

Sustaining Community-Based Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Learning Platforms at Work in Freetown, Sierra Leone

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Abstract

In Freetown, Sierra Leone, despite the progress in the official response to the COVID-19 outbreak, there remain concerns about the limited involvement of local communities and the use of bottom-up participatory approaches in the response. While the official response has been characterised by restrictive public health measures such as partial lockdowns and the declaration of a state of a public health emergency, for the urban poor, the implications have been wide-ranging including the deepening of inequalities, especially among residents in slum-like informal settlements who already suffer from pre-COVID-19 structural challenges and vulnerabilities. This includes challenges linked to health systems fragility, environmental risks and uncertainties around livelihoods in the informal economy, which forces many to live from hand to mouth. Ultimately, these vulnerabilities challenge the acceptance and compliance of the restrictive state-led health measures, which puts them at risk of infections. To address these structural inequalities and foster an inclusive dialogue, a City Learning Platform, comprising the Freetown City Council, local community residents and their groups, and a few non-governmental organisations have been working creatively to respond to the COVID-19 challenges faced by the urban poor. But, while this alternative bottom-up approach has allowed the coordination of response to address community-level priorities more effectively, how well the platform has been able to successfully sustain the interest and commitments of vulnerable groups and to build their capacities, co-create knowledge and explore new opportunities has yet to be understood. This article highlights the strategic value of Community Learning Platforms in sustaining local responses to the pandemic. It also explores how social protection measures are shaped into the local response and help tackle deeply entrenched inequalities in the communities. The article additionally reflects on the challenges and opportunities for using the Community Learning Platforms in the COVID-19 response.

Keywords

Urban health, continued actions, learning platforms, community-based responses, COVID-19, Freetown

Introduction

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has raised significant concerns in Africa, particularly since conventional means of controlling the virus such as physical distancing or isolation at home were impractical in many contexts. The examination of state-led measures, including the early application of strict movement control such as lockdowns in urban areas, brought significant economic hardships to poor and vulnerable residents ([Brewer et al., 2021](#)). In

Freetown, Sierra Leone, the state-led approach to control COVID-19 had strong indications of lessons learnt from its previous public health crises such as the 2014–2015 Ebola virus disease epidemic ([Burki, 2016](#)). Political will to act swiftly was notable. A COVID-19 task force was quickly established, unlike in some other slow-reacting African countries ([Devermont & Harris, 2020](#)), and the National COVID-19 Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan was launched with the support of the World Bank ([World Bank, 2020](#)). In addition, the deployment of public health strategies was particularly useful in border surveillance and stemming mass imported cases ([Maxmen, 2020](#)). However, these centralised measures have not been adequate in fighting the spread of COVID-19 because the health systems lacked resources to fully protect staff and provide the necessary quarantine facilities for all positive cases. This was also coupled with other teething perennial challenges such as delayed salary payments and threats of industrial actions (strikes) by healthcare staff ([Robinson, 2019](#)). The difficulties of total self-isolation at home, especially for the urban poor, meant that there was no guarantee that the infection chain was ever properly broken; rather, it was likely aggravated with the rise in asymptomatic cases ([Maxmen, 2020](#)).

Consequently, the fight against the spread of COVID-19 in Freetown, just like in the case of Ebola, saw that the active role played by grassroots organisations ([Abramowitz et al., 2015](#); [Bedson et al., 2020](#); [Camara et al., 2020](#)) and efforts both to augment and fill in the gaps of centralised top-down efforts failed to adequately serve the poorest and most vulnerable resident of the city's informal settlements ([Shoman et al., 2017](#)). The role and utility of grassroots efforts in informal settlements at the onset of the pandemic were visible in information management and the delivery of essential relief efforts especially in the wake of stringent lockdowns ([Osuteye et al., 2020a](#); [Wilkinson, 2020](#)). The deliberate mobilisation of social and financial capital through well-organised structures such as the mixed actor groups called the Community Learning Platforms (CoLPs) operating at the heart of informal settlements have constituted a concerted bottom-up approach to urban pandemic management. Such an alternative bottom-up approach has allowed for the coordination of responses that address community-level priorities more effectively, particularly at the early stages of the pandemic. How well the platform, as an example of a grassroots mobilisation, has been able to successfully sustain the interest and engagement of vulnerable groups and to build their capacities, co-create knowledge and explore new opportunities as the pandemic lingers, is yet to be examined. This is particularly relevant given that the current official pandemic response framework did not adequately incorporate community-based responses into a formal strategy a common reality and limitation across many urban centres in the global South ([Corburn et al., 2020](#)).

