SPARK
MICROGRANTS

Spark's COVID-19 Task Force for Community Action and Response

COVID-19 Task Force

When the global COVID-19 pandemic reached East African countries in March of 2020, Spark Microgrants took action to develop a strategic COVID-19 response plan, set new policies in place, and assess the needs and impacts on our communities. A Spark COVID-19 Task Force was formed with representatives from each country program and department. This team has met weekly to discuss how Spark's Facilitated Collective Action Process (FCAP) can be adapted to new global circumstances, how we can continue supporting our communities in these new contexts, and to implement our immediate response programs. Spark has also been supporting our partner organizations to respond to COVID-19 in their communities. Across six countries, our partners have been prioritizing community preparedness, supporting community-led campaigns, facilitating local leadership, and mitigating the economic impacts of COVID-19.

Spark's Response Plan

Spark understands that COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities, and recognizes our ability to utilize our existing strategies to support communities that are being impacted. Spark is leveraging FCAP leadership in facilitating collective action at the village level to 1) support villages to develop preparedness plans and manage through COVID-19 and 2) bolster recovery efforts through equipping government and civil society to employ the FCAP as an economic and social stimulus.

This community-based approach has been successful and covers three phases of support:

Preparedness - Support communities through low tech solutions to develop preparedness plans to prevent spread (already in effect). Gather learnings from what is happening in communities during isolation and share with partners.

Management - Support communities, through increased economic hardship through local projects, supporting the most vulnerable and top up funds.

Recovery - Spark's FCAP will be integrated as a core part of post-COVID economic and social stimulus packages across the region. To prepare for the FCAP to reach hundreds of new villages at once Spark is building a mobile-enabled remote training program for youth facilitators and community members to increase the efficiency of the FCAP twofold.

Thus far, the Task Force has focused on preparedness and management support by assessing the needs of community members, disseminating crucial information, and brainstorming ways to adapt the FCAP in accordance with safety measures.

Task Force Activities

As soon as COVID-19 hit the countries Spark operates in, all in person FCAP meetings were suspended and activities transitioned to loud speakers and mobile communication through voice calls and text threads. The task force rolled out two rapid surveys to gather information from families on the situation and received reports back on their concerns over heightened food insecurity. Spark facilitation and top up funds were introduced to support communities to manage amidst this increased hardship. Community partners are now forming community action plans through a series of activities listed on the following pages.

1 Community Research I

Spark's Research, Evaluation, Learning, and Monitoring (RELM) team assisted the Task Force in conducting a rapid survey of Spark communities in Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, to assess some of the immediate worries and impacts of COVID-19 on their livelihoods. The study was conducted on April ninth and tenth, by making phone calls to communities and surveying respondents from 150 Spark communities

The results of the survey revealed the following key data points from these communities:

- 39% of respondents highlighted that their biggest challenge at this time are changes to community institutions, no FCAP meetings, savings groups, or loss of social cohesion.
- Over 60% of respondents in Rwanda reported immediate economic changes in their daily life.
- Immediate concerns are around increasing prices and lack of ability to generate income - 49% of respondents say the cost of goods/lack of food is the biggest challenge they face right now.
- Women have less fear of getting sick than men and slightly lower levels of knowledge of how the virus can spread.

These findings informed the SMS campaign's strategy, as the majority of messages were sent out after the results of the survey were assessed. The study guided Spark in the delivery and content of the SMS messages and continued to inform the new Task Force program adaptations to meet the needs of community members.

"Once the lockdown expands its seems like many people will die from hunger instead of being killed by COVID-19, and once this virus reaches to our village really it seems like most of us we shall die, comparing the developed countries that are facing death everyday. Really I am worried by the upcoming months. " - Community member surveyed in Rwanda

2 SMS Campaign

After government restrictions and lockdowns in Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda, community organizing and access to information became more challenging for community members. Utilizing Spark's existing SMS text messaging platform, the Task Force launched an SMS campaign to reach out to all communities and communicate crucial information on health and send messages to encourage continued social cohesion.

Between March and May, country teams **sent a total of 24,593 SMS text messages to all 325 Spark communities**, with about two to six texts per week. The content of these messages focused on COVID-19, reinforcing information from the Ministry of Health and World Health Organization. SMS messages also included updates on community FCAP projects and disbursements.

The SMS messages were sent out in two batches, the first focusing on immediate and critical information, and the second to gather information on community needs and plans to manage amidst COVID-19.

In addition to this, Spark shared information through community mobilizers with a megaphone who made announcements and provided key messages from a distance. This ensured that those without mobile phones could still have access to this crucial information from a trusted source.

Examples of SMS Messages:

- "Hello! Together we can fight COVID-19. Think about how you can trust and support each other to get basic needs while staying safe from COVID-19."
- "Community savings strengthens our unity. How could your community use your FCAP savings at this time? Discuss with your leaders."
- "Hi, in our culture, hugs and handshakes are pillars for social cohesion. These can spread COVID-19, you can greet each other by waving and smiling, etc. Wash your hands regularly with soap and clean water."

