CORPSAFRICA'S COVID-19 CRISIS RESPONSE AFTER-ACTION REVIEW REPORT

JULY 2021
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An After-Action Review is an evaluative tool used throughout and after a project to assess its success and failures from an objective and constructive standpoint. Such reviews do not place blame or criticize involved parties, but instead seek to optimize program management and implementation for the betterment of future projects.

CorpsAfrica has embarked upon an After-Action Review of its Covid-19 response efforts to gain a comprehensive view of how staff and Volunteers were able to help the communities they serve in the face of this global pandemic. **We seek to understand how initial goals were met, changed, or abandoned, and which strategies were most successful in achieving desired outcomes.** The information we gain through this review will allow us to learn from the experience and improve our efforts in the future. We seek to clearly delineate the lessons learned and share them widely.
Dear Friends,

On behalf of all of us at CorpsAfrica, I am pleased to share this report on the extraordinary efforts of the CorpsAfrica Volunteers responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Morocco, Senegal, Malawi and Rwanda. Their courageous, selfless, and effective efforts in a time of crisis continue to be a model for us all.

Through their COVID-19 education efforts, Volunteers provided PPE supplies, served as models of calm and hygienic behavior, and simply stayed with their host communities during this historic time. We know that they’ve made a huge positive impact, but we still need to quantify and demonstrate that impact and study the expectations and results in order to learn what worked, what didn’t, what can we do better next time, and other valuable lessons. We do so for our own improvement and to share these insights with host communities and our crisis response peers. We are excited to incorporate these lessons into our core training program to improve the CorpsAfrica model and be better prepared to respond to future crises.

It is a great honor to give young Africans the chance they deserve to lead Africa’s development and to be of service to their fellow citizens in challenging times. Together, with generous support from OCP Group, Mastercard Foundation, Open Road Alliance, Sanford Heisler Sharp, and all of our generous partners and donors, we are creating a model for national and Pan-African service and participatory, collaborative and accountable community development across Africa. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Liz Fanning
Founder and Executive Director
“Women were working individually but now they started working together and are more open to going outside and finding good practices to enhance their activities. They are more ambitious.”

Bandagne Fall, Senegal
CorpsAfrica Volunteer

“The work of a volunteer allowed my community to take their destinies into their own hands, especially at the level of young people who are today very committed to developing our community.”

Ndeye Penda Fall, Senegal
CorpsAfrica Volunteer

“Thank you CorpsAfrica for not leaving us during the Covid-19 crisis.”

Thoza Village, Rwanda
Community Member
“I have found great satisfaction from this job so far because I feel like I have represented CorpsAfrica in a good image as a volunteer, Both the local government authorities and the community members are very grateful for the activities I have done. In addition, the fact that CorpsAfrica has given me a fantastic chance of helping such a rural community and the way community members take me, it all makes me feel proud of myself and CorpsAfrica as well.”

Alexandre Rurangwa, Rwanda CorpsAfrica Volunteer

“CorpsAfrica was able to get the best out of us and gave us the courage to continue to fight for our community.”

Yamoussa, Senegal Community Member
Founded in 2011, CorpsAfrica recruits, trains and sends college-educated young Africans to live in remote villages in their own countries to facilitate small-scale, high-impact projects that are identified by local people, along the lines of the Peace Corps model. To date, CorpsAfrica has hosted hundreds of Volunteers in Morocco, Senegal, Malawi, and Rwanda, who have completed over 500 projects, including wells, schools, roads, irrigation systems, literacy programs, livestock farms, and many more, all identified by the local communities. The CorpsAfrica model is centered around five principal values that promote local ownership and the engagement of youth and local stakeholders:

- Locals Helping Locals
- Collaboration
- Listening and Capacity Building
- Monitoring and Impact Evaluation
- Accountability and Transparency
While outsiders have traditionally dominated Africa’s development sector, it is African-led development that will facilitate the economic growth, local leadership, and African philanthropy necessary to break cycles of poverty, youth unemployment, and aid dependency across the continent. CorpsAfrica Volunteers, trained in the methods of Human-Centered Design and Asset-Based Community Development, engage the participation of all local people to facilitate projects that improve the resilience of communities, strengthening them so people lead higher quality lives, and are better prepared to weather crises, recover from setbacks, and thrive.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, CorpsAfrica’s participatory process created strong bonds between the Volunteers and their communities and built trusting relationships that laid the foundation for crisis response efforts to be maximally effective. Having safe spaces for sharing information and providing basic supplies can be life-saving in remote, high-poverty areas where access is difficult.
CORPSAFRICA'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

With the arrival of COVID-19, all the Volunteers chose to stay at their sites, temporarily suspended their primary projects and pivoted to preparing the communities they served to face the pandemic. The situation required the Volunteers to be flexible, brave, and creative, and they were able to immediately provide the communities with access to clear, comprehensive, and up-to-date information about the disease.

In addition to their primary projects, Volunteers in each country worked on various COVID-19 prevention and crisis resilience-oriented projects. In Rwanda, Volunteers built over 2,000 kitchen gardens in addition to hundreds of latrines; in Senegal, projects initially focused on soap and bleach making; in Malawi, the Volunteers helped people make facemasks and installed handwashing stations in public areas; in Morocco, projects addressed the need for schoolchildren to have masks and soap in order to continue their education safely.