This article contributes to filling that knowledge gap and highlight the strategic value of CoLPs in sustaining local responses to the pandemic, buttressing the debates of the value of community-mediated disaster risk communication which reduces uncertainty and supports appropriate decisions, actions and overall recovery in the event of disasters ([Badri, 2021](#); [Bradley et al., 2014](#); [Osuteye et al., 2020b](#); [Rahman & Munadi, 2019](#)). It also explores

how social protection measures were built into the local response and how this social capital helped tackle deeply entrenched inequalities in communities. This aligns with the held notion of how higher levels of social capital help enhance communal response and recovery capacities ([Helliwell et al., 2014](#); [Makridis & Wu, 2021](#); [Villalonga-Olives et al., 2021](#)) not just in the immediate aftermath of a crisis but particularly in the long-term ([Aldrich, 2012](#)). The article will additionally reflect on the challenges and opportunities for CoLPs in shaping the COVID-19 grassroots response.

Overview and Methodology

Overview of the Learning Platform

SLURC¹ has curated the learning platforms at both the community and city scales that serve as a space for learning, sharing and relationship building between the Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor (FEDURP), community residents and external collaborators (including the Freetown City Council; [City Learning Platform \[CiLP\], 2019](#)). The CoLP, which includes diverse representation of mixed groups of community actors (covering diversities in gender, tenure status and disability, among other social identities), is set up at the settlement level to provide a safe space to learn and discuss issues around urban development, with a strong focus on participatory and inclusive practices ([CiLP, 2019](#)). This is complemented by the establishment of similar structures at the city level, called the CiLP. The platforms have supported the exchange of knowledge in the city and leveraged their social capital during the COVID-19 response to support local communities ([Osuteye et al., 2020a](#)). The CoLP currently exists in 10 informal settlements and meets regularly, thereby enabling the voicing of the community's concerns to the city-scale through representation (including the ward councillors, persons living with disability, youths, religious leaders, chiefs, women's leaders, social groups, FEDURP/local networks, Community Disaster Management Committees [CDMCs], Ward Development Committees [WDCs], civil society networks, local non-governmental organisations [NGOs] and community-based organisation [CBOs], and ordinary citizens), while feeding learnings and actions back to the community. Each CoLP consists of 20 representatives (65% women and 35% men) drawing on at least one representative from the different demographics and social groupings present in each settlement, and spatially spread across different sections of the communities. Women have played a leadership role in all the platforms set up as they are considered to be problem-solvers, thus easily able to influence decisions through advocacy, and in turn consolidate trust in the COVID-19 response process through appropriate messaging.

The learning platforms undertook a number of emergency response initiatives from previous studies ([Osuteye et al., 2020a](#)) to provide basic needs for vulnerable groups during lockdowns, engage in sensitisation campaigns on hygiene practices, mobilise resources and facilitate collective actions that benefit the general community. With the pandemic having lasted for over a year, we investigated how the communities have coped with these COVID-19

measures, while also examining how the work of the platforms ensured their ‘sustenance’ over time.

Methodology

The study was conducted in 10 informal settlements in Freetown (Cockle Bay, Colbot, Dworzarck, Mabella, Moa Wharf, Oloshoro, Portee-Rokupa, Susan’s Bay, CKG and Funkia) where the CoLPs had been established (see [Figure 1](#)). In-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were held in August 2021 with 20 representatives of the CoLPs which included community residents and groups (with particular attention to women and youth). This provided them the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences on the value of the learning platforms and the opportunities and challenges associated with the sustenance of COVID-19 responses by the platforms, and to further explore their coordination roles with NGOs and the government and other organisations in the COVID-19 responses. In addition, we also had in-depth conversations with 10 community members and leaders about the benefits and sustenance of community-based responses during the pandemic by the learning platforms (see [Table 1](#)).



