, or postponed, and others were simply canceled and funds reallocated to COVID-19-related activities instead. Overall, donors were relatively flexible and a shift toward more local approaches was observed.

Concerns: Key concerns of interviewees when it comes to church members and communities revolved

around economy and livelihoods, health, education, and social issues.

LWF response to the pandemic: The Rapid Response Funds

The next main section of this report discusses the two LWF COVID-19-focused Rapid Response Funds (RRF), which constitutes one of the most important parts of LWF's response to the pandemic. These funds embodied the strong solidarity between member churches, country programs and related agencies across the world. Funded projects varied broadly but were mostly focused on practical responses.

Responses by LWF and its partners

This section focuses on the advocacy and policy engagement responses of LWF and its partners and presents findings from the interviews.

Priorities: For local LWF partners, advocacy and policy engagement seem to not have been considered as priorities, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. This is explained by the nature of the prioritized projects (small and implemented locally), the focus on immediate and life-threatening needs, the lack of perspectives, and the shortage of staff.

Diversity of advocacy and policy engagement: Despite this initial non-prioritization, LWF and its partners were involved in many different types of advocacy and policy engagement work during the pandemic. From issuing statements to organizing webinars, interviewed faith actors demonstrated great capacities to bring important issues to the agenda in a difficult context.

Misinformation: The high levels of misinformation around COVID-19 worldwide have not spared faith

communities. The research conducted for this report showcases how faith actors have used advocacy and policy engagement as a tool to tackle this issue and share accurate messaging among their communities and the general public.

Collaboration: Collaboration among faith actors and between faith and non-faith actors played a big role in the advocacy activities of the faith actors we interviewed. It enabled them to make the voices of local actors heard at global levels, avoid duplications, and boost their visibility.

Strengths: Interviewees saw presence and a high level of trust in communities; bridging the local and global levels, but also communities; broad and already established networks as strengths of faith actors' advocacy and policy engagement work.

Areas for improvement: Overall areas for improvement for faith actors engaging in policy and advocacy include: the risk of politicization, the lack of recognition of their work leading to a lack of belief in their power to change things, and the lack of funding for the hiring of professional advocacy staff.

Post-pandemic advocacy and policy engagement: Interviewees think that public health, COVID-19 recovery programs, and increased support in specific programmatic areas are the three key topics that post-pandemic faith-based advocacy and policy engagement should focus on.

Recommendations for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers

The following recommendations are based on the interviews conducted with staff members of the LWF, its member churches and partner organizations.

Recommendations for international organizations and donor agencies

Support and recognition of faith actors' contributions in responding to emergencies in a more systematic and empowering manner.

Structural, long-term, and flexible funding to accurately respond to ever evolving needs and develop a more comprehensive response.

Recommendations for faith actors

General recommendations

Collaborate within networks: Interviewees encourage other faith actors to continue prioritizing collaboration, build on partners' activities, and rely on each other's strengths.

Rebuild a sense of community: Interviewees recommend to faith actors to rebuild a sense of community in their congregations and focus on "self-care," according to one LWF staff member.

Embrace positive change: Faith actors are advised to embrace the positive change brought by the pandemic.

Use evidence-based approaches: Interviewees encourage faith actors to use evidence-based methodologies in their work.

Speak out and change narratives: Interviewees advise faith actors to not be afraid of speaking out about sensitive issues and countering problematic narratives, but also to carefully consider the consequences of speaking out.

Advocacy-focused recommendations

Advocate for structural, systemic, and solidarity approaches to not "lose sight of the wider picture," as one staff member from an international faith-based organization (FBO) put it, instead of always addressing each crisis individually.

Advocate at local and regional levels and not only at global levels.

Link the local and global levels by continuing to remove barriers to the participation of local actors and by advocating for more inclusion and amplification of local voices.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly around the world leaving in its wake a huge death toll, economic crises, and increased threats to already vulnerable and marginalized people. This pandemic has weakened global solidarity, compromised economies and livelihood options, and led to a deficit in protection for the most vulnerable, including displaced people in settlements and camps, women, children, indigenous people, and others. Communities were left to navigate social services as well as health and safety mandates that often hardly addressed their most acute needs. Faith actors have increased efforts to respond to local needs and equip those in the community to advocate for themselves.

The newly created situation necessitated both programmatic and advocacy actions from the LWF and its partners to ensure that the human rights, dignity, and livelihoods of the most vulnerable were protected during the pandemic. Churches at local, national, regional, and international levels have pledged and committed themselves to an ongoing engagement, given that the pandemic is still a critical global issue.

This report focuses on the advocacy and policy engagement work of LWF and its partners during the COVID-19 pandemic. LWF is a global communion of Lutheran churches. To date, 149 churches in 99 countries are part of LWF.¹ LWF also comprises 20 humanitarian and development programs in 28 countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

With this report, LWF aims to showcase the role and broad spectrum of engagement of FBOs and churches in responding to the pandemic, going beyond program work by putting a focus on advocacy and policy engagement.

After a presentation of the methodology employed for this research, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on faith actors is discussed. Following that, the report focuses on the findings that emerged from 13 interviews conducted with staff members of seven different FBOs. The discussion of the findings starts with an overview of the impact of the pandemic on LWF and its partners, including the organizations themselves, their humanitarian and development activities, but also on their members and communities. It then continues to examine the RRF, before moving to the advocacy and policy engagement work of LWF and its partners during the pandemic. This section first discusses the prioritization of advocacy during the pandemic, then gives an overview of various advocacy and policy engagement through examples. This section also includes details about the response of LWF and its partners to COVID-19 misinformation, as well as collaboration, overall strengths, and areas for improvement. It ends with how LWF and its partners envision post-pandemic faith-based advocacy and policy engagement. The final section briefly presents the conclusions, before focusing on the recommendations that arose from the research.



Conducting the interviews over an extended period of time allowed us to include responses from different stages of the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on 13 interviews with staff members of seven different faith actors. All of these were partners of LWF or from LWF itself. We adopted a mostly qualitative approach using semi-guided interviews as the main data collection method, in order to allow for in-depth responses from participants.

All participants were referred to the researchers by LWF.

Among the seven faith actors, two are local faith actors and five are international FBOs. A first round of seven interviews was conducted online in October 2021. A second round of six online and in-person interviews were conducted in June, July, and October 2022.

All the participants gave informed consent to take part in this research. We analyzed the interviews using the qualitative data analysis software from ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development to code the transcripts following a thematic analysis-based coding frame to facilitate the analysis of results.

Moreover, we used the findings of an online survey that was sent by LWF to all its member churches in June 2020 to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on

their work and see how they had responded to it. Their response rate was 51.35%² and included feedback from churches that are usually very difficult to be reached by LWF headquarters, according to one staff member.

While our research revealed first hand insights into the policy and advocacy response of LWF and its partners during the pandemic, there are some limitations to this research. First of all, data was collected by two separate research teams at different times. This was due to internal organizational reasons. We tried to address this by slightly adapting the interview guide for the second round of interviews in order to minimize the impact of the staggered research process. On the other hand, conducting the interviews over an extended period of time allowed us to include responses from different stages of the pandemic. Secondly, our research is based on a limited number of interviews and with only Christian faith actors. Therefore, while our research provides valuable first insights into the response of LWF and its partners, further research would be welcomed to include more respondents from diverse backgrounds.



Photo: Rev. Miguel Angel Nuñez

Many spiritual practices and faith actors' organizations have been changed by the pandemic.