During the pandemic, CorpsAfrica Volunteers hosted over 700 community meetings to sensitize people on COVID-19, how it spreads and how to effectively integrate preventive measures into their daily lives. The outreach impacted at least 294,040 community members. Almost every Volunteer provided updated information and checked on community members via phone calls or messages, made and distributed facemasks and soap, installed handwashing stations, and served as a model of good hygienic behavior, such as proper mask wearing, thorough handwashing, and social distancing.

Volunteers reported that, as a result of these efforts, an estimated 100,000 people changed their behavior to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and every Volunteer reported that their community now understands the threat of the virus. Their success is demonstrated in the limited number of COVID-19 cases affecting people in the communities that CorpsAfrica serves -- those in Senegal, Rwanda, and Morocco have not had any cases of Covid-19 since March, while communities in Malawi suffered only 23 cases. And no Volunteers contracted the virus.*

* As reported by Volunteers
CorpsAfrica’s philosophy of openness and adaptability factored heavily in its COVID-19 response efforts. When the pandemic hit, the Volunteers were uniquely positioned to be a part of the emergency response efforts for some of the most disconnected, remote villages in Africa.

By March 2020, they had been living in these communities for several months and so had already built a strong foundation of trust and understanding, which are critical ingredients for crisis response efforts. A few months into their service, they had started working on their primary projects, which are identified by local communities and focused on building resilience and economic independence. Because the CorpsAfrica model was already centered around resilience and preparedness, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic that shifted the roles of the Volunteers, the essence of what they needed to accomplish remained the same.

Beginning in early March 2020, Volunteers realized that they needed to pivot from their projects and started to work fastidiously to identify the most urgent needs of their community and serve as liaisons to government agencies, Development Partners, and other agencies. While Volunteers were ideally situated to provide in-depth COVID-19 sensitization, messaging, and protective materials across all communities, they knew (from their training) that their relief efforts would depend on the unique needs of their communities. They worked to build vital channels of communication, dispel misinformation, and served as models of good, hygienic, calm behavior.
COVID-19 hit in early 2020 and by March, people started realizing that there would be severe interruptions to daily life. Volunteers in all countries hosted community meetings to talk to the local people, answer their questions, alert them to the dangers while allaying irrational fears due to widespread misinformation. At the onset, implementation of primary projects were temporarily suspended and dramatically affected by the pandemic as gatherings were limited, travel was restricted, and **attention was directed towards preventative measures and addressing immediate survival needs**. Despite these interruptions, the Volunteers completed their projects just a few months late with **only small variations**. Their successful completion exemplifies CorpsAfrica's model, as these projects truly addressed community needs.

It is natural for communities to strive to enhance the quality of life and well-being of their members. In recent years there has been a focus among developing communities to center their efforts around the theme of **resilience**, a new approach based on the principle of recovery and sustainability.

This “resilience approach” has therefore become one of the essential components of community development, not only because it helps communities take a leadership role in preparing for challenges, but because it makes them more powerful by using their assets, capacity building, and resources in order to recover from obstacles and move forward.
CorpsAfrica's model reflects the best practices of community development. With years of trials in the field building upon the success of the Human-Centered Design model, we emphasize implementation, measurement, and monitoring and evaluation. This is why, in order to prepare communities for unprecedented challenges such as COVID-19, CorpsAfrica developed a new curriculum for a “Resilience Training Program” to integrate the resilience model as a core principle in training Volunteers and staff on the ground. By adopting a resilience framework, we can take deliberate and measurable steps toward assessing a community's needs and challenges, then provide a plan to improve these conditions.

CorpsAfrica Volunteers and community members have been exemplary models of the importance and impact of resilience training throughout COVID-19. Able to stay in their communities and extend their service while other NGOs left, Volunteers helped implement projects in a wide variety of sectors, such as Agriculture and Nutrition (29 projects), Economic Development (23), Business Cooperatives (14), Women and Girls (11), Community Centers (9), Education and Youth (6), Food Security (6), Health (3), Potable Water (2), Environment (2), Infrastructure (1), and Irrigation (1). These projects, identified and implemented by the communities, gave the local people skills, knowledge and a foundation for sustainable development that not only eased the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but will also make them more resilient in the face of future crises.

The communities' resilience is demonstrated by the continued success of their projects despite the pandemic. Gardening and farming projects were particularly significant in light of the severe economic downturn facing rural African communities. Creating new gardens and revitalizing existing ones boosted locally sourced food production and were targeted at the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children.

Crops can be consumed by the family and/or sold, providing a source of income while also providing a healthy, diverse diet. Better nutrition leads to a stronger immune system, which is vital in fighting the COVID-19 virus. In the case of Volunteer Marie Ingabire’s vegetable garden project in Rwanda, over 100 people reaped these benefits.
In January 2020, we asked Volunteers to rank the resilience of their communities, on a scale of 1 to 7, and then again, as projects were winding down in December 2020. In nearly every case, Volunteers saw an increase in resilience levels, with an average overall increase from 4 to 5.3.