Figure 1. Map Showing the Informal Settlements Hosting Learning Platforms across the City of Freetown
Source: The authors.

Methods	Participant Type	Informal Settlement Residents
In-depth interviews	Community chiefs, FEDURP leadership and CODOHSAPA, NGOs working in informal settlements, CSOs, and CBOs	14
Semi-structured interviews	Local federation members, youth group leaders, women's leaders, and CBOs leaders	10
Focus group discussions	CoLP community representatives including women's savings group leaders, heads of community kitchens, persons with disabilities, religious leaders, social mobilisation groups, CDMCs, ward councillors, and interest groups	40 (4 sessions)

Emerging Perspectives and Reflections of the Learning Platforms: Impact of Community-Based Approaches to COVID-19 Response

The learning platforms have been working together with community residents in the 10 informal settlements to support COVID-19 responses. Drawing from the perspective and experience sharing sessions held with the learning platforms and community groups and members, the following impacts of the community-based responses to COVID-19 were highlighted.

Building Trust and Acceptance Within the Community

Political neglect and social and political exclusion of community residents when implementing COVID-19 measures contribute to distrust, resistance and outright fear of authorities ([Van Belle et al., 2020](#)). Interestingly, building trust and gaining acceptance, which are at the centre of effective outbreak control, were largely absent in the official strategies of dealing with the pandemic in informal settlements. This affected the commitment and social buy-in of communities in the context of compliance with top-down directives and measures such as lockdowns, quarantines, curfews and travel restrictions. For instance, the 'militaristic approach' used to effect quarantine actions in Susan's Bay at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was counterproductive to building trust and acceptance in informal settlements. This resulted in conflict and low levels of compliance. The experience of non-inclusion of community residents in the previous Ebola responses was a key reason for the mistrust between state actors and communities. We observed that when communities were not involved in health response planning, it created a void in the information dissemination loop, which caused suspicion. This was aggravated by pre-existing tensions around the failure of elected officers to meet their promises and expectations to deliver basic services such as water and sanitation. Moreover, many community residents felt misrepresented by the lack of involvement. Subsequently, the involvement of the CoLP was instrumental in changing the perceptions of people and alleviating the fear and panic that lingered from the bitter memories of the Ebola pandemic, thereby allowing enforcement measures to take effect. This is because they experienced the CoLP as a local structure that they could identify with and were able to trust. The experiences of trust that were built between community structures

such as FEDURP and the government during Ebola were now extended to the COVID-19 response. To date, recorded infections in informal settlements remain low when compared to formal areas.

Identity politics and communal struggles to navigate daily access services were also a rallying point for community residents. Many residents recognised and valued working with community stakeholders because they seemed responsive to their needs. Community authorities including chiefs and community-based groups such as FEDURP appeared to have gained the confidence of community residents through their networking with NGOs to provide basic services. Some elected leaders, such as members of parliament and councillors, did not seem to be as trusted as the chiefs because of their limited contribution to development. Thus, community chiefs are often considered as 'insiders' while some elected officers are considered as 'outsiders'.

"We have worked with health workers, community chiefs and religious leaders to build trust in the COVID-19 response. We have supported the government to build and promote discussions around handwashing and the use of face masks by letting people know that COVID-19 is real. This has been helpful because within the Dworzarck community, there has been no case of COVID-19 reported". (A community member from Dworzarck)

During the pandemic, CoLPs have successfully leveraged existing social and political capital as a way of building two-way trust to mobilise and gain acceptance in the community. This has enabled them to sustain the provision of basic needs thereby strengthening the resilience of vulnerable residents living in informal settlements and building the necessary trust to respond to COVID-19 ([Osuteye et al., 2020a](#)). Similarly, the CoLP has been critical in sustaining the fight against misconceptions, rumours and misinformation, particularly concerning vulnerable groups ([Sathian et al., 2020](#)) and providing continuous public engagement and education. This has further increased the social pressure for behavioural changes that are acceptable and effective, including changed attitudes to stigma of infected persons across the various localities where the CoLP is established in Freetown.