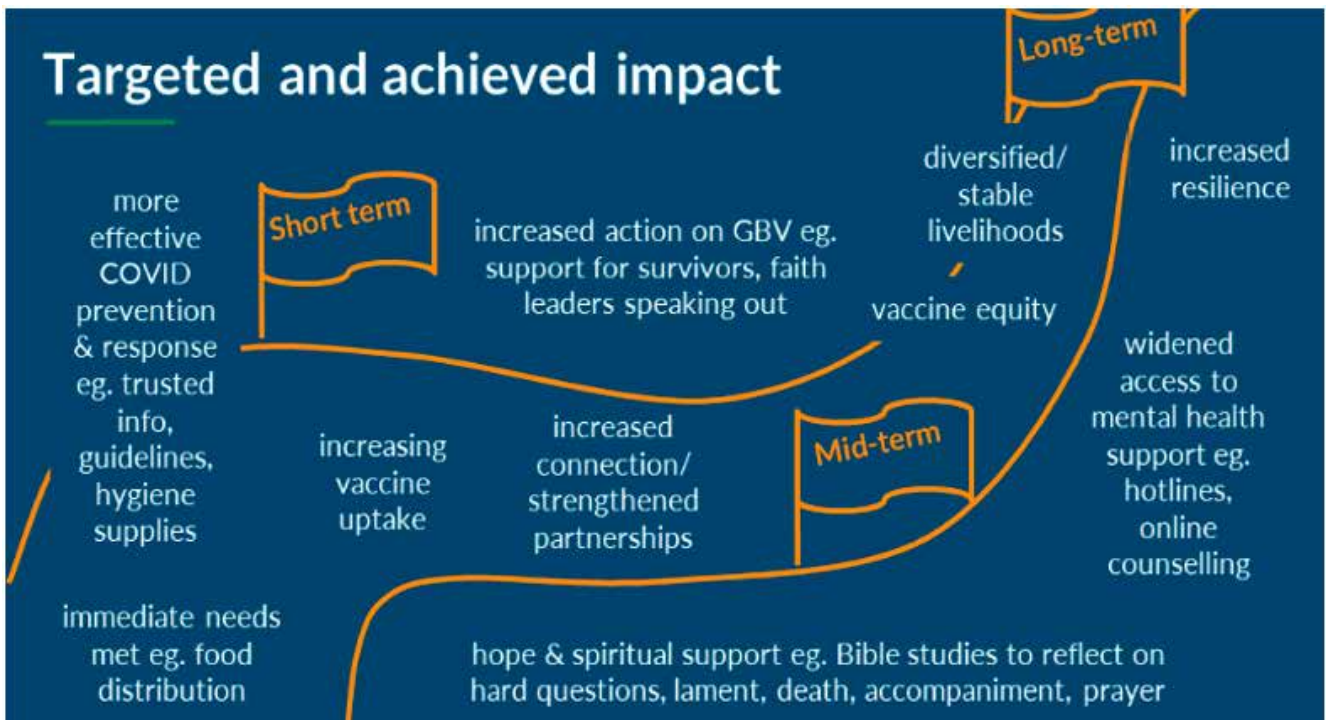
IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON FAITH ACTORS³

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020.⁴ By August 2022, the official numbers showed that almost 600 million people had been infected and 6.4 million had already died from the virus globally.⁵ The pandemic has disrupted health and economic systems worldwide⁶ and impacted people’s lives around the world. Over one year into the pandemic, 90% of countries still reported one or more disruptions to essential health services.⁷ It pushed an additional 77 million people into extreme poverty in 2021 compared to 2019, and 100 million more children into poverty, a 10% increase since 2019.⁸

Faith actors were very quick to respond to the pandemic in their communities, being “powerful advocates and supporters for vulnerable groups”⁹ and implementing “religious ‘social protection’”¹⁰ for their communities. When it comes to COVID-19, faith actors responded

with programs that included short and long-term objectives (see figure below for more details).

With the pandemic came new funding opportunities that were too often tied to COVID-19-related outcomes, thereby not allowing actors substantial flexibility in implementation and often drawing attention away from other priority issues (e.g., ongoing conflicts, HIV, etc.). Faith-based donors were said to be more flexible with their funding, likely because they could rely on existing partnerships, which were strengthened through the pandemic. A report published by the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) in 2022 highlighted the importance of preexisting, trusted partnerships. The pandemic has also been an opportunity for new strategic collaboration, both between faith actors and with public actors. However, coordination mechanisms were sometimes too complex and led to wasted resources and duplications of efforts in some cases.¹¹



(Source: S. Kemp and O. Wilkinson, *Lessons Learned*)

Partnerships with public actors gave some faith actors an opportunity to implement impactful advocacy work at local and global levels. However, despite some advancements in this area, overall faith actors are still very much not integrated in strategic ways by public actors and international agencies.

The engagement, continued presence, and high levels of trust of faith actors in communities was recognized by non-faith international agencies from the beginning of the pandemic. This has led to greater inclusion and involvement of faith actors by some agencies, although many faith actors continue to be instrumentalized and not fully recognized “as partners with their own values, capacities, and unique ways of working.”¹²

COVID-19 has also enabled the creation of new spaces for approaching work at a more local level. Technology made possible a greater connection between actors around the world (often leading to the transformation of internal relationships and amplifying the voices of a broader range of actors), but also resulted in the exclusion of some actors due to digital inequalities. Changes in approaches to partnerships were highlighted by faith actors, with some leaning toward more localization, some more toward regionalization, and others not experiencing any particular changes on that point. Funding was still said to be very much centralized, and many reported a disconnect between “Western” expertise and the realities of local actors.¹³

Misinformation was highlighted as a major issue faced by many faith actors. There is a certain mistrust in Western “experts” as a result of colonial exploitation in many countries, the legacies of which continue into the present. Many faith actors were very active in countering misinformation, by having “(a) ongoing investment from skilled staff to build close relationships; or (b) support for actors already trusted by local groups.”¹⁴ However, some faith communities, generally a minority, have contributed to “resistance and undermining trust in public health and other officials.”¹⁵

The discrimination of specific groups, often religious, has contributed to increased inter- and intra-group tensions. Overall, social tensions around the globe have escalated. The pandemic’s impacts have weighed more heavily on specific groups, such as women and girls who have been subjected to increased gender-based violence. Mental health issues and isolation were exacerbated by the pandemic, but faith actors were able to provide “solace and spiritual support to communities.”¹⁶

Many spiritual practices and faith actors’ organizations have been changed by the pandemic. Restrictions and regulations around sick people and burial practices have also generated tensions. This was intensified by the ban on physical gatherings, leaving “social scars”¹⁷ in many communities. Some faith actors managed to organize various forms of online worship, although this was not feasible in every community due to a lack of access to the necessary resources by faith communities, but also because of digital inequalities. In addition to the impact this had on community relations, it often resulted in financial loss for faith actors as community collections could no longer take place.¹⁸

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on LWF and its partners

“One thing that [the 2020 COVID-19 impact on LWF member churches survey] shows is how different the needs are, of course, across regions and across countries within one single region. For some the pandemic is over, more or less. . . . In some places . . . we’re in the middle of it.”¹⁹

Impact on churches

As reflected in existing literature on the impact of the pandemic on faith actors, a key concern for many LWF members and their partners during the pandemic was the “existential worry” of Christian actors about their survival, both in terms of finance and as members. First and foremost, LWF members were concerned about the loss of members who passed away from COVID-19 or who did not wish to be part of a specific congregation anymore. The consequences of not being able to gather, meet, and sustain relationships worried many churches. The 2020 COVID-19 impact on LWF member churches survey mentioned that “in many cases, those members who are most difficult to reach are the ones that are most vulnerable and in need.”²⁰

Many churches developed online forms of worship to address this issue. According to the 2020 survey, this online offer included “church websites, YouTube, different forms of social media,”²¹ but also more traditional media such as television or radio. A staff person of LWF stated that most of the member churches had

developed some kind of online offer for their members, but some lacked the equipment and skills to do it. An interviewee reported that the situation was far from ideal because many community members could not join because they had no Internet connection or data. But overall, the interviewees said that the online offer was appreciated by their members, allowing them to connect even in difficult times and reach new people who did not use to come to in-person meetings.