3 Community Research II

To follow up on the first COVID-19 study, a more comprehensive survey was administered to 150 communities in Uganda (13.5%), Rwanda (68.2%), and Burundi (18.4%). A total of 446 respondents participated in the survey to analyze four main areas of inquiry: health, food and economic security, COVID-19 prevention, and community-led initiatives. This second survey was conducted a month after the pandemic reached East Africa, providing a more in-depth analysis of the confirmed impact on food and economic security. Key data points collected from this survey revealed evidence in three core areas:

Livelihoods:
- An average of 86% of the respondents thinks that the restrictions caused by COVID-19 are affecting the availability of food and economic opportunities in their communities. This number peaks in Rwanda, where 94% of respondents reported changes to the availability of food and economic opportunities in their communities.
- Respondents highlighted that efforts within communities to address economic and food insecurity could focus on agriculture (18%), food donation (21%), conducting business in line with social distancing guidelines (7%), advocacy to gov't and other NGOs (7%), and helping one another (7%).

COVID-19 Actions and Support:
- 38% of the respondents reported that actions are being taken within their communities to support the most vulnerable members in their communities with food (31%) and other forms of support (7%, including small loans, basic household supplies like salt and soap, and support to plant garden crops).
- Only 20% of communities in Uganda and Rwanda are using the savings group resources to address their immediate needs.

COVID-19 Prevention and Knowledge:
- 86% of respondents reported washing hands frequently, while 75% said they were maintaining social distancing.

4 Community Discussions and Action Plans

The Task Force engaged with FCAP community-based facilitators by making phone calls to understand deeper community concerns, share the results of the community studies conducted, and to discuss how communities can find solutions and take collective action responsibly. To conduct the remote community calls, Spark trainers each called at least seven community members, facilitating discussions using guided questions. Spark asked two main questions to communities: 1) What actions can you take to address your biggest concerns? and 2) What is the best way for you to communicate during the crisis? These have been guiding communities to take collective action and utilize the research for their COVID-19 response.

As a result, each community that participated has submitted their COVID-19 community action plans to the Task Force. The action plans include how the community can continue their FCAP project under new circumstances and with added safety measures as well as how they can support their most vulnerable members from the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Community Action Plans

Each community collaborated to develop their own action plans based on the unique needs and impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods and economic security. Some examples of these in each country are:

Uganda - Ofua 3 Refugee Block
Ofua 3 Block is a refugee community in West Nile Uganda. As food and economic security were some of the biggest impacts in Uganda, the community has decided to start independent backyard kitchen gardens to plant their own vegetables and provide food for their families, buy seeds for community members, and rent land for agriculture. They are also continuing to spread awareness about the spread and prevention of COVID-19 to community members. They came together to develop an action plan to address their needs of food security, income, and COVID-19 prevention.

Rwanda - Buliza Community
Buliza community in Rwanda has developed a collective action plan to help community members in need, as there have been changes in income due to restrictions. To address this, the community is continuing their savings and credit groups that are available to members in need, and donating food to those that need additional support. To support the health of community members, they are also collectively paying for community member health insurance.

Burundi - Kirungu Community
The main concern of communities in Burundi is health and COVID-19 prevention. Therefore, Kirungu community's primary action plan involves encouraging community members to wash their hands, social distance themselves in public places, cover their mouths, and go to the hospital when they are experiencing symptoms, and to generally keep community members informed about COVID-19. They are also encouraging community members to continue with individual activities of their FCAP project, so they can continue providing food and income for their families.

5 Small Group FCAP & Microgrant Top-Up

The Task Force has developed an adapted version of the FCAP that adheres to restrictions and safety measures for COVID-19. This is being developed as a "Small Group FCAP" - to avoid large group meetings and instead promote smaller group gatherings (less than ten) to continue their capacity building sessions, decision-making, and FCAP project planning. Varying within the country programs depending on context and FCAP structure, most communities are being grouped according to their existing savings and loans groups, geographic zones, or other determining factors.

The key goals for this revised FCAP are:

1. Community to take collective actions to address the impact of COVID-19 on families in their villages.
2. To progress the FCAP with safe meetings that adhere to social distancing policy.
3. Ensure communities are better prepared in case of a second wave of COVID-19.