Response Coordination

At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, CoLP members provided vital support through community sensitisation, food supply and provision of face masks to the most vulnerable ([Osuteye et al., 2020](#)). Food support to vulnerable groups such as persons living with disability, the sick and the aged was delivered through newly established community kitchens. CoLP members also worked with community stakeholders to ensure that the concerns of informal settlement residents were meaningfully embedded into the local government's response plan ([Gilmore et al., 2020](#)). One year on, group members have expanded their response by widening their target population for sensitisation as well as embarking on other public health measures such improved environmental sanitation and sustained water supply and responding to gender-based violence within their communities.

The CoLP has continued providing food support to its target beneficiaries in Dworzarck, Oloshoro, CKG, Kroo Bay, Colbot, Moyiba, Mabella-Magazine, Portee-Rokupa and Susan's Bay. This initiative has been sustained through support and funding from multiple sources, including the Freetown City Council and NGOs such as GOAL-SL, Catholic Relief Services, CARITAS Freetown and Cities Alliance through SDI. These funds were also complemented by FEDURP Savings and pooled financial resources from community members themselves and the 'Assistive Technology Initiative for persons living with disability' (AT 2030) a research programme led by SLURC. Through the AT 2030 initiative, food support to the marginalised, including those living with disability or chronically ill, was extended outside the 10 CoLP communities to the disabled community in other informal settlements of Thompson Bay and Pademba Road, where more than 200 persons living with disability are accommodated in temporary facilities ([Ossul-Vermeiren, 2020](#)).

The CoLP also played a critical role in dealing with the rise of gender-based violence in informal settlements during the protracted periods of movement control ([Conteh et al., 2020](#)). Community groups increased their reporting of gender-based violence in communities such as Up-Gun, Colbot, Kanikay, College Road, Douala and Blackhall Road to the east of Freetown. Similar actions were undertaken in Cackle Bay and Oloshoro in the west of the city. The reporting also focused on child street hawking to bring to the attention of authorities the potential exposure of children to sexual abuse and the risk of COVID-19 infection. CoLP members from Colbot community shared that the constant monitoring and reporting of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), coupled with community sensitisation, has helped reduce the incidence of violence in these communities. It was reported that the reduced incidence of SGBV during the COVID-19 pandemic has also been influenced by educating community chiefs and including them in actions to address the problem. A community member from Colbot described how they have responded to SGBV in their community:

"We found out that the rate of SGBV was high during the COVID-19 period. Children, especially girls who hawk in the streets, were at risk of sexual exploitation, so we decided to report these issues daily through an app which was developed together with the Freetown City Council and the CODOHSAPA. We also involved the chiefs in community sensitisation to ensure that people move away from harming women and girls. Through our intervention, we have found out that the rates of violence are reducing in the communities".

Additionally, the CoLP was pivotal in augmenting the water supply to informal settlements. During the COVID-19 period, access to water was even more critical for regular handwashing and maintaining personal hygiene. In most informal settlements, however, daily access to water remained a challenge. This was made worse in some communities where poor management of fees collected at communal public taps led to the non-payment of utility bills to the municipal water agency, Guma Valley Water Company (GVWC). Consequently, GVWC disconnected the supply of water to communal taps in some of these communities. In Oloshoro and Funkia, CoLP members intervened by paying water utility bills to GVWC to

restore supply to water tanks. Currently, the group is in the process of expanding access to regular water supply to more residents by reinstating the use of other communal water tanks that have not been refilled for a while. A community member from Oloshoro explained their interventions to restore water to the community:

“We found out that people were struggling to access water because the main water tap was disconnected by Guma Valley due to mismanagement of money collected at the taps. CoLP members in the community raised money to pay up the water bills to Guma which has allowed them to reconnect the tap. Another community tap which services many residents has not been functional, but we are trying to generate resources to ensure that it becomes functional”.

Managing Fake News and Facilitating Dialogue

A key impediment to sustaining community action was the spread of fake news, rumours and inflammatory messages about COVID-19 on social media ([Apuke & Omar, 2021](#)).