 Volunteers were asked to rate the resilience of their communities on a scale of 1 to 7:  
1 = Not resilient at all, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Extremely Resilient
They also renovated latrines and handwashing stations in several schools where facilities were inadequate or lacking. Additionally, the Volunteers worked with school leadership on training and support for teachers and students (understanding COVID-19 and response measures).

Through the microgrants, a Malawian Volunteer was able to provide tablets to secondary school students at her site in Zomba, so they could continue to learn during school closures. Volunteers also provided radios to primary school students in Dedza, enabling them to listen to educational programs that were broadcast on the national radio station, with support from UNICEF.

In Rwanda, the Volunteers’ ability to stay with their communities contributed to the bond between the communities and CorpsAfrica, allowing for the successful construction of 1,318 kitchen gardens and 235 latrines. Volunteers also provided 108 handwashing stations, sensitized close to 77,000 people in topics such as malnutrition and COVID-19 prevention, and helped repair a bridge and 69 houses for community members that were most in need.

In Senegal, the microgrants enabled Volunteers and community members to establish income-generating activities including soap and bleach-making, and youth and women-run farming and food production operations. The microgrants also helped replenish medicine stocks at Néma Bah village hospital, and paid for school supplies.

In total, the microgrants impacted 294,040 people by providing them with 23,705 facemasks, 13,310 bars of soap, 1,591 bottles of hand sanitizer, 5,204 bottles of bleach, 522 hand washing stations, 1,136 pairs of gloves, 278 pairs of goggles, 2,340 sets of reusable protective clothing, 2,399 kitchen gardens, 1,017 latrines, and six megaphones for sharing information about COVID-19. These microgrants were an essential boost to the efforts of the Volunteers and to the situations of the communities.
“After COVID-19 was confirmed in Malawi people began to panic and worry, especially people in my community. They were concerned about their well-being and those of their children and they felt hopeless. So, after Mastercard Foundation gave us the grant to implement a response project, we bought plenty of soap, handwashing stations and facemasks for everyone. This brought a relief to the people and they started to see a future where it's possible they will get through this pandemic. Hence this was powerful.”

Volunteer Eliza Chanika, Malawi

Extremely or Very Useful: 86.8%  
Volunteers at Site: 98.2%
Country office staff and Volunteers truly embodied CorpsAfrica’s principles of listening, empowerment, and flexibility as they moved with swiftness and agility to bring information and aid to high-need communities. **Volunteers made the brave decision to stay at their sites to roll out information campaigns, provide life-saving hygienic materials, and to connect their sites to government resources like Africa CDC**, which provided updated information and guidance. As a result, community members felt they had an accurate understanding of the threat of COVID-19 and its transmission. They were especially grateful to CorpsAfrica Volunteers for staying with them through the pandemic, when many aid groups were forced to evacuate.

“A powerful moment during the COVID-19 crisis was when I made the decision to stay and serve my community during the crisis when we were given the opportunity to leave and go back to our homes.”

**Volunteer Margrat Chavula, Malawi**
Modeling Good Behavior for Community Youth

In addition to providing hygienic materials and information, Volunteers served as models of calm and healthy behavior during the pandemic. This was especially true with respect to the youth in their host communities, for whom they served as role models of good COVID-19 behavior and an inspirational spirit of openness, leadership, responsibility, and respect for self and others. In Malawi, female Volunteers acted as mentors to many girls in the community. Students wanted to emulate their educational achievement and parents asked for advice when their daughters were misbehaving because they knew that their girls looked up to and listened to the female Volunteers.

Engaging Youth and Women’s Groups

Many of the Volunteers’ primary projects focused on catalyzing youth and women-run small business cooperatives, and providing assistance to these groups. These efforts came in the form of financial management training, organizational workshops, assistance with legal and other documents, and the building, repairing and upgrading of physical infrastructure for business operations. Volunteers and community members worked to both ease the labor involved in activities like cereal processing, and ensure that these fragile businesses remained profitable, equitable for all, and financially sound for the long term.

These efforts were designed to nurture budding enterprises, to empower youth to be the leaders of tomorrow and provide them with seed funding to achieve goals, and to empower women and girls to earn funds to sustain their families.
“With CorpsAfrica, local families are much more aware of their resources and new organizational dynamics are favored, both at the level of young people but also women.”

Volunteer Ousmane Ndiaye, Senegal

As the pandemic stretched on, the economic fallout cut deeper and deeper. Lockdowns and restrictions led to job loss, food insecurity, and decreased household incomes by as much as 75 percent.

## Average Household Income at Volunteer Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Early 2020</th>
<th>Late 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>100 USD</td>
<td>75 USD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>50 USD</td>
<td>25 USD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>25 USD</td>
<td>12.50 USD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>0 USD</td>
<td>0 USD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Average Household Income Table:
- **Total**: Morocco: 100 USD, Senegal: 50 USD, Malawi: 25 USD, Rwanda: 0 USD
- **Morocco**: 100 USD, Senegal: 50 USD, Malawi: 25 USD, Rwanda: 0 USD
- **Senegal**: 50 USD, Malawi: 25 USD, Rwanda: 0 USD
- **Malawi**: 25 USD, Rwanda: 0 USD
- **Rwanda**: 0 USD
Income-generating projects such as mask-making, cloth-dyeing, agribusiness, metal-smithing and soap-making helped keep communities afloat by bringing in enough money to meet basic needs. Furthermore, community members cited savings plans and financial management training for small businesses as some of the most helpful tools during the crisis and for continued economic stability.

