

COVID-19 risks turning back the clock on years of essential development work

Over the years, governments in the Global North have, with varying degrees of success, provided commendable levels of support to help tackle challenges faced in low- and middle-income countries. More recently, efforts to improve the position of women and girls, such as championing sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), including the fight against gender-based violence, has been high on the agenda. This has been, and remains, an essential component of development cooperation, the attainment of universal human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)). Yet now, as we face life and death in the time of [COVID-19](#), and watch the devastating impact of coronavirus on the health of populations, the toll on health systems and the economic impact it is already having—those efforts are left in the balance.

Our experiences working with the [Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) as part of the [Health Systems Advocacy Partnership \(HSAP\)](#) has given us a close-up view of the positive impact that can be made through progressive and focused development cooperation. None of which would be possible without essential funding for civil society groups working in some of the most deprived, fragile and vulnerable communities in the world. Programmes like this are also improving the security and prosperity of donor countries. That's not even to mention the moral obligation placed on us by our shared values of social justice and human rights.

COVID-19 doesn't change the fact that, without this funding, the clock will be perilously turned back on the efforts and advances made in recent years. There is a real danger that the economic impact this disease is already having on donor country GDP will emerge as cuts in development budgets, leaving the poorest and most marginalised struggling to find a voice for many years to come.

In no sense is this truer than when it comes to raising the bar for improving health and wellbeing of women and girls. Through development cooperation, governments can further education, empowerment and ownership of sexual and reproductive health for countless people in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. This also contributes to the achievement of SDGs. Without funding for essential programmes, the SDGs will remain nothing but a dream. The commitments that government have made to achieve these goals must not be forgotten as a result of COVID-19 or else we risk exchanging one crisis for another, potentially one with an even more devastating long-term impact for countless people.

By partnering with expert civil society, governments can help ensure a targeted and effective approach to development cooperation, one that meets the needs of the most vulnerable and empowers people to take control of their own future. By ensuring it continues even as the fallout of COVID-19 remains, we will still be able to live up to the promise of supporting healthy populations that thrive both socially and economically. That, in the end, is in all our interests.