

CASE STUDY 7

Adapting advocacy workplans due to unforeseen circumstances: Alliances in India, Tanzania and the Caribbean and the impact of COVID-19

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the way organisations operate and conduct advocacy. NCD alliances worldwide adapted to the new environment shaped by COVID-19, by strengthening their coalitions and forming appropriate partnerships, engaging in virtual advocacy activities, and retooling NCD priorities to address the intersections between NCDs and COVID-19.

The Healthy India Alliance (HIA), Tanzania NCD Alliance (TNCDA) and the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) moved quickly to adapt their workplans in response to the pandemic starting in 2020. HIA, as part of NCDA's Our Views, Our Voices initiative, adapted its advocacy plan by replacing planned in-person consultations, with virtual community conversations to build a community-led narrative on COVID-19 and NCDs. TNCDA, supported via NCDA's Advocacy Institute NCDs and UHC Accelerator Programme, faced an unpredictable environment brought about by the death of the former President Dr. John Magufuli resulting in changes in the new Cabinet, while also having to deal with the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. HCC, supported by NCDA's Civil Society Solidarity Fund on NCDs and COVID-19, launched a Transformative New Agenda to adapt their NCD response to the realities of the pandemic (learn more here).

Projects adapted to COVID-19

HCC adapted its advocacy workplan around what they called a Transformative New Agenda (TNA), by designing a slogan to build on the uncertainty and urgency, especially for those living with NCDs: "Now More Than Ever". HCC decided to adapt its planned advocacy campaign and developed and launched a regional long-term strategy making the case for a new approach to NCD prevention and control, and calling for the integration of NCDs into broader health agendas, such as health security and pandemic preparedness, to contribute to building back better during and beyond COVID-19. The vulnerability of people living with NCDs to

COVID-19 strengthened the messaging of its TNA digital campaign to prioritise policies that prevent NCDs and protect people living with NCDs, using rights-based and equity focussed language. According to HCC, due to the pandemic, the campaign timeline, target audiences and key messages were all modified for the better.

When the pandemic restricted HIA's plans to convene in-person consultations, it pivoted to hosting virtual community conversations in which trained champions were invited to build a community-led narrative on COVID-19 and NCDs, thus promoting the meaningful involvement of communities in building back better. Given that no in-person events were scheduled during the pandemic, HIA seized the opportunity to adapt budget allocations to support the time commitment of people living with NCDs as experts. At the same time, HIA engaged more with sub-national governments and non-government stakeholders to harness local advocacy opportunities to call for a people-centred NCD response. These sub-national efforts allowed to identify potential members and local host organisations, providing an opportunity to expand the alliance's membership base.

TNCDA had to react fast to respond to the changes in the political landscape and global pandemic, assessing their implications to its workplan and taking precautions to avoid putting staff and community at risk. It leaned into existing partnerships and political will it had created with government agencies over time to continue promoting NCDs even with these changes. The alliance continuously reached out to policy makers, including parliamentarians, to evaluate the implications of political changes to NCD prevention and control programmes, as well as to continue positioning itself as a key ally in any government response. According to the Tanzania NCD Alliance, **"If the roots are planted deep in the soil nothing can change due to the change in weather! Similarly, any initiatives that are related to the community and civil society MUST be sustainable, irrespective of change in political leadership."**

Recommendations

- When timing and framing advocacy activities consider that societal events have a political aspect, even if we are not aware of it. Even those events that are not overtly political (holidays and celebrations) can be used to elevate the status of NCDs as a topic of concern among decision-makers and citizens.
- Forecast challenges as best as you can and speak with donors about flexibilities in grant timelines and budgets as early as possible to allow for reprogramming.
- Make collaboration a priority. Leverage your network, membership, and partners to develop joint solutions to maximise project impact, including with policy makers and institutions.
- Assess the implications of new circumstances to re-evaluate needs and align advocacy campaigns to the current situation, such as by engaging in digital advocacy efforts.
- Although unforeseen events might lead to changes in an advocacy workplan, use the impetus created, as an opportunity to advocate for NCDs as part of national and regional post-pandemic recovery plans, and by involving people living with NCDs.