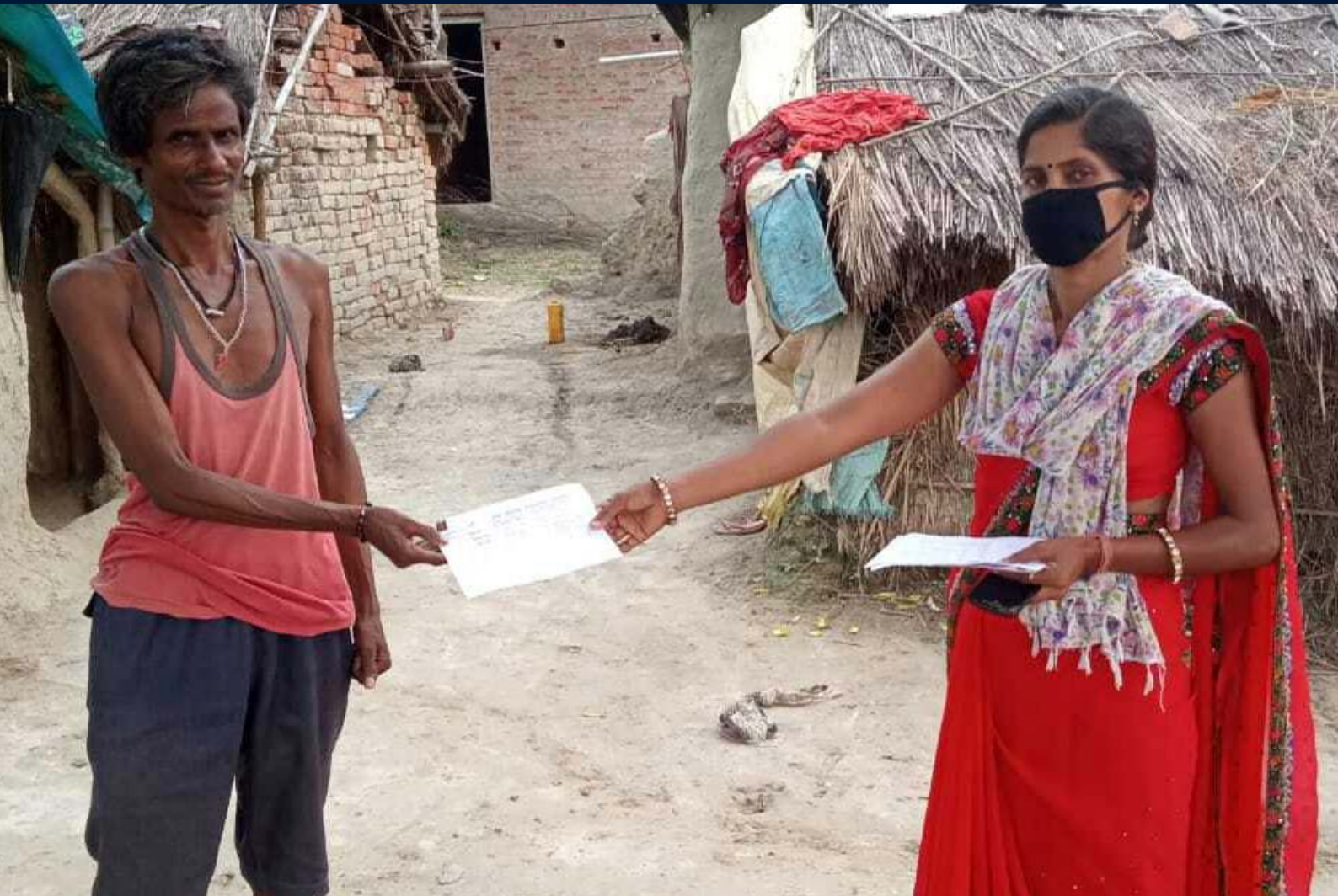


Reflecting on the year that was:

Lessons from the covid frontlines



The Freedom Fund is a leader in the global movement to end modern slavery. We identify and invest in the most effective frontline efforts to eradicate modern slavery in the countries and sectors where it is most prevalent. Partnering with visionary investors, governments, anti-slavery organisations and those at risk of exploitation, we tackle the systems that allow slavery to persist and thrive. Working together, we protect vulnerable populations, liberate and reintegrate those enslaved and prosecute those responsible.