Small group and socialy distant FCAP meetings in Burundi and Rwanda
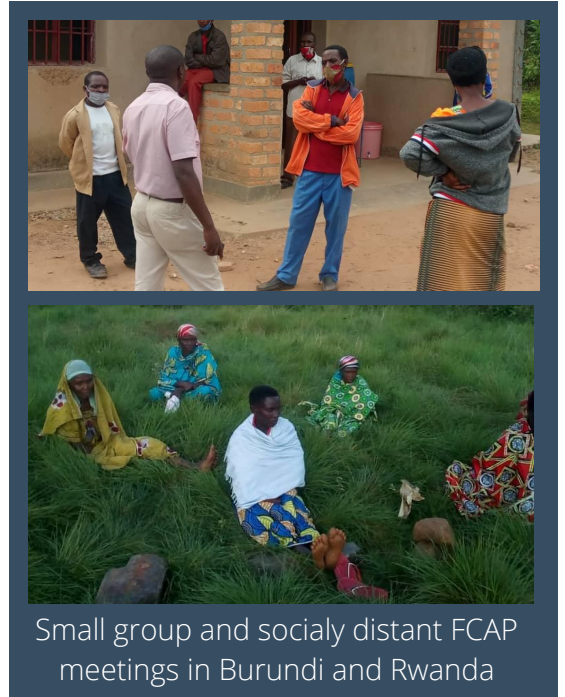
The Small Group FCAP will focus on village organizing, COVID-19 community actions and grant spending, and overcoming future challenges. The expected results of these activities and the overall Small Group FCAP initiative will be to ensure that communities are better aware of the status of their projects, able to resume project implementation if possible, continue their savings groups, and lastly have greater clarity on microgrant disbursements. Additionally, Spark has now secured funding to provide a microgrant "top-up" of $500 to each village, that communities can use to implement their action plans and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.

6 Kansi Pilot

In addition to the Small Group FCAP, Spark is also piloting a virtual program, facilitated remotely online. This is being tested in the Kansi Sector in Rwanda as part of a training program for community facilitators. Participants of this virtual FCAP are fifty-eight community-based facilitators (CBF) representing twenty-nine communities. This pilot brings facilitators together to participate in an accelerated, collective FCAP to test the ability for virtual training, and provide community facilitators additional projects so they can then better facilitate the FCAP for families in their village.

The virtual FCAP facilitates meetings in a WhatsApp group chat to complete modified activities and discuss their goals and project pathways. The group then uses an online voting platform to vote on collective decisions about their project. The pilot group has now completed all FCAP planning activities remotely, and will begin the implementation of their project soon.

Spark is utilizing this pilot to push our limits and explore what is possible on mobile and assess what parts of the FCAP can be done remotely. Spark chose to include only community facilitators as participants in the pilot, because they were typically more involved in the process, had higher levels of tech capacity to use smart phones, and are gender equal and representative of their communities. For participants that did not have smartphones (about 50%), a subsidized loan was provided to purchase one so they could access WhatsApp and join the discussion.

Spark will continue facilitating and monitoring this virtual pilot, with potential to expand the FCAP to new platforms and groups if COVID-19 restrictions continue. Additionally, the incorporation of these new technologies into communities is contributing to better flows of information and gives the facilitators an opportunity to share back messaging to their communities.

Community of Practice COVID-19 Actions

The Community of Practice (CoP) is a collective of organizations that are implementing Spark's Facilitated Community Action Process (FCAP) across various countries and contexts. Alongside Spark's Task Force activities, the CoP has also been responding to COVID-19 and supporting their respective communities by implementing some of the following community-led response initiatives:

1 **Prioritizing Community Preparedness:**
- ACA and CEFORD supported communities in Ghana and Uganda to set up hand washing stations with high-quality soap.
- CEFORD, FVS, Spark and the Government of Rwanda supported communities in Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda to develop COVID 19 Preparedness and Response Plans with actions and strategies in light of the crisis.
- CEFORD in Uganda has provided critical PPEs to community leaders and health workers.

2 **Supporting Communication Campaigns:**
- Community facilitators are helping Ghana health services to use radio and community info centers to spread COVID info on a weekly basis.
- VDF in Liberia has recorded jingles to share with communities to relay critical messaging in a memorable way.
- CEFORD in Uganda are sharing sensitization messages using radio, and SMS, and supporting local volunteers to share messages safely.

3 **Facilitating Strong Community Leadership:**
- In Ghana, ACA helped communities to form Citizen Committee Networks, which support information sharing, contact tracing, support for those in isolation, and working with community health volunteers to educate their immediate communities on COVID related info.

4 **Mitigating Social and Economic Impacts of the Lockdown:**
- CEFORD in Uganda is supporting the livelihoods of impacted communities through the provision and distribution of inputs and seeds for planting, working through lead farmers provided with hand washing facilities and hand sanitizers.

Looking Forward and Next Steps

The Task Force has now completed the implementation of the SMS campaign and community calls and moved on to the implementation of the small group FCAP and virtual pilot. The Task Force is also committing to the implementation of the following actions:

→ **Community Study III** - a third community study to survey families in each partner village to gather learnings on how families are managing amidst hardship, what community initiatives are being launched and how social dynamics are evolving.

→ **Microgrant top-up** - Spark has secured additional funding to provide a "top-up" of $500 per community, adding it to village microgrants so that the communities can implement their action plans. Now that each village has submitted their COVID-19 action plans for how they are addressing COVID-19 and mitigating economic effects, this will allow them to follow through on them, and Spark will now work on distributing these additional funds to communities.

→ **Small Group FCAP Phase 2** - There will be a second phase of small group FCAP meetings, as countries start reopening, and core FCAP programming begins again. Each communities has the felxibility to change their project pathways and meet new, unexpected needs.