Social media was used to spread rumours contrary to official messages and manipulate the unsuspecting public for political reasons. For instance, there was the emergence of a claim that the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out was intended to be a sinister population control tool in the opposition party's strongholds. This was accentuated by the fact that official government communication on COVID-19 was not tailored to the specific needs, uniqueness or challenges of informal settlements, giving room for rumours to spread. Consequently, people grew disconnected from the official responses, which did not adequately capture or consider the utility of community-led actions and initiatives ([Corburn et al., 2020](#); [Macarthy et al., 2017](#), p. 25). For example, an app jointly developed by the federation and Centre of Dialogue for Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation (CODOHSAPA) to enhance the reporting of COVID-19 cases in hard-to-reach informal settlements was never recognised by the state actors National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre (NaCOVERC) even though it provided a clear directive of how to report in real time, new cases from those places. The disregard for community initiatives such as the above had an overall impact on COVID-19 response and support. Streamlining of communications and information flow has been at the core of community-based responses to COVID-19, to mitigate these challenges.

The CoLP facilitated information dissemination to residents by organising community outreach events and sharing video and audio content, posters and handbills ([Wieland et al., 2021](#)). Community groups also shared COVID-19 messages in local languages, using public address systems as they moved through the settlements. This action, according to community members, was meant to ensure that residents, including migrants from rural areas who were not familiar with English or Krio,² received the necessary information. Community groups also used different digital platforms including WhatsApp, radio and television to spread COVID-19 messages for the benefit of residents who had access to them.

The CoLPs have sustained their communication efforts over time to spread accurate COVID-19 information, dismiss rumours and protect their members from infection. People continued to conflate and downplay COVID-19 symptoms with illnesses such as the common cold and malaria, which were already prevalent in their communities and which they had become accustomed to owing to unsanitary living conditions. The COVID-19 response by the government also seemed to be hampered by rumours about the potency of COVID-19, which has contributed to significant vaccine hesitancy and has the potential to further spread the disease beyond the current rate of spread ([Conteh et al., 2021](#)). This concern was expressed by a community member from Cockle Bay:

“Because of rumours, community people are losing trust in health workers. Rumours greatly affected the Ebola response, and we are now experiencing the same during the COVID-19 period. People say that COVID-19 is not real because it has not killed as many people as Ebola did. This has affected vaccine uptake levels because some people believe the vaccines have been poisoned to kill people”.

In trying to address rumours and misinformation, CoLP members designed mass information events, where megaphones were used to disseminate information, and handbills were distributed at community social spaces such as markets and ataya bases³ to educate people about preventing COVID-19. Such targeted messaging across our 10 research sites is reported to be changing attitudes towards the disease. Change of behaviour has been observed in the use of face masks and handwashing. In Funkia, for example, CoLP members have conducted door-to-door sensitisation of community residents, which they say is contributing to the number of people who are now using face masks in public spaces. A similar approach has been used in Oloshoro, CKG, Dwazark and Cockle Bay, where CoLP members have used mobile loudspeakers to disseminate COVID-19 messages to sections of communities that are excluded from public information outreach due to limited access and rough terrains. One CoLP member from Dworzarck described how the platforms are used to disseminate COVID-19 messages:

“Our sensitisation efforts directly target rumours because we believe this has the potential to affect the COVID-19 response. We apply different means including using Bluetooth speakers to target areas where many people gather, such as markets. We also use WhatsApp groups where we disseminate messages to savings groups⁴ within FEDURP about protecting themselves from COVID-19 infection”.

Finally, CoLP members have sustained COVID-19 messaging among themselves by setting up WhatsApp groups to share updates. This approach has proven to be useful and popular in savings groups within CoLP and FEDURP many of whom are often busy with livelihood activities.

Social Mobilisation

Mobilising communities to support the COVID-19 response and build trust is a huge challenge that has lasted since the Ebola period. Residents of informal settlements, realising this challenge, organised themselves to enhance an inclusive response. For this reason, CoLP

members have had engagements with religious leaders, a variety of CBOs, the market women's associations and fisher unions to support the government in spreading appropriate messages to their members. However, social mobilisation efforts are affected by the influx of people in fishing communities such as Funkia and Portee-Rokupa where many people visit for everyday trade. It was reported that people visiting such communities hold different beliefs and attitudes which negatively influence residents of these communities.