“\text{It\textquotesingle}s the biggest impact because we learnt to lift up all without leaving anyone behind. We work as a team and we observe our problems and we analyze what we can do about them, together.\textquoteright\n
\textit{Nyakayenzi, Community Member}
“People in our community realize that the fight against COVID-19 can be won only when people work together to compliment other people's efforts. While in other neighboring communities it was an individual fight where others were complying while others did not.”

Volunteer Margret Chavula, Malawi

Changing Mindset: From Dependency to Self-Determination

A major goal of CorpsAfrica's work is to help catalyze communities’ transformation from a state of dependency to one of self-reliance. In fact, this idea reverberates through every aspect of the work that CorpsAfrica and its beneficiaries carry out.

Throughout their service, Volunteers are shown their own power to help facilitate and guide high-impact projects that transform the health, economic and educational status of their host communities in deeply meaningful ways. By working collaboratively to pool funds, identify assets and design and carry out projects with Volunteers, community members' own power to improve conditions for themselves and their peers is revealed to them. As repeated in testimonials across sites, working with CorpsAfrica serves as an inflection point that motivates communities to identify and persevere with projects that make the community more resilient and self-sustaining.
In the course of their COVID-19 education efforts, Volunteers reported some resistance to measures such as physical distancing and mask-wearing, and disbelief of information about COVID-19. Although many eventually came around to good practices, the proliferation of false information and rumors about COVID-19, combined with the logistical difficulty of physical distancing (especially when weighed against the critical need to earn money) and other practices, meant that the process of changing behavior was slower than it could have been at some Volunteer sites, or that attitudes relaxed after an initial period of good behavior. Several Volunteers noted that engaging trusted community leaders, such as Village Chiefs and Imams, to help reinforce COVID-19 messages and dispel myths about the disease helped to ensure that community members adhered to the guidelines. In addition, one Volunteer recommended that area health authorities travel to villages to deliver proper messaging themselves as an added reinforcement because they are such a trusted source of information.

Leveraging The Power of Social Behavioral Dynamics

When asked what could have been done to better encourage COVID-19 safety practices, some Volunteers gave answers relating to group behavioral dynamics and pressures to
to observe precautions. They suggested recruiting local volunteers to be the ones doing the encouraging. Family members are most effective at persuading people not to travel, helping to monitor handwashing stations, and reminding each other to stand two meters apart and to wear their masks. One Volunteer noted that “imposition” and “obligation” seemed to lead to a categorical refusal, while peer encouragement and consensus-gaining yielded better results. While some sites did very well in terms of peer-to-peer encouragement, these lessons and successes can and should be transferred across all communities going forward.

Encouraging Alternatives to Early Marriage and Pregnancy

As cited by Volunteers, one result of the pandemic that was particularly prevalent in Rwandan and Malawian villages, was school-age girls entering into marriage and becoming pregnant during the extensive school closures. While many projects focused on the most dire need of feeding hungry people, a larger safety net of educational and economic activities as alternatives to early marriage for girls might prevent such a phenomenon in future crises. When girls are provided with options that empower them through increased economic stability and daily activities oriented toward educational mobility, they and their families feel they have options outside of starting a family at an early age. Early marriage effectively ends their education and increases economic hardship in the long-term.
Investigating Strategies to Encourage Mask-Wearing Behavior

A significant part of the Volunteers' COVID-19 crisis response effort was centered around facilitating access to facemasks and encouraging their use. Almost half of the Volunteers reported that community members were more likely to wear masks if they were provided for free, while other Volunteers found that the action of paying for a mask increased its use. Our surveys showed that most masks were free of charge, as they would have cost an average of $0.51, while the average person's ability to pay was only $0.16. Therefore, although paying for a mask might encourage more sense of responsibility, the barrier to purchase was often too high. In many cases, small businesses were able to earn an income by making and selling low cost masks. This was most popular in Rwanda, where over 3,900 masks were sold at Volunteer sites. The issues of mask-wearing, mask-vending, free mask distribution, and possible relationships between them bear further investigation and monitoring. As communities continue to battle COVID-19, there will be opportunities to identify strategies to promote mask-wearing, and to share success stories across all communities.

These insights from Volunteers were extremely helpful and can be put to good use in the future as a “first line of defense” for strategizing crisis response across all countries.
In the early spring of 2020, Morocco had one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases in Africa. Accordingly, the government put in place some of the most restrictive lockdown measures on the continent. For several months, CorpsAfrica Volunteers were locked out of their sites.

During this time, they checked on community members and raised awareness about the virus through remote information campaigns including a video and infographics. They also leveraged the time at home to help their host communities apply for critical grant funding to safeguard against the disease.
Once back at their sites, Volunteers immediately began rolling out their COVID-19 microgrant projects, which included briefing school leadership on vital information, and distributing masks, soap, disinfectant gel, and thermometers to 22 primary schools, thus allowing them to safely reopen.