Now that gathering in person is again possible, interviewees reported that online forms of worship and community-building have again decreased. One interviewee explained that they had decided to drop the online offer for the moment because asking already overworked ministers to do both was too much, but they were thinking of restarting it once they had enough capacity to do so.

Another LWF staff member revealed that some members did not come back to face-to-face church activities because people don't really feel like coming after having benefited from online worship for two years. Also, they don't really feel like coming back either because of the fear to get infected or because of convenience.

I mean, it may be also easier to just switch on your computer at home, in some cases, and then we have heard from some that they have lost members because the online offer was there from different churches. They've been shopping around, which was the most interesting online worship service, and then it just switched from one condition to another... Especially in places where this identity [Lutheran] is not that strong.

However, the online offer also attracted new or inactive members and allowed some churches to reach three times more people than before the pandemic, according to another interviewee.

Some churches are now questioning what the future will look like with these changes: What does it mean to be a church after the pandemic? How can we continue to create a sense of community? Can we still be a community if we don't meet in person anymore? Is it possible to have a congregation without a physical church? What role do the basic theological confessional principles play in this new online reality? Some are moving from the belief that "communion requires physical presence to the new forms of communion, communion in spirit

community at a distance, online communion, virtual communion," as one international FBO staff person put it. As an answer, another FBO interviewee said that "this crisis time makes them [churches] understand that they actually need a common and shared value as communion in the church" in contexts that used to be very divided, including in interfaith contexts.

With lockdowns in place, church members were not allowed to gather on Sundays for worship anymore. Churches were faced with a steep decrease of their incomes as there were no more offerings and income generating activities, making it hard for some to even keep employing the pastors. An interviewee explained that even when people were allowed to gather and come back to church, the growing poverty due to lockdown-induced income losses did not allow people to contribute as much as they used to, decreasing their church's revenue overall.

Impact on humanitarian and development activities

When the pandemic started, the LWF churches, country programs and partners interviewed had to rethink their way of working, and replan their humanitarian and development projects and activities. Their methodologies and ways of working had to be reconsidered entirely, and staff had to make time for new priority topics and tasks on top of their already very heavy workload.

Overall, most of LWF and its partners' projects continued during the pandemic. Some activities were delayed because they had to be adapted to the new context with its many restrictions. Some activities were dependent on in-person meetings, which were not possible anymore. While some organizations moved many activities online, it took time to develop the new formats and to ensure every participant had access to the necessary resources and a reliable Internet connection. The experience varied, such as for World Service, which was able to shift almost seamlessly within its country programs.

Activities that could not take place online were either postponed or canceled. In many cases, plans to hold face-to-face meetings were abandoned and previously allocated funds were redirected to other COVID-19-related activities. One interviewee

Funding flexibility

A recurring topic mentioned by interviewees was their work with donors toward more flexible funding. This occurred in a context where programs had to be adapted and faith actors had to advocate and negotiate for more flexibility in the funding granted before the pandemic. It seems that most of the donors agreed. Some long-term funding was shifted toward more emergency activities, some programs received extensions, and additional funding was allocated toward COVID-19-related activities.

However, interviewees also reported that funds took time to arrive, weighing heavily on organizations already struggling because of the pandemic. One interviewee mentioned that while they were very grateful for the flexibility, the funds for the activities initially planned before the pandemic were no longer available and that they had to find other sources of funding for these activities. Finally, according to one of the interviewees, this flexibility is no longer applied by donors now that the pandemic is considered to be under control in large parts of the world.

On the flip side of more COVID-19 funding being available, it became necessary for implementing organizations to “try to defend funding for non-COVID-19 related issues” as they “saw from the beginning that there will be huge ... indirect impacts, and that then even bigger than ... direct health or consequences.”

described how “naive” everyone was at the beginning of the pandemic, only postponing activities to the next half of the year, then the end of the year, then the year after. No one knew how the pandemic would evolve, and it was right to postpone meetings, and postpone them again. Organizations were uncertain about how long it was going to last, but were serious about its impact from the outset.

Our research also revealed a strategic move toward more localization. One LWF staff member explained that some of the funding for meetings and conferences that could not take place anymore was redirected “to individual churches to do things locally.” Another said:

We also recognized that it wasn’t possible to access communities, we couldn’t physically get out to communities. So, we needed to think cleverly about the way in which we could monitor the programs and continue to support the programs from afar. So, a lot more responsibility was invested in local, frontline staff to do that work. And a lot more trust was invested in them as well because we just physically couldn’t get to the field.

Moreover, interviewees reported that civil society actors from all over the world (including the head of-

fice and country programs in the case of LWF) were brought closer together despite not being able to travel because of “all the virtual possibilities” that created new spaces for people from different countries. This allowed colleagues and partners to quickly get together, share expertise, connect, and work together remotely. However, it was reported that with the pandemic slowing down, people now want to meet in-person again and travel of staff members of international FBOs to country offices is slowly picking up again. It is still too early to determine if the positive shift toward doing things more locally and making closer connections between colleagues working across the world will remain.

Impact on church members and communities

In addition to the impact of the pandemic on an organizational level, many LWF churches and their partners were also concerned about the repercussions of the pandemic and their communities’ response. Key concerns revolved around economy and livelihoods, health, education, and social issues.

Economy and livelihoods

Loss of income was a key issue during the pandemic. Lockdown restrictions led many community members to lose their jobs and unemployment peaked in many countries. Groups such as people relying on the informal labor market or with a job based on interactions with others were particularly vulnerable. Growing poverty and disruptions in the agricultural sector market chain also affected community members’ livelihoods and worsened food insecurity.

“The economic impact was caused by the restrictions. So, it was not COVID-19 itself. It was the restrictions around COVID-19 that caused the economic hardships and destroyed livelihoods. And then I think what communities quite often experience is that there were multiple shocks.”²²

Health

Health services were severely affected by the pandemic, on the verge of collapsing in some cases. Access to health services was a primary concern for communities, especially for marginalized groups. An



Photos: LWF/E.Shaheen

Health services were severely affected by the pandemic.

interviewee specifically pointed to the difficult situation in refugee camps, which were overcrowded and difficult to access because of fear of spreading the virus, and where maintaining social distance was impossible.

Moreover, an increased need for pastoral care and mental health support was observed by interviewees, with community members dealing with stress, anxiety, uncertainty, loneliness, isolation, and – in the words of one local FBO staff interviewee – a “lack of perspective, a growing sense of hopelessness.”

Later in the pandemic, key health-related concerns were oriented toward the COVID-19 vaccine. Interviewees listed vaccine hesitancy, misinformation around vaccines, vaccine access, vaccination of vulnerable groups, and expiration dates of vaccines as the main vaccine-related issues.

Education

School closures have had a durable impact on children around the world, especially on girls. Many students dropped out and are not expected to return to school. One interviewee highlighted the fact that in some countries teachers had not been paid during lockdown and many did not go back to teaching when schools were reopened.

Social issues

The pandemic heightened tensions or conflicts in many societies, communities, and families. Interviewees reported inter- and intra-group tensions, human rights violations, violence, racism, intolerance, radicalization, and a new wave of COVID-19-related populism, often with nationalist and jingoist elements.

The pandemic also had a significantly gendered impact, with sexual and gender-based violence in-



LWF's COVID-19 RRF assistance went to the most vulnerable populations.