“We have held a series of group discussions including market women, CBOs, fishermen and religious leaders to ensure that everyone is involved in the response. Through these groups, we have promoted the use of face masks and handwashing. We can see that change is happening because we are beginning to notice the use of face masks by people in public places”. (A community member from Funkia)

The fluid nature of the fabric of fishing communities has meant that social mobilisation and involvement of local decision-makers has become a conscious and continuous endeavour for the CoLP to ensure the integrity and continuity of the range of responses mentioned earlier.

Sustaining Community Responses: Opportunities and Challenges for Using Learning Platforms in COVID-19 Response

Opportunities

Ingenuity and Creativity

While the COVID-19 crisis had negative effects on Freetown, it also created opportunities for the locals to showcase their ingenuity and creativity in crises management. Through CiLP, they have engaged with the FCC, CODOHSAPA and SLURC to identify a range of new ideas and approaches and draw on their varied experiences to share practical lessons on how the COVID-19 crisis can be addressed. For example, residents were able to creatively adjust and improve on hygiene practices through the local fabrication of face masks and handwashing stations. Teamwork allowed partners to rely on each other and to bring individual talents to the table to deal with the crisis. Open and frank communication between stakeholders was key as it enabled effective solutions to new challenges.

The CiLP also allowed a more productive engagement between the locals and external partners, and the dialogues motivated the CBOs to meet the community's specific needs. The passion that CBOs and other partners brought to the CoLP inspired members such as SLURC, CODOHSAPA and the FCC to remain committed and ensure success of activities and interventions. Through sustained engagement, several residents and community groups were encouraged to contribute creative ideas which fostered individual and collective knowledge.

“Our greatest strength is the capacity development opportunities we have had over the COVID-19 period. Through working with our partners like SLURC, FEDURP, FCC and CODOHSAPA, we have gained tremendous skills in community and resource mobilisation, networking, and

advocacy skills. Our approach to promote equity and inclusion has helped us maintain a strong membership to respond to community priorities". (A community member from Cackle Bay)

Inclusion and Meaningful Participation

Ensuring inclusivity of the platforms and pushing towards the same aim created a sense of shared responsibility which helped ease pressure from any one organisation that was represented by the platform. The relationships that were built inspired individuals to work longer hours and take on more tasks, with members providing support to each other. In carrying out the responses, individuals were encouraged to take the lead on activities in turns based on their unique specialties and strengths while also leaning on each other for reassurance and support.

Apart from the prospects for residents to showcase their work and to engage directly with public officials about problems faced in their communities, residents were able to hold monthly platform meetings (CoLP) at the community level to share best practices. Knowledge from the meetings formed the basis of platform meetings at the city level and were generally critical in shifting public understanding about informal settlements, and hence, the need to shape the COVID-19 response to reflect their shared realities. Besides, the CoLP also provided a space to articulate the range of support and concrete actions that the community wished to have addressed as part of the response. Doing so enabled the community residents and their groups to be involved and work cooperatively to define the problem and to set the agenda for action.

Networking and Partnership

Additionally, the platform created the space and opportunity for strengthened networking and partnerships among the different stakeholders, which allowed them to open up to each other and to provide support whenever needed ([Abramowitz et al., 2015](#)). Working as a team also allowed the building of trust as strong relationships were established with other team members. As platform activities became more responsive to community concerns, the interest in membership grew among residents in other informal settlements and civil society groups, and so, many joined as new members. As part of FEDURP's routine, all new members from the community were taught savings skills⁵ with their capacity built in several other aspects (e.g., advocacy, leadership, etc.) including networking with other CoLP members. Together, these skills allowed members to support each other and to strengthen the weaker ones with the aim to build a more cohesive group.