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A powerful frontline response

Following a year of unprecedented challenges, we all share a sense of exhaustion and apprehension as we continue to face the varied and devastating effects of the covid crisis – both on our own lives and on people and economies the world over. The most vulnerable populations have been suffering the worst of the devastation caused by the dual calamities of a global pandemic and global recession, many of them losing their livelihoods overnight, seeing their rights curtailed and their futures taken away. Through our local partners' deep engagement with some of the most vulnerable communities on the planet, we witnessed the tragedy unfold across all our program areas.

However, amid all the negative fallout, we have also learned a huge amount in these past months: about ourselves, the people we work with and the people we serve; about the fragility of socio-economic systems and the interconnectedness of the issues we face; and about the transformative power of local, community-based solutions to enable people to survive and adjust to global crises and new realities. The term 'think

global, act local' has never been more appropriate. Human ingenuity, solidarity and resolve have saved, and will continue to save, millions of lives in all corners of the globe, with frontline and community efforts often outpacing and outperforming official responses. And these local solutions can serve as vital blueprints for action that can be scaled and replicated elsewhere. We are immensely proud to have been able – with the help of our donors – to support and enable such lifesaving frontline efforts by our partners in India, Nepal, Thailand, Myanmar, Ethiopia and Brazil through an Emergency Response Fund (ERF), which we set up in April 2020 to address the spiralling crisis. In this paper we want to celebrate some of the amazing work done by our frontline partners, reflect on what we have learned, and identify ways in which we can use this cataclysmic moment and the experiences of 2020 to drive positive systemic change in a post-covid world.

Image: Covid relief distribution in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, 2020. © Freedom Fund



Our emergency response at a glance

Lives directly impacted: **250,752**

Communities supported: **196**

Frontline partners supported: **95**

Emergency relief fund contributions	
Legatum Foundation	\$931,353
UK Department for International Development	\$312,500
Cassiopeia Foundation	\$250,000
UBS Optimus Foundation	\$185,271
Walk Free	\$160,000
Laudes Foundation	\$108,853
Humanity United	\$50,000
Other donations	\$50,000
TOTAL SECURED	\$2,047,977

Funds disbursed	
Emergency supplies & services	\$1,115,192
Partner staff time for advocacy & coordination	\$317,278
Microgrants to savings & loan groups	\$596,906
TOTAL	\$2,029,376

Lives directly impacted, by gender & age	
Women	88,864
Men	66,357
Girls	49,121
Boys	46,383
TOTAL	250,752

As the pandemic began to reach our beneficiary populations, plunging many of them into existential struggles almost overnight, the Freedom Fund moved quickly to set up an Emergency Response Fund (ERF) to help meet immediate assistance needs. With the generous and unbureaucratic support of our donors, we were able to raise over \$2m, which was swiftly disbursed in the form of small, flexible grants to 95 of our frontline civil society partners and community groups serving 196 communities across Thailand, Myanmar, India, Nepal, Ethiopia and Brazil. In the vital first months of the crisis, these grants were used to provide lifesaving relief supplies such as food, soap, and female hygiene kits, as well as sanitiser and personal protective equipment. Where appropriate, they provided small cash payments and micro-grants. And perhaps most importantly in terms of its wider and most enduring impact, they engaged with local and national authorities on behalf of marginalised communities.

At a time when governments were still scrambling to field a response, and often overlooked (or lacked the resources and infrastructure to reach) the most marginalised groups, 95 of our local grassroots partners mobilised rapidly and worked tirelessly - at no small risk to themselves - to supply essential emergency support to over 250,000 highly vulnerable individuals, the majority women and children. Combined with their parallel awareness raising and government engagement efforts, our partners impacted the lives of many thousands more.

In distributing the direct assistance, partners employed different approaches depending on their capacity and the needs of their target communities. While in some places, goods were delivered to homes, others had beneficiaries come and pick up emergency parcels from central distribution centres. In locations where partner staff were unable to be physically present due to covid restrictions, they liaised closely with community groups to manage community self-distribution mechanisms. And naturally, lessons were learned and adjustments made along the way. For instance, partners quickly realised that perishable goods were too complicated to store and distribute and switched to non-perishable items only.