THE RAPID RESPONSE FUNDS

An important part of LWF's response to the pandemic was its COVID-19-focused rapid response funds, which started very quickly at the beginning of the crisis.

The World Service response enabled COVID-19 projects in 18 country and regional programs, representing 22 countries. Most of the projects started in the second quarter of 2020 for an average duration of six months. The main activities included distribution of non-food items (protection and hygiene kits, hand-washing devices), as well as food security and livelihoods. Others were education, awareness and sensitization campaigns, training of staff and other stakeholders and staff protection.

There were several rounds of funding to which member churches could apply for grants of up to six months and for a maximum of EUR 5,000 that could be used for projects addressing basic needs. Alternatively, members could apply for up to EUR 10,000 "per church, national committee, regional expression or related diaconal institution."²³

As of June 2022, LWF had received more than 180 applications, including from member churches that usually do not apply to mechanisms for member church projects that LWF had in place prior to the pandemic. This enabled the LWF to "reach churches they had never reached before," as one staff member put it.

The RRF impact was reinforced by the fact that most of the funds came from the churches themselves. Besides some private donations, most of the funding came from churches or church-related organizations, making it a solidarity mechanism between churches. As one interviewed LWF staff member pointed out: "the funding came from churches who kind of can afford it to a degree, you know, maybe wealthier, and it went to churches that were, that are, much more fragile economically speaking." An interviewee reported how meaningful it was receiving a grant – however small it may have been – for some of the LWF member churches from a solidarity point of view.

Eligibility for the member churches' RRF

The project concept has to show a clear link between the proposed activities and the impact that COVID-19 has on member churches and the communities they serve. The project should show a shift to recovery and livelihoods, addressing the continued impact of COVID-19.

Recovery indicates the process of a community returning to "normal" after a shock

Recovery and livelihoods projects: Examples are skills training, start-up funding for small scale businesses, back to school initiatives, community gardens

Existential needs: Providing for basic needs (e.g., food) will be considered, where a shift to recovery & livelihoods appears not yet appropriate or feasible in a given context. This must be shown clearly in the application

Strengthening / rebuilding resilience: Projects responding to natural disasters or other emergencies will only be considered,

where coping mechanisms and resilience have been reduced due to COVID-19. This must be shown clearly in the application

Medical/health interventions are discouraged for safety reasons where the necessary professional skill set is not obviously present.

Cross-cutting Issues

Please demonstrate in the application how the project design takes into account the uneven impact of COVID-19, where some groups have been affected stronger than others. Address growing inequalities and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on particular groups, including:

- Equality and gender justice/empowerment: e.g., support to women economic empowerment and to survivors of domestic violence / Sexual and gender-based violence;
- youth, in particular in low-income countries and young women;
- low-income groups, e.g., migrant workers, unskilled labor, daily wage workers;
- advocacy to address structural and cultural causes of injustice and violence.³⁹

Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania⁴⁰

COVID-19 and lockdowns have exacerbated the problem with labor migration into precarious jobs as well as the risk of being trafficked into forced prostitution. Romania has the highest number of labor migrants in Europe as well as the highest number of human-trafficking and forced-prostitution cases.

The risk of online abuse and online grooming has also increased due to children spending more time online. The

economic impact of the pandemic has also led more women to resort to legal prostitution. The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania started a project in 2021 to prevent online abuse and human trafficking in Romania in pandemic times. It strategically addresses these issues by offering a topical training course for ministers, priests, social assistants, teachers, and others. It involved the development of awareness raising and prevention materials for teachers of seven school grades and enabled key actors to network at a twice-yearly roundtable dedicated to countering these issues.

Because of the size of the grants, the funded projects were usually volunteer based and opened up opportunities for unpaid team members to implement activities in their area, further strengthening solidarity between church members and local institutions. An LWF staff member explained that the grants enabled churches to create and rebuild livelihoods for their members and that later, some church members were able to give back to the church, creating a positive beneficial circle for the churches and their members.

RRF-funded Projects

“Generally, the projects are very diverse, because the contexts are so diverse, and the churches are so diverse.”

“These projects are small, but they make a difference for the people who are directly involved. And some of them were pilot projects with the hope that they could be replicated.”²⁴

The funded activities were described by one LWF staff member as “quite hands-on projects, basically projects that address these issues on a practical level.” Interviewees reported the following activities as falling under the funded projects:

- Health related activities:
 - Purchase of masks, hand sanitizers, and other hygiene products (especially at the beginning of the pandemic)
 - Awareness raising for COVID-19-related measures

- Equipping churches to develop an online alternative (church services, but also radio projects, for example)
- Supporting churches to continue providing spiritual care
- Providing support to the churches’ social services with a strong focus on the most vulnerable population (e.g., healthcare workers, migrant labor forces, unemployed people, people with disabilities, etc.)
 - Food distribution and a focus on livelihoods, often targeting women (e.g., fish farming, agricultural projects, small entrepreneurship, seed funding)
 - Gender justice (e.g., prevention of domestic violence, girls’ education)
 - Back to school projects (e.g., tutoring projects, enabling the purchase of extra desks to reopen schools and maintain social distancing)
 - Restoring social ties (e.g., a grief-counseling café where people who experienced lockdown and the death of loved ones could share their experience, community gardens)

“The longer [the pandemic] went on, the stronger the focus moved to livelihoods, often with a strong aspect on gender justice . . . [because] these two were quite closely interlinked, [so] that the economic impact caused an increase in domestic violence and, you know, how these things are interconnected.”²⁵

As of June 2022, LWF still had some funds left and was about to open a new and final call for applications. The priorities were not set yet, but according to one interviewee, no considerable change was expected compared to the earlier months of the pandemic.

RESPONSES BY LWF AND ITS PARTNERS

Advocacy and policy engagement Not a priority? The RRF case

In the RRF-funded projects “advocacy to address structural and cultural causes of injustice and violence” was listed by one LWF staff member as one of the cross-cutting issues for which member churches could apply. However, to the knowledge of the LWF staff members interviewed, no funded projects had a very strong advocacy focus. Some had what they called a sort of “soft advocacy element,” in the sense that they aimed to connect communities with line ministries, for example. According to interviews, a number of reasons explained why advocacy was not considered a priority, especially at the beginning of the pandemic:

- The nature of the projects – small grants, implemented locally – made it easier for member churches to design and implement very practical projects instead of engaging at a “higher level on fundamental issues,” according to one LWF staff member, as it would have been the case with advocacy activities.
 - The focus on life-threatening issues meant that advocacy was often sidelined. For example, one interviewee explained that “at the beginning of [the pandemic], the most important thing was to keep people out of danger.”
 - Churches were already shorthanded, with staff getting infected by COVID-19 and unable to work, affecting their capacity to respond to immediate needs. In this context, dedicating staff to advocacy was often simply not realistic. Doing COVID-19-related advocacy in some contexts was dangerous and not feasible, because governments did not allow advocacy activities, even prior to the pandemic.
- It was often difficult to set advocacy priorities because no one knew how long the pandemic was going to last and what its impact was going to be.

“It’s not necessarily that the COVID-19 advocacy was stepping into the background, but advocacy in general was maybe not the most prioritized because of all the other things.”²⁶

What is advocacy?

In its handbook on advocacy, LWF defines advocacy as “organized actions, whether at local, national or international level, by ordinary people, associations or organizations that aim to bring about changes in policies, practices, or value systems that perpetuate injustice in order to safeguard [the] dignity and human rights of all.”⁴¹

Focus on girls' education

Later in the pandemic, girls' education became a strong focus of LWF and its partners in terms of advocacy and policy engagement. This issue emerged "almost as a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions," according to one LWF staff member, and was a stark expression of the gendered dimension of the pandemic.