Challenges

Defining Roles and Responsibilities Among Stakeholders

Although exciting, working together to respond to COVID-19 using learning platforms was often challenging and experimental in nature. For instance, once stakeholders came together, there was uncertainty related to their own roles or how collective roles will be collated in a manner that addressed the needs and aspirations of residents in informal settlements. A

significant amount of collective negotiation and navigation was necessary to ensure that the sense of equivalence, mutual respect and parity in partnerships were maintained at all times. This also ensured that there was some clarity in the shared roles that emerged. The maintenance of power and hierarchical flatness among stakeholders was a deliberate step to remove a potential source of conflict which could hinder the outlined tasks and objectives of the platforms.

Financial Constraints

There were other challenges related to financial constraints especially after expanding the CoLP to other communities. This worsened following the unforeseen United Kingdom's Overseas Development Assistance funding cuts, which caused a decrease in available funding to stakeholders that supported platform activities (notably SLURC). Ensuing uncertainties caused a setback to the platforms and resulted in a few partners withholding or commensurately limiting their support and engagement.

“One of our greatest challenges is financial sustainability. We hope to extend our networks to different communities, but we are affected by the lack of resources. We are also demotivated by the lack of recognition by state actors. For example, when we created an app for incidence reporting during the COVID-19 period, NaCOVERC did not accept it because the idea was from community members”. (A senior member of FEDURP)

This situation reiterates how the improvement of most informal settlements has traditionally been anchored and steered by community volunteers whose energy, funds and resources are needed for the continued transformation that makes a difference in the lives and well-being of the residents ([Macarthy et al., 2017](#)). However, with COVID-19, the spirit of volunteerism seemed to decrease, owing to the high levels of poverty caused by the economic fallout of COVID-19 and a growing need for external funding. Unsurprisingly, most people now ask to be rewarded for their time on activities aimed at improving their own communities.

Conclusions

Looking ahead, beyond the immediate COVID-19 response, the learning platforms have created opportunities for meeting the needs of vulnerable communities by curating spaces of engagement and interaction and scaling up grassroots actions to complement government and NGO efforts. The platforms have been critical in the provision of correct information on the pandemic, highlighted how prevention of COVID-19 was possible and coordinated community-based responses and liaised with relevant external stakeholders. The high level of trust already established because of the platforms ensured that the communities were willing to continue to creatively design and integrate social protection measures into the local COVID-19 response and to tackle deeply entrenched inequalities, including targeted support for the elderly, persons living with disabilities and most vulnerable residents who were at higher risk. The assessments of the activities of the platforms over the period of the pandemic demonstrate their value in building and sustaining genuine trust among the communities and

forging a shared vision for the continuation of vital pandemic management over time through convening community engagement forums, information sharing and hands-on participation. This is a critical and noteworthy observation and conceptualisation of grassroots responses in times of crises.

The study also shows that sustaining the platforms requires an inclusive approach to partnerships, which enhances the collective voice of the community in their liaisons with the government and other key stakeholders. This unified and inclusive approach has played a critical role in identifying solutions to unique priorities, such as communal water provision which have contributed to slowing the spread of the virus, improved handwashing behaviour mitigating impacts and supporting vulnerable and marginalised communities. These partnerships are likely to support communication and behaviour change for disease prevention in the short-term which will have long-term and far-reaching benefits for individual and community resilience to the management of future crises and shocks.

There is, therefore, a need for state actors to recognise the role of the platforms in responding to pandemics and broadly incorporate those community-based responses into future pandemic response strategies. Supporting these community-led actions will help protect against the long-term disparity in the health, social and economic impact of COVID-19 across informal settlements in Freetown and beyond.

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Notes

1.

The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (www.slurc.org).

2.

Krio is Sierra Leone's lingua franca and is widely spoken throughout the country. However, people who migrate from rural communities cannot speak it because of limited exposure.

3.

Ataya is a drink believed to boost energy and vitality. It is popular among young people while socialising.

4.

Savings groups are a form of microfinance, involving small groups of 15–25 members that have well-defined procedures, allowing members to make basic rules about saving and borrowing and operating in transparent and democratic ways.

5.

Saving skills involve the ability to learn how to invest money productively as well as using a platform to strengthen social cohesion through mutual trust building and collective actions.

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