Volunteers also distributed protective gear to community members and disinfected schools and mosques. They worked with communities to address hygiene infrastructure issues by renovating school latrines, drinking fountains and handwashing facilities; procuring sewing machines to make facemasks; and testing local water for drinkability.

Many primary projects focused on making vital infrastructure upgrades as identified by local school leadership, such as building a wall in a primary school, repairing latrines, constructing a fence, and making needed classroom repairs.

In addition to the physical upgrades, Volunteer Asmaa Berkia hosted workshops dedicated to time management and communication skills and taught English classes to girls in her community, while Volunteer Redwane played educational games with students to support their learning in a creative way.

One of CorpsAfrica’s most successful interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic was creating a clear channel of communication between local schools and the government and aid agencies that could provide funds and equipment to continue learning in a safe, well-outfitted environment.
The main income-generating activities of communities in the High Atlas Mountains consist of agriculture, animal husbandry and the harvesting and selling of medicinal herbs. Many Volunteer projects aimed to upgrade or expand existing assets in these sectors, taking into consideration the area’s recurrent droughts and the effect that this and other climatic features have on local economies. To this end, several projects focused on irrigation and potable water, such as creating water reservoirs and irrigation tanks, building canals, and piping potable water directly into households.

In the Agoundis Valley, a large scale agricultural project was led by Volunteers Asmaa, Youssef and Mohammed in collaboration with the Toubkal National Park Authority, the Ait Youb Local Association, and the local Coopérative Agoundis de Développement de l’Environnement. The project involved planting and raising 32,000 thyme saplings and featured training sessions led by a medicinal plant expert on the raising, handling and benefits of medicinal thyme. Participants also learned how to dry and prepare the plants for sale. The success of the thyme project has the power to impact Agoundis on multiple levels —community income, maximizing agricultural potential, and environmental health and biodiversity. The plan is to replicate it at other sites in the region.

Volunteer Youssef Hamdaoui also worked to arrange for the donation of 2,600 fruit trees from the High Atlas Foundation to four villages.

“Now we can irrigate our fields in the summer thanks to CorpsAfrica.”

Tahanaout Community Member
As a result of the restrictions, many projects were delayed several months and a landholder donor rescinded his promise of land for Volunteer Redwane Hamma’s irrigation project. Redwane subsequently changed his project to focus on needed infrastructure upgrades at a local primary school. Other issues caused by the pandemic included loss of income (which meant the community contributions to projects came much more slowly), and some confusion over project plans due to a shifting timetable. In many cases, the solution rested on stretching project timelines and, to this end, the Volunteers’ time at their sites was extended by several months so that they could successfully complete the projects.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The largest obstacle that CorpsAfrica/Maroc Volunteers faced was the inability to return to their sites for several months due to COVID-19 restrictions. Volunteers put the time to good use by helping families complete applications for needed crisis aid. The microgrants made a huge impact in High Atlas communities, especially with the reopening of schools.

“We learnt CorpsAfrica through a human and we learnt humanity through CorpsAfrica.”

Al-Makhzen Community Member
In March of 2020, Volunteers were en route to Dakar for In-Service Training when COVID-19 travel restrictions were suddenly imposed. This meant that, with one exception, they were temporarily unable to return to their sites. CorpsAfrica/Senegal staff and Volunteers quickly pivoted to remote communication with their sites to monitor the situation and disseminate information through novel means, such as creating videos and other materials in local languages.

Simultaneously, through the help of a CorpsAfrica alumnus, four Volunteers participated in a UN Women-led online training course in the production of antiseptic soap and hydro alcoholic solution, which they then taught to the rest of the group. Through a collaboration
Projects included upgrades to existing infrastructure, such as cereal mills; rehabilitating defunct community assets, like women’s vegetable gardens; setting up a palm oil processing center (the main source of income for the community); creating a women’s economic house, business cooperatives, processing and training centers; setting up a community bakery; and creating agribusiness and fishery operations. All of these projects were designed to ensure economic resilience in times of crisis, which had dealt a crushing blow. Working collectively and increasing productivity allows communities to save funds for leaner times. Locally grown food and medicine serve as critical resources when outside markets are inaccessible.

Upon returning to their sites when the initial lockdown was lifted, Volunteers engaged in intensive COVID-19 sensitization campaigns, distributed hygienic products, and trained community members in soap and bleach production.

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND FOSTERING ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

Volunteers helped catalyze a series of projects identified by community members and designed to enrich the economic situation of women and the broader communities. The project plans hinged on leveraging assets and the power of collaboration to ease labor and economize production.

with the Ministry of Youth’s National Civic Service, CorpsAfrica/Senegal staff and current and former Volunteers worked with local youth to make and distribute 5,000 liters of bleach, 5,000 bars of soap, and 300 handwashing stations to high-poverty communities around Dakar. Volunteers also trained the youth to continue production on their own.
CULTIVATING COMMUNITY HEALTH, WITH AN ENVIRONMENTAL EDGE

Many Volunteer projects aimed to promote community health by addressing issues related to waste management and establishing local sources of food and medicine. The creation of food-producing gardens and microforests, such as the Yamoussa Agroforestry Domain (DAYAM) has ensured villagers have steady access to fruit, vegetables and medicinal plants. Additionally, several projects focused on establishing innovative, environmentally-friendly operations like bio-charcoal production and community composting of food scraps to create fertilizer.