Once the restrictions were lifted and children were allowed back into classrooms, LWF and its partners realized that many girls could not go back to school due to the pandemic having reinforced earlier trends of girls' rights being curtailed. For example, many families struggling economically married off their daughters in exchange for increased resources. Other girls had become pregnant, preventing them from rejoining school.

LWF quickly raised that issue within the wider network, and it became an LWF priority advocacy topic with actions at four levels:

- Advocacy with governments to push for changes in policy and practices for all girls to still have access to the education system.

- Advocacy with religious leaders to counter norms and beliefs that kept girls out of school. Working with them is essential "to make sure that any cultural or structural barriers that prevent girls from getting education" are removed, according to one LWF staff member.
- Advocacy for innovative education approaches for girls whose circumstances had changed because they were now married or had to take care of children.
- Advocacy at the global level to the UN Human Rights Council to remind governments of the importance of girls' education.

These ongoing advocacy efforts have enabled a significant number of girls to go back to school. Gender justice remains an advocacy priority for LWF and its partners.

One LWF staff member commented: "Education is a human right and if a girl doesn't have education, it exposes her to a difficult future . . . For faith-based organizations, it is absolutely important . . . to ensure that girls have adequate and quality education because it is their ticket to the ability to live safe, fruitful lives."

According to one LWF interviewee:

Even when they [churches in Latin America] do a practical response, it's kind of ingrained in their DNA that, you know, they don't shy away from things that are kind of hidden advocacy . . . they're expressing their sense of justice and what they do.

This meant that even if activities were not labeled as advocacy per se, some local churches did organically integrate it in their response.

In the second round of interviews that took place in June and July 2022, people mentioned that the attention to COVID-19 in advocacy, but also in programming in general, had decreased because COVID-19 funding was running out and new crises, such as the war in Ukraine, were emerging. Finally, there was a percep-

tion that there was a need to start mainstreaming work on global health, including COVID-19.

Examples of advocacy and policy engagement

Interviewees shared many examples of their advocacy and policy engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When it comes to advocacy activity cited by interviewees, declarations and statements on COVID-19-related issues were often mentioned. One interviewee explained that his organization shared some statements up to three times a week in the middle of the pandemic. It was not uncommon for these statements to be made by faith leaders to give them more magnitude.

The issues most addressed by advocacy

Vaccine uptake, access, and equity. This included vaccine uptake, access, and equity, misinformation, questions of intellectual property (TRIPS waiver), local production of the vaccines, and the sharing of technologies.

Investment and strengthening of the global health system. This included a focus on integrating lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in order to better react in case of future pandemics.

Education. Activities focused on getting schools to reopen and on the promotion of alternative ways to provide an education for children during the pandemic.

Social protection of the most vulnerable groups. The specific focus depended on the context, but women, children, religious, ethnic or racial minorities, and the elderly were often included.

Livelihood and economic recovery. The focus here was on more long-term solutions (economic empowerment, micro-enterprise projects, livelihood projects, etc.) and inclusive economic recovery processes.

Flexible funding. This included advocating to donors for more flexibility in funding. See text box on p. 12 for more details.

Open letter from faith leaders to G7 leaders to end vaccine inequality

Faith leaders, including the LWF General Secretary, the Dalai Lama, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, the Elder Metropolitan of Chalcedon representing the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town wrote an open letter to G7 leaders (from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and United States of America) to ask for vaccine patents to be waived and facilitate access to vaccines in low-income countries.

Some excerpts of this open letter:

- “The recognition of our common humanity makes it imperative that we rise to the challenges posed by a virus that recognizes no border. The phrase ‘none of us are safe until all of us are safe’ is not a political slogan but a scientific fact and should be clear from the rapid spread of more transmissible variants.”
- “We believe that more equitable approaches to vaccination in the world’s poorest countries is both an ethical obligation, and an epidemiological imperative if we are to protect vulnerable people wherever they live, including the citizens of the G7. The old axiom that ‘our life and our death are with our neighbor’ has never been more apt, and we urge you to respond speedily and effectively to this challenge.”⁴²

Writing letters to government officials, administration, Members of Parliament, political parties, and so forth, is another advocacy activity brought up by interviewees. For example, these letters were urging political actors to take action on certain topics, and to take part in the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access mechanism COVAX. The sharing of briefing papers (e.g. on what governments and donors should take into consideration) and online and in-person meetings with political actors – sometimes as a result of written letters – were also cited as examples of advocacy engagement.

Some interviewees mentioned the use of mainstream and social media to raise awareness on certain topics. Radio and social media campaigns, blog posts, articles on websites, publication of joint pieces on media, newspaper articles, and op-eds were cited as examples.

Other interviewees spoke about the organization of workshops and webinars as a way of doing advocacy during the pandemic, as well as speaking engagements at public conferences, high-level political forums, or simply being present at public cultural and political events (e.g. festivals). Consultations and the creation of a toolkit on how to engage with faith actors during the pandemic were also cited as an advocacy example.

Public discourse as a way to do advocacy during the pandemic was discussed by an interviewee. These discussions usually centered not only on COVID-19, but also around related issues such as the freedom of religious beliefs, gender-based violence, virtual and physical harassment, etc. Faith and interfaith actors were involved in those discussions, as well as political actors.

One last example that came up in the interviews was doing and using research for evidence-based advocacy. After producing evidence on a certain topic, the actor would draw recommendations from it and use it as a basis for its other advocacy activities.

Advocacy and policy engagement as a tool to counter misinformation

One key issue mentioned by interviewees was countering misinformation during the pandemic. Misinformation has had deadly consequences, fueling vaccine hesitancy and refusal, prolonging the COVID-19 pandemic and having repercussions on the most vulnerable groups.²⁷ Some interviewees shared that misinformation hindered dialogue and led to increasing interreligious tensions and violence in some contexts.

Statements to the UN Human Rights Council

LWF “was very key in following the discussions about COVID-19 at the Human Rights Council”⁴³ and in communicating about the pandemic as a human rights issue and not only a global health concern.

For example, Gunnel Axelsson Nycander, Policy Advisor at Act Church of Sweden, presented a statement at the Human Rights Council about social protection as a way to prevent extreme poverty and counteract inequality on behalf of LWF, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and ACT Alliance on 29 June 2021.⁴⁴

In this statement:

- The international community was called “to prioritize social protection floor spending nationally and internationally to deliver on the human right to social security at a time when extreme poverty is increasing while global wealth continues to grow.”⁴⁵
- The Human Rights Council was called to “support the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to establish a Global Fund for Social Protection to manage this and future crises.”⁴⁶

Briefing paper: Gender and faith perspectives on COVID-19

In 2020, ACT Alliance published a briefing paper on the gendered dimensions of COVID-19. It provides recommendations for ACT Alliance members, but also for policy makers and private sector actors. It also includes a section on the role of faith actors and communities in addressing this issue, as well as good practices.

For example, in this briefing paper, ACT Alliance recommended in medium term:

- “That governments ensure that women and girls having limited or no access to healthcare will be referred to, or will have access to, healthcare facilities including psychosocial support including by:
 - Setting up referral systems, particularly on sexual and reproductive health, in areas where there is limited or no access to healthcare;
 - Providing healthcare services including sexual and reproductive health, targeting particularly vulnerable groups; and
 - Providing psychosocial support for people with different needs and life situations.
- That all stakeholders ensure groups with differentiated needs, including women and girls and LGBTIQ people, will have access to specific information on their entitlements and rights to ensure their protection, including:

- Information on specific gender issues will be provided through different and overlapping communication channels; and media platforms to intentionally include women and their expertise in their coverage of COVID-19; and
- Setting up referral and support systems on accessibility and protection services, and safe spaces, for victims of gender-based violence.
- That groups that have differentiated needs, including women and girls, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or questioning (LGBTIQ) communities, will have access to or will be supported in rebuilding their livelihood or income sources. This will be linked to other sectors especially livelihoods.
- That women and girls on the move, as a significant part of refugee and migrant populations overall, must have equal access to health services, including by:
 - Removing obstacles that discriminate against their inclusion;
 - Erecting ‘firewalls’ against immigration enforcement; and
- Inclusion in measures to address increases in sexual and gender-based violence and harassment due to isolation measures and other pandemic-related stresses.”⁴⁷

Examples of misinformation that interviewees reported having encountered during the pandemic included:

An LWF staff member revealed that in some of the RRF applications “sometimes churches wanted to go for medical remedies or medical interventions that were either wrong or not proven.” LWF obviously did not fund these as they only accepted interventions approved by medical professionals.

Publishing credible information for staff members and congregations is one of the most cited ways

interviewed organizations have used to counter misinformation. It was also pointed out by an interviewee that the information had to be based on scientific facts, but also understandable for their congregations. More than “arming people with the right information,” some also said they encouraged their members to “seek credible information.” According to one FBO staff member, it is important for churches to create this dynamic whereby church-based communities understand the need to seek credible information, rather than just accept everything on face value, and create

Webinar “Engaging with Faith Actors: Building on Lessons of COVID-19”

ACT Alliance European Union (EU), Caritas Europa, EU-CORD, and Islamic Relief Worldwide cohosted a webinar on engaging faith actors and COVID-19 in October 2020. They invited “EU and civil society in-country and Brussels-based personnel engaged in development, humanitarian and peacebuilding for participatory discussion on the opportunities and challenges of engagement with faith actors in policy and programming.”⁴⁸

The webinar was “accompanied by a toolkit addressed to EU policy makers offering civil society practical considerations for engaging with faith actors in the COVID-19 response”⁴⁹ and gave “the opportunity to reflect on how to engage with religious leaders and faith communities in different contexts respond-

ing to the immediate and longer-term impacts of outbreaks, such as Ebola and COVID-19, both in policy and in practice.”⁵⁰ Participants debated:

“Why, especially in terms of COVID-19 response, engagement with faith leaders is important and what this looks like at local, national and international level.

How to navigate and overcome challenges that come from engaging with faith leaders for constructive engagement at the policy and programming level.

Drawing on the distinct experiences of the World Bank and civil society, where common ground may be found for EU policy approaches.”⁵¹

Evidence-based advocacy: The case of Indonesia

The LWF National Committee in Indonesia initiated research on the impact of COVID-19 and restrictions on public activities for informal workers. They chose to focus on this particularly vulnerable group because of the lack of social safeguarding and the economic injustices they were facing.

They trained one professional researcher and staff members from the national committee and a church on how to do research and fact-finding in the communities. Once that was achieved, the research work started and the fact-finding missions in the communities were carried out. A report was written

based on the results and included some recommendations for churches and Indonesia’s political actors.⁵²

This report and these recommendations were then used as a basis for advocacy activities. A staff member of the LWF National Committee in Indonesia explained that they were “pretty successful” in their advocacy work based on this report at the government level:

Some of our recommendations have been noted at least at the local government level. So, after we submitted our recommendations, our reports and research reports, the local governments and churches ... gathered ... to raise issues that many communities in the area are facing.

a sense of analytical awareness and critical thinking that is important in every single decision made.

Some interviewees also mentioned the need to create safe spaces where people can have dialogues, raise their concerns, and discuss with each other as a way to counter misinformation. Interviewees agreed that this kind of dialogue on social media platforms, even though it is where most misinformation is spread, is not possible. They nonetheless still published credible information on social media platforms for their members, and some faith actors even received training on how to use social media to spread awareness and share accurate information.

“Once people really understand, they change their minds.”²⁸

Besides sharing trusted and understandable information on their social media platforms, church leaders were also encouraged to do the same during services, church activities, or to go directly into communities to do so. It was highlighted by most interviewees that church leaders are trusted members of communities, so it was important for them to use their authority to stop the spreading of misinformation. This was especially true in countries where faith actors are more trusted than the government or where the government did not take the pandemic seriously.

To fight misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines and encourage people to get vaccinated, faith leaders were encouraged to get vaccinated publicly to “lead by example.” Using theological messages, pastoral letters, working with governments on messaging, and making public statements were among the actions taken by

Examples of misinformation reported by interviewees

On vaccines	On COVID-19
“Vaccines are the mark of the beast.”	“COVID-19 is a plot of the West” and other suspicions based on historical colonial practices.
“Vaccines are promoted by Bill Gates and therefore they have microchips in them.”	“People got COVID-19 because they drank from the wrong place.”
“Vaccines are nothing except water.”	“People got COVID-19 because they went to the toilet, so people shouldn’t go to the toilet anymore.”
“Vaccines give AIDS to people.”	“If people want to avoid getting infected, they shouldn’t speak to anybody who’s just coming into the country and avoid foreigners.”
“Getting vaccinated will kill people.”	“Humanitarian actors, White aid workers, and healthcare workers were considered as the people who brought the virus into communities.”
“It is up to God to cure people, so vaccinations won’t have an impact and by getting vaccinated, people are meddling with divine intervention.”	“It is because of the people with disabilities that people have got COVID-19.”



Creating public awareness and fighting misinformation by producing radio programs.

churches against misinformation and to encourage vaccine uptake that were cited in the interviews.

“The church plays a hugely important role in [stopping misinformation]. And it can’t be understated at all. And the churches need to rise above superstition or culture that promotes misinformation. And they must maintain a very strong stance against any sort of misinformation and, importantly, against the stigmatization and marginalization of groups.”²⁹

Collaboration

Collaboration was a recurring topic among the interviewees. Networks were said to be of great help in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and carrying out advocacy activities. The interviewed personnel

of international FBOs mentioned were involved in the following networks and working groups during the pandemic: ACT Alliance, the International Council for Voluntary Agencies, some UN emergency clusters, UN Human Rights Council, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, WCC, Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) network, LWF, and the COVAX mechanism.

“There’s never going to be an international situation where you have perfect coordination. But I think, yeah, the way of working in networks has helped a lot [during the COVID-19 pandemic]... I do think that in terms of international advocacy, it’s been a plus to have some really organized kinds of groups.”³⁰

Letter: LWF leaders urge member churches to follow health recommendations⁵⁴

LWF President Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa and then General Secretary Rev. Dr Martin Junge wrote to the churches on 31 March 2020. They reiterated “the call for all member churches to follow public health guidelines, while also condemning stigmatization and inviting people to support those most severely challenged by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) disease.”⁵⁵

Excerpt on physical gathering for worship:

“With great concern, we hear of Christian communities that insist on physically gathering for worship, even when restrictions have been put in place by authorities.

Besides those big international networks, it was pointed out that churches have connections and networks of healthcare facilities, education institutions, and communities at local and global levels. This enables them to give a voice and a platform for local faith actors at global levels. As a national actor from a local FBO said:

We were there to listen to people. We can voice away their concerns, their questions, and bring those to the bigger community, to the church wide or to the global church...so everybody can think together [and] come up with ideas or solutions.

More than having the voices of local faith actors heard at global church levels, international FBOs such as the LWF managed to bring these voices into international non-faith organizations and networks. An interviewee nonetheless pointed out that there were some “language issues” between international non-faith actors and faith actors, making it sometimes difficult to understand each other and collaborate.