One Volunteer built family latrines in their village with the goal of eradicating infectious disease by 2022, while another Volunteer established a waste collection and recycling program to create green jobs and ensure sanitary conditions.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

COVID-19 impacted Volunteer projects and community life in a variety of ways, from practical matters like social distancing to the economic hardships that limited communities’ ability to fund projects and caused increasing food insecurity.

From the beginning of the pandemic, there were many challenges around how to disseminate information, convince communities of the urgency of the situation, and instill good COVID-19 prevention practices. Volunteers reported that some methods, like
‘dictating rules’ about social distancing and hygiene, were not as successful, especially in light of low case numbers and widespread misinformation. Volunteers also came to see what did work—emphasizing social and economic impacts of the disease, encouraging people to remind each other about COVID-19 safety practices, repeated messaging from government health authorities, and perhaps most importantly, enlisting the help of community leaders to reinforce COVID-19 sensitivity.

Facing timeline delays and funding gaps, Volunteers worked with community members to review available assets and adjust expectations, and ultimately opted to extend their service in order to complete their projects in 2021. The crisis also caused communities to take actions like setting up a seed bank, and to focus even more on economic resilience to lay a good foundation in the event of a future crisis.

Volunteers were asked to rate the resilience of their communities.

1 = Not Resilient at all, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Extremely Resilient
While education support had been identified as a high priority at many Volunteer sites, the COVID-19 pandemic (with its wave of school closures) presented a new set of challenges. The Ministry of Education, with support from UNICEF, began excellent educational programming broadcast via radio and internet, but many young learners did not have access to smartphones or radios. Quick action was needed to get the proper tools into their hands.

Through the Mastercard Foundation microgrant, Volunteer Margaret Magombo was able to provide tablets to secondary school children at her site of Nsondole, and Volunteer Mieke
Mmeya worked with the Village District Committee to distribute radios and facemasks to primary school students in Mpalale. Meanwhile, Volunteers across sites helped set up makeshift classrooms, arranged book-borrowing programs with local libraries, prepared students for their national exams, and taught both school curriculum and life skills. The Nursery School project led by Volunteer Eliza Chanika is also in-progress and will soon be completed.

FIGHTING COVID-19 AND ENSURING LONG-TERM HEALTH

COVID-19 cases rose later in Malawi than in many other African countries, giving Volunteers more time to help prepare their communities. They served as channels of communication, relaying information from local health clinics to their sites through meetings with village leaders, schools, and women’s and youth groups. They also worked with communities to disinfect clinics, install handwashing stations, and distribute soap, sanitizers and facemasks. Volunteers helped change the perception of COVID-19 by dispelling rumors and misinformation, and served as models of calm and safe COVID-19 behavior throughout the crisis.

Volunteers stayed at their sites for the intended duration working on their primary projects, many of which went hand-in-hand with the COVID-19 microgrant projects to support community health. One much-anticipated project, led by Volunteer Dorothy Mapira, was the drilling of a borehole for potable water in the community of Chiondwe. The same community implemented a health clinic renovation project to provide basic health services such as childhood immunizations, prenatal counselling, and first aid. Prior to this, community members had been traveling 8km to seek medical attention and medication for themselves and their children.

“Thank you CorpsAfrica for not leaving us during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the pandemic, we still need to talk about how we can develop our community.”

Village Headman Mnyutu, Mzimba, Malawi
As communities overwhelmingly cited economic resilience as an important goal, Volunteers helped local people identify income-generating assets, desired areas of skill-building, and crucial organizational tools. This resulted in the establishment of multiple small business operations including soap and candle-making, tailoring, agribusiness and youth-led beekeeping, carpentry and utensil-making. The diverse agribusiness projects included extensive training in farming methods as well as larger-scale construction projects such as pond-digging, and building brick chicken coops.

Other projects, such as mask-making and soap production, generated revenue and fostered good hygiene to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In addition to training, project implementation and oversight, many Volunteers assisted with the management of resources by helping to create and monitor community and small business savings plans.

“At first we thought CorpsAfrica will help us with all our problems and provide funding for our community project ideas, but later we learnt that we have everything and we only need technical expertise and a little push to develop.”

Thoza Community Member
A common challenge across sites was securing community contributions in a time of economic hardship. Many community members experienced loss of income, food shortages, and other financial stressors while at the same time project materials were scarce and expensive due to COVID-19.

Furthermore, due to pandemic restrictions, group meetings were difficult to arrange, resulting in project delays. This meant adjusting expectations around timelines and material procurement, and finding safe ways to work together. However, by and large, the project deliverables and plans remained almost unchanged. Volunteers opted to extend their stays with their communities to see the projects through to the end.

“CorpsAfrica has brought more impact to our community in a shorter time than any other organization that has worked in our community.”

Mpalale Community Member
The projects have diversified sources of food and income, allowing community members to pay hospital bills, increase harvests with the additional fertilizer, and enable people to trade for higher value animals.

Vegetable garden beneficiaries hailed them as a remedy for malnutrition, which has been especially plaguing the community’s children. Some have established lucrative produce vending operations, and the revenue has enabled them to pay for things like school fees and health insurance.