“We are a powerful voice.”³¹

“The church has also the task to get people together because ours is a Lord who wants us to be together.”³²

When talking about advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, an interviewee explained that it had been essential to avoid duplications, support the advocacy work others were already doing, and identify the gaps. According to an interviewee, another reason – beside the emergency – that explains this increase in collaboration is that the civic

Sometimes, this defiance is based on the assumption that the virus only affects people from certain regions of the world. In other cases, the defiance is based on a theological narrative, according to which the blood of Christ has cleansed the lives of the believers, and therefore protects from the COVID-19.

We reiterate our call to LWF member churches to listen to health authorities and follow the measures that they are putting in place to contain the spread of the virus, even if this means refraining from gathering for worship in one place for a period of time.

We furthermore call member churches to teach diligently and to live out the gift of faith in humbleness and responsibility. The story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness (Mk 4) helps us understand that faith should never lead to testing and tempting God’s power. Instead, faith in the Triune God empowers us to go through this time of trial with hope and with a loving heart towards those most vulnerable to COVID-19 and its consequences.”⁵⁶

space is shrinking and available resources are decreasing, which pushed people and organizations to collaborate more. It would boost their visibility, which in turn would result in higher chances to receive new funding.

Most interviewees agreed that a stronger collective voice is an opportunity for all faith actors to join hands and advocate against injustices together, even though collaboration can sometimes be laborious in face of so much plurality and diversity among faith and interfaith actors.

“We’re not going to solve every policy challenge but we can continue to engage with policy policymakers for the good of all. But the great news is we don’t do it alone.”³³

Overall strengths

“They [faith actors] are duty bearers, they have a responsibility. It’s not just governments that are

Tanzania: Radio programs for COVID-19 awareness and prevention⁵³

This project started in 2020 is implemented by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

The project aims at creating public awareness and fighting misinformation by producing radio programs involving medical doctors to provide reliable information. The goal is very relevant to the Tanzanian context, where lack of epidemiological data or misinformation may be obscuring the true impact of the pandemic. The church is bold enough to speak about COVID-19 while the government has denied the existence of the pandemic in the country. The radio will reach an area with a population of 8 million people living in rural areas where other radio stations do not reach and will be implemented through Radio Voice of the Gospel, in Moshi.

Fighting misinformation at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is “one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States, with nearly 3.3 million members in more than 8,900 worshipping communities across the 50 states and in the Caribbean region.”⁵⁷

ELCA has encountered most of the misinformation around COVID-19 through their social media, and it is not unusual for their Facebook page audience to post misinformation in the comment section of their posts. ELCA has a social media team who hides the misinformation posted and bans the repeated offenders from their social media. According to an ELCA staff member, it is difficult to have dialogues allowing people to grow and encourage them to seek more trusted information on the comments’ section on social media posts, but “one-on-one kind of personal conversations and dialogue” has proven to be more efficient.

With the help of local bishops, ELCA is coaching “leaders to consistently provide accurate and reliable information in worship and in their church communication,” according to one FBO staff member. Through its messages to congregations, ELCA

has also encouraged its members to respect the health recommendations and get vaccinated: for example, they sent out “a congregational resource that applies ELCA teaching to questions about public health, vaccination, and religious exemption to vaccines,” according to another staff person.

The ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton has regularly shared videos “meant to have a personal tone from a figure of authority as a trusted messenger” about COVID-19. Another staff member talked about a particularly striking video where she acknowledged

the fear that many communities may have toward receiving the vaccine and she’s worked to reassure that the vaccines are safe. That same video also encouraged others to chat with their neighbors about the vaccine and reassure hesitant members of their community that the vaccine is safe.

Bishop Eaton’s vaccination, as well as that of many other ELCA leaders, especially coming from communities more reluctant to get vaccinated, have also been recorded and published to encourage people to get vaccinated. ELCA churches have also been used as vaccination sites and congregations with undocumented immigrants have been assured that Immigration and Customs Enforcement would not be present.

duty bearers, but these are leaders of communities, of society, and that comes hand in hand with responsibility.”³⁴

Faith actors are often said to have a trusted position in their communities and were indeed very active in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The knowledge and experience of faith actors responding to crises was recognized by WHO, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and many other actors from the very beginning of the pandemic.³⁵ It was however pointed out by an interviewee that raising awareness about the role of faith actors had to be done at the international fora. Nonetheless, a few interviewees agreed that faith actors had been given an opportunity to have their voices heard and the fact that many stayed and delivered in context where other actors were pulling out has led to more respect and attention from international actors.

When asked about their strengths in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviewed faith actors from an international FBO mentioned that one of their contributions was to “bring to the table the voice of faith actors,” to “advocate with an also moral voice,” by bringing in their calling and what it means to be – in their case – Christian and to embody Christ’s mission on earth in their actions and words.

Another strength mentioned by the interviewees is the broad network of members and institutions that

Christian actors have access to. Many faith actors, and especially the Catholic Church, play a big role in health systems in many countries around the world that have experience in dealing with previous global health crises such as malaria and Ebola, which gave them a critical position in responding to the pandemic. Moreover, some interviewees mentioned that faith actors can reach and have access to people in places where even government officials do not have access, thanks to their long-term presence and long-lasting relationships with their members. An interviewee also highlighted that the work of faith actors has been particularly acknowledged when it comes to social behavioral change, including in relation to burial practices.

Thanks to their rootedness and global reach, as one international FBO staff member put it, faith actors have been able to

accompany [those in the greatest need] on lifting up their own voices, so that policymakers understand how personal these macro policies are in the lives of families in every community. Lawmakers from all political parties are seeking more local stories and experiences when coming to make a decision on a matter.

More than this unique position and ability to reach so many people, one LWF staff member explained that in

some contexts, faith actors are more listened to and trusted than governments and humanitarian workers because of the “credibility of the voices.”

“It’s important to recognize that the incumbents and the South have a very important role beyond all this spiritual health or spiritual life: they have pretty important practical roles to play in institutions, but also in communication.”³⁶

Some interviewees also explained that COVID-19 was an opportunity for faith actors to play a leading role in building bridges and reducing the polarization that grew exponentially with the pandemic. It offered a chance to lead people in accepting the plurality and diversity of voices by building dialogue and creating safe spaces.

Overall areas for improvement

Interviewees also talked about weaknesses when it comes to the COVID-19 advocacy work of faith actors. One of the first weaknesses mentioned by three interviewees is the risk of involuntary politicization of their advocacy work. As an example, one LWF staff interviewee said that “if you were to develop a particular advocacy statement on a political situation, and you need a buy-in from faith-based actors that clearly have historical and political affiliations, then it can be an absolute nightmare.”

Another international FBO interviewee explained that faith actors have not always been very good at changing “the narrative that’s being constructed by religious fundamentalists” and recognizing their value in fighting it. This is linked to another more general



Photo: LWF/Albin Hillert

An opportunity to lead people in accepting the plurality and diversity of voices by building dialogue and creating safe spaces.

weakness highlighted by some interviewees: the lack of evidence about the work of faith actors leading to insufficient recognition of their contributions and faith actors themselves not always believing in their power.

Accountability has also been said to be a weakness of some faith actors as they do not always answer the reporting standards set by international actors, making it difficult for them to receive international grants. Faith actors have also been said to be mainly volunteer-based because of a lack of funding. This lack of professional staff also affects the capacity of faith actors to do advocacy.

“There’s a lot of goodwill, a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of motivation, but not always a huge degree of professionalism, in some places much more than others.”³⁷

Post-pandemic faith-based advocacy and policy engagement

With the pandemic under control in many countries as we write this report, faith actors are able to restart planning their activities with less uncertainties. We asked interviewees what they thought would be the advocacy priorities in the next few months, years, and post-COVID-19 pandemic. Key topics revolved around public health, COVID-19 recovery programs, and a number of other programmatic areas.

“Where the advocacies’ engine should go and does go is maybe a different question.”³⁸

Public health

Interviewees predicted that public health would keep being an advocacy priority in the future, with a focus on pandemic management and vaccination. This includes improving the availability of and access to vaccines; increasing vaccine uptake against COVID-19, but also for children under five; learning from the COVID-19 pandemic management in order to strengthen global health systems and cooperation, as well as systemic and structural approaches.

COVID-19 recovery programs

Recovery programs from the pandemic are a key advocacy and policy engagement priority among the interviewees. They want those programs to be fair, inclusive, sustainable and, in the words of an international FBO staff member, “planet-centered,” meaning how humans can exist and live within the planetary boundaries.

Other programmatic areas

In addition to these two key areas, interviewees mentioned a range of other specific programmatic areas that they believed needed more support in future advocacy and policy engagement. These include mental health and psychosocial wellbeing; access to education; food security; gender-based violence; freedom of religion and beliefs; inclusive peacebuilding for women as well as religious and traditional leaders; and increasing the use of cash transfer mechanisms in emergency situations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research has shown that LWF and its partners have been deeply impacted by the pandemic. COVID-19 has impacted their ability to reach their members and build community, their funding, as well as the humanitarian and development activities they were implementing. The key concerns of the interviewees about church members and communities revolved around economy and livelihoods, health, education, and social issues.

Facing this unprecedented crisis, LWF and its partners have adjusted their policy and advocacy efforts. Advocacy and policy engagement seems to not have been considered as a priority, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. But despite this non-prioritization, LWF and its partners were nonetheless involved in many different types of advocacy and policy engagement work during the pandemic, including as a tool to tackle misinformation and share accurate messaging among their communities. Collaboration played a big role in interviewed faith actors' advocacy activities and enabled them to have the voices of local actors heard at global levels, avoid duplications, and boost their visibility.

This research also highlighted strengths (presence and high level of trust in communities; bridging the local and global levels, but also communities; broad and already established networks) and overall areas of improvements (risk of politicization; lack of recognition of their work leading to lack of belief in their power to change things; and lack of funding to hire professional advocacy staff) for faith actors engaging in advocacy and policy efforts.

Finally, interviewees thought public health, COVID-19 recovery programs, and increased support in other programmatic areas are the three key topics the post-pandemic faith-based advocacy and policy engagement will focus on.

The following recommendations are based on the interviews conducted with staff members of LWF and its partner organizations:

Recommendations for international organizations and donor agencies

Recognize and support faith actors, especially local faith actors: Interviewed faith actors call on international organizations and donor agencies to recognize their contributions in responding to emergencies, empower them, systematically engage with them, and develop their religious literacy.

Structural, long-term, and flexible funding: Interviewees wish the funding flexibility granted by donors at the beginning of the pandemic to continue to be implemented in order to enable development and humanitarian actors to accurately respond to ever evolving needs and quickly respond when crises arise. A focus on structural and long-term funding was also advised by interviewees as it would enable organizations to develop a more comprehensive response and to hire long-term staff under suitable conditions, which is difficult with short-term funding.

Recommendations for faith actors

General recommendations

Collaboration and networks: Interviewees encourage other faith actors to continue prioritizing collaboration, build on partners' activities, and rely on each other's strength.

Rebuild sense of community: Interviewees recommend that faith actors rebuild a sense of community in their congregations and focus on what one LWF staff member described as "self-care."



Encouragement to continue prioritizing collaboration, build on partners' activities, and rely on each other's strength.

Embrace positive change: Faith actors are advised to embrace the positive change brought by the pandemic, and not try to “go back to the way things were,” to quote an international FBO staff member.

Evidence-based approaches: Interviewees encourage faith actors to “promote an evidence-based approach to everything that they do,” in the words of another staff member.

Speak out and change narratives: Interviewees advised faith actors to not be afraid of speaking out about sensitive issues and countering problematic narratives because they are trusted in communities. But they were

also advised to carefully consider the consequences of speaking out: being expelled from a country (for organizations) and receiving threats are a possibility.

Advocacy-focused recommendations

Advocacy for structural, systemic, and solidarity approaches: Interviewees call for advocacy to focus on structural and systemic approaches based on solidarity, to not “lose sight of the wider picture,” in the words of an international FBO staff member, instead of always addressing each crisis individually.

Advocacy at local and regional levels: Advocacy actors are advised by our interviewees to not only do advocacy at global levels, but also at local and regional levels.

Link the local and global levels: Interviewees urge all the humanitarian and development actors to continue to remove barriers to the participation of local actors and advocate for more inclusion and amplification of local voices, including local faith actors.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ “About the LWF”.
- ² Overview of Survey Results: COVID-19 Impact on LWF Member Churches (unpublished internal survey, LWF, 2020).
- ³ This section largely relies on two papers on COVID-19 and faith actors published in the beginning of 2022: O. Wilkinson and K. Marshall, *Two Years and Counting: COVID-19 through a Religious Lens* (working paper, Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, March 2022); S. Kemp and O. Wilkinson, *Lessons Learned: Faith-Based COVID-19 Response. How Do Adaptations to COVID-19 Inform Strategies for Enhancing Local Faith Leadership in Health and Development?* (Washington, DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, 2022).
- ⁴ *What is Coronavirus? Facts, Symptoms, and How to Help* (Federal Way, WA: World Vision, 2022).
- ⁵ *COVID-19 Weekly Epidemiological Update*, edition 106 (Geneva: World Health Organization, 24 August 2022).
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- ⁷ “COVID-19 Continues to Disrupt Essential Health Services in 90% of Countries,” World Health Organization, 2021.
- ⁸ *What is Coronavirus?*
- ⁹ Wilkinson and Marshall, *Two Years and Counting*.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Kemp and Wilkinson, *Lessons Learned*.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Wilkinson and Marshall, *Two Years and Counting*.
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- ¹⁹ From a LWF staff member.
- ²⁰ LWF, Overview of Survey Results.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² LWF staff member.
- ²³ Applications for LWF Member Churches Projects (2022).
- ²⁴ LWF staff members.
- ²⁵ LWF staff member.
- ²⁶ LWF staff member.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ International FBO staff member
- ²⁹ LWF staff member.
- ³⁰ International FBO staff member
- ³¹ International FBO staff member
- ³² Local FBO staff member
- ³³ International FBO staff member
- ³⁴ LWF staff member.

- ³⁵ Wilkinson, O. and Marshall, K. (2022) *Two Years and Counting: COVID-19 through a Religious Lens*, Working Paper March 2022, Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs.
- ³⁶ International FBO staff member.
- ³⁷ LWF staff member
- ³⁸ International FBO staff member
- ³⁹ Applications for LWF Member Church Projects, “Annex: Eligibility Criteria and Further Details for Project Applications August 2022.”
- ⁴⁰ Text provided by Yann Bovey, LWF.
- ⁴¹ *LWF Advocacy Handbook: A Guide for Member Churches and Country Programs* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2018), 13.
- ⁴² The entire letter is available here: *COVID-19: Faith Leaders Urge G7 to End Vaccine Inequality*, website of The Lutheran World Federation, 2021.
- ⁴³ From a LWF staff member.
- ⁴⁴ “Statement by Gunnel Axelsson Nycander in Human Rights Council, on Behalf of LWF, WCC and ACT Alliance,” video, 01:27, 30 June 2021.
- ⁴⁵ “Human Rights Council: LWF Calls for Increased Efforts to Combat Extreme Poverty,” website of The Lutheran World Federation, 2022.
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- ⁵³ Text provided by Yann Bovey, LWF.
- ⁵⁴ The full text of the letter is available on the LWF website <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/covid-19-solidarity-and-cooperation-should-know-no-borders>.
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