Successes, Challenges and Lessons: RWANDA

The majority of Volunteer projects in Rwanda focused on farming and animal husbandry. Hundreds of animals were distributed across communities as part of piggery, goat, sheep, and chicken farming projects, and their impact has magnified manyfold.

GROWING LOCAL AGribUSINESS
“One of the beneficiaries of the Mastercard Foundation microgrants started growing fruits, earning $36 every week from his harvests. He said he never knew it was possible, not until our Volunteers instilled in him the spirit of self-reliance and showed him his assets and capacity.”

Eustochie Sezibera, Director of CorpsAfrica/Rwanda

BUILDING AND REBUILDING TOGETHER

A significant portion of primary projects were focused on addressing issues of ‘human security,’ such as a lack of adequate housing and inadequate or deteriorating physical infrastructure.

Volunteers built pit latrines for every project beneficiary, which have improved their lives not only by preventing infectious disease, but by decreasing disputes over shared facilities. Meanwhile, the restoration of a 4km water pipeline built by Volunteers has brought clean water to the village of Rugeshi.

Volunteers stepped up to build homes and repair those damaged by landslides during seasonal rains, while also finding temporary shelter for displaced people. Training in skills like brick-making and sewing have provided ways to continuously bring in income, while community savings plans have encouraged economic stability during uncertain times.
Volunteers put up signs at road intersections to remind people to wear masks, educated community members about the virus and its prevention, and drew circles for social distancing outside shops. Using national mask-making guidelines, some community members made fabric masks and sold them for a small fee.

Even as many other NGOs operating in the area left, the CorpsAfrica Volunteers courageously stayed at their sites to continue COVID-19 safety efforts.

“They told us that we are different from many NGOs due to the fact that we show, we teach, we empower, instead of give. We build from resources that are in the community such as ideas of community members, assets and the willingness of the people.”

Volunteer Niyomugenga Israel

As COVID-19 cases began to rise, the CorpsAfrica/Rwanda office quickly moved to distribute 108 Kandagira Ukarabe (“step and clean”) and "tippy-tap" handwashing stations, 1,585 bars of soap, and close to 8,000 masks while Volunteers worked with local leadership to provide vital information and support to communities—at first through daily phone calls until in-person meetings were allowed.

“CorpsAfrica showed us love during these bad moments of COVID-19, continued being with us, empowered our vulnerable families, and are a committed partner. They deliver their promises as seen in the COVID-19 materials.”

Village Leader UWIMANA Francine
KITCHEN GARDENS ENSURE FOOD SECURITY DURING A CRISIS

One of the most impactful types of projects has been the kitchen gardens, which are small gardens about ten feet in diameter filled with a variety of vegetables, enough to sustain a large family with delicious and nutritious food. Kitchen gardens are made from locally available materials and cost around $20 each. They have proven to be a very effective remedy for malnutrition, which has particularly afflicted children at Volunteer sites across Rwanda. Kitchen gardens established before the advent of COVID-19 helped cushion beneficiaries during market closures—and at times served as a families’ only sources of food. They were especially important when schools closed, which brought an end to the school-feeding programs that nourished young students. CorpsAfrica Volunteers have helped build 2,345 kitchen gardens in Rwandan communities. In light of their success, the intention is to expand the creation of these easy to replicate assets in all CorpsAfrica country programs.

“[Bugesera District community member] Muhashyi Vincent said that before working with CorpsAfrica, one of his children was suffering from malnutrition and now is healthy because of eating veggies we planted in the kitchen gardens.”

Volunteer Muneza Leon Yves

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The pandemic has had dramatic effects on employment, food access, and household income. At one Volunteer site, household
income dropped from an average of $18/month to just $3/month. Market prices for food rose while community members' small personal savings and incomes dwindled. This precarious situation showed that food security is perhaps the most critical issue for many rural Rwandan communities. Volunteers cited economic instability as the second major issue that the pandemic exacerbated. This further underscores the need for economically-oriented projects such as community savings plans, financial management training, and supporting small business operations that can thrive within the more “enclosed” ecosystem of a community or set of villages, when for safety reasons it’s not possible to travel outside the area.

Rwanda Kitchen Garden Production

Number of Kitchen Gardens

0 500 1,000 1,500 2,000 2,500

Cohort 1  Cohort 2
Time and again, CorpsAfrica staff and Volunteers have demonstrated the importance of adapting as new and urgent needs arise, and building resilience into the design of community projects. Perhaps no crisis has confirmed the importance of this approach more than the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, Volunteers had to shift their energy to preventing and mitigating harm from the imminent threat of the pandemic. On the other, primary projects geared toward sustained community well-being (health and sanitation, housing and infrastructure, food security, economic opportunity, and education) proved to be more vital than ever.

Projects developed before the pandemic by current and former Volunteers provided a safety net to an extent that could not have been fully comprehended. In this sense, the pandemic was a testing ground for what works—which kinds of efforts pay dividends in crisis moments and for the long term—and which don’t.
We were heartened to see that CorpsAfrica’s central focus on community resilience, adaptiveness/preparedness, and fostering relationships with communities defined by trust, mutual respect and collaboration, were the essential ingredients for realizing successful small-scale, high-impact projects.

Of course, there were also plenty of lessons to be learned, and every new cohort of Volunteers is essentially a workshop for testing approaches and gaining clarity on how best to work with communities.

During this historic year, we learned the value of working with trusted local authorities to reinforce life-saving information and encourage public health, communication styles that did and did not work, and, significantly, just how crucial educational and economic components of a community can be. They are not simply ‘nice to have’ elements that can be worked on in good times, but crucial stabilizing foundations that can lift up entire communities in difficult moments, and serve as catalysts for youth and women’s empowerment in particular. We also learned about the difficulty for community members of balancing the need to work with safety considerations in a public health crisis. This is an issue that we must continue to thoughtfully consider, figure out how to address, and incorporate into future efforts.

While there is much more to do and to learn, the COVID-19 pandemic further revealed the power of CorpsAfrica’s approach and toolset. Equipped with the methodological tools of Human-Centered Design and Asset-Based Community Development to help achieve project goals, Volunteers help community members to identify their needs, and fill in the ‘content’ of the projects to be carried out while taking ownership of their communities’ own development. Successful projects cannot be carried out without the supporting ingredients of trust, listening, openness, adaptability, and a true collaborative spirit. Through this combination of time-tested elements, CorpsAfrica gives young Africans the opportunity to help African communities in need build their scaffolds from dependency to empowerment and self-reliance.
“CorpsAfrica has left a mark that will always remind us of the importance of solidarity, change and love.”

Asmaa Berkia, Morocco

“I would tell [my grandchildren] that during the pandemic I put forward my patriotism and my sense of duty and empathy for my community.”

Amadou Fall, Senegal

“The pandemic allowed me to give the best of myself for my country with a spirit of creativity.”

Marie Celestine Sagna, Senegal
“If I am blessed enough to have grandchildren, I will tell them how it feels good to be useful in a situation where people need your help.”

**Speciose Kubwimana, Rwanda**

“My experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as a CorpsAfrica Volunteer is unforgettable because I served a rural community in the most difficult time the world has ever experienced, so everything I did I did not for myself but for the whole community.”

**Alexandre Rurangwa, Rwanda**

“Sometimes I did not realize how important it is to help someone in need, but when I see my community members happy and thanking CorpsAfrica I realize what it is like. This makes me happy too and I feel proud of working as a CorpsAfrica Volunteer. It makes me want to do even more. Thanks a lot!”

**Alexandre Rurangwa, Rwanda**

“Thank you for giving me this community experience and opportunity to serve my fellow Rwandans.”

**Faustin Kayiranga, Rwanda**

“My work as a volunteer affected the community in a positive way especially the fact that I stayed with them during this pandemic increased their trust in CorpsAfrica. They consider us as family and some used to tell me that my presence there makes them feel secure. In case of any problem they call me and I do everything in my capacity to reassure them.”

**Speciose Kubwimana, Rwanda**

“I think that my commitment and a good serving heart have put a smile on my community member’s faces.”

**Leon Yves Muneza, Rwanda**
“CorpsAfrica has empowered us by training us on Asset-Based Community Development and also it facilitated us to initiate collaboration and cooperation among ourselves as a real journey of self and community development. So now we have bright future goals.”

Kayonza District Community Member

“Before we were not organized but since the coming of the Volunteer we have clear objectives and we are more structured.”

Aminata Alassane Diallo, Cas-Cas Community Member
“Before CorpsAfrica, I thought that all we need as villagers are just donations from rich people from the city, but working with CorpsAfrica has taught me that we already have so much in our community that we can do to make our lives better than just waiting for people's donations.”

Mkwachi Village, Malawi Community member

“The volunteer’s work is a resource we cherish in our community. He is working with youth helping them on skills development. These youth were useless to most community members but now they can make good furniture and everyone has hope in them.”

Thoza Village, Malawi Community Member

“CorpsAfrica has brought a nursery school to the village. This will help children have a proper early childhood foundation.”

Lambulira, Malawi Community Member

“CorpsAfrica has brought more impact to our community in a shorter time than any other organization that has worked in our community.”

Mpalale village, Malawi Community member

"The work that CorpsAfrica is doing with the youth here will go down as the best youth centered project here in Kaluluma youth network."

Kakwale Village Member, Malawi Community member

“CorpsAfrica is different. It taught me to always look at what I can do with available resources. I am thankful for them.”

Sinahamagaye Venuste
Francois, who lives with a disability, also thanked CorpsAfrica: “Now I am happy and we are really grateful to the authorities for sending this girl to come and help us in the fight against malnutrition for us where we pick vegetables we should not buy on the market.”

**Gitwe Village, Rwanda Community Member**

"For me, CorpsAfrica is a parent, it is a guardian and it is a blessing. It has helped me to know my value, my capacity, my responsibility, and the role I have to make life better.”

**Bicamumanza Enok, Rwanda Community Member**

“We wish the CorpsAfrica Volunteer would stay with us and never leave us because he has already become part of our community.”

**Rutsiro District, Rwanda Community Member**

"No one has lived with us as you do, CorpsAfrica is for people."

**Nyabimuri Village, Rwanda Community Member**

“We thank CorpsAfrica's volunteers for not leaving us during this time of pandemic, God bless them.”

**Rutsiro District, Rwanda Community Member**
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