A top priority was the open and transparent prioritisation of the most vulnerable, and the

empowerment and engagement of the beneficiary population in the decision-making and distribution of goods. Thanks to partners' longstanding engagement with the target communities, and our years of prior investment in the building of community groups and self-help structures, we were able to tap into and activate these structures. All Freedom Fund programs reporting remarkable levels of collaboration, local enthusiasm and ingenuity. Meanwhile, complaints procedures were set up and communicated from the outset, to allow for fair and transparent treatment of any issues that did arise.

Emergency food and cash were only part of the story. They were intended to be a temporary measure until vulnerable people could access longer-term government assistance. A key element of our and our partners' efforts was therefore the close engagement with relevant authorities across our program areas, highlighting where aid was most urgently needed and promoting practical solutions. They collected vital beneficiary data and shared it with government agencies to ensure assistance reached the most needy and worked with disenfranchised groups and individuals, including migrants and those without formal documentation, to obtain necessary registrations and documents to qualify for public assistance.

This type of outreach and government engagement work received some 15% of total ERF funding, and also comprised efforts to generate public awareness and media stories to increase pressure on authorities to act. To support this effort, we solicited the help of a specialist strategic communications agency, to work with partners and produce effective and coherent public messaging across all program locations.

Over the lockdown period, several of our program countries observed a marked increase in child marriage rates, a common indicator of increased levels of desperation and deprivation in vulnerable communities, further compounded by children being unable to attend school. In India, normally known for its lavish and enormously expensive weddings, lockdown restrictions furthermore provided an opportunity and incentive to marry off daughters in modest ceremonies outside of public view and at greatly reduced costs to the parents. To tackle the problem head on, our partners in Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu, launched a campaign against child

marriage. They partnered with local district officials to produce and promote a five-minute [music video](#) called “Why Shatter a Dream?” This song was distributed widely to community groups via WhatsApp and shared with other NGOs working on child rights issues in Tamil Nadu. Our partner Peace Trust also distributed informational leaflets and stickers with a helpline number to report a child marriage.



Throughout the ERF period, partners systematically collected and analysed information in their target communities. The data they gathered served not only to underpin their engagement with the authorities in real time, but will also serve as a basis for our policy and outreach work going forward. In Ethiopia, for instance, the pandemic highlighted the lack of support services

and processes in place to support Ethiopian migrant workers employed abroad. Having documented those migrants’ experience, their lack of access to adequate emergency shelter in these countries, and the inefficient government procedures to process paperwork and assist stranded Ethiopian migrant workers, partners can use the gathered evidence to identify specific issues that need to be targeted within the migration management system. The Freedom Fund will continue to help partners collect and use this information to push for improved migration management.

Finally, in addition to direct emergency assistance, outreach and government engagement, a third category of ERF grants enabled partners to provide micro-grants to vulnerable individuals, mostly through small savings and loans groups already up and running in our program communities. The majority of micro-grant recipients used the money not just to meet immediate needs but to start or reinforce small businesses, thereby acting as a much-needed stimulus to village economies. In northern India, such micro-grants were also made available to child labourers who had returned from Jaipur. Care was taken to ensure that vulnerable families received direct assistance and/or micro-grants, with families reporting that the support was timely as they could not access either government support or loans.

Image: Covid relief distribution site in Nepal’s Dhanusha District. © Freedom Fund



Mobilising authorities to protect and assist returnee adults and children

Thailand

Migrants were already among the most vulnerable groups when the pandemic struck. Those who had been detained in police stations and immigration detention centres were in particularly dire straits. Pre-covid, migrants arrested for minor violation of the law were commonly deported within a few weeks. But lockdown meant months of detention in crowded cells not fit for purpose and without access to essential supplies. Freedom Fund partner Foundation for Education and Development (FED) intervened to provide 69 detainees of Turkish and Burmese (including Rohingya) origin in Phang Nga immigration detention center with basic medication, daily essential items, personal hygiene kits and food. They also engaged with relevant authorities to help expedite and monitor the detainees' repatriation.

In August, a number of children of Burmese migrant workers, who had visited their parents and relatives across the border in Thailand in the school holidays, were unable to return to Myanmar due to border closures. Freedom Fund partner Foundation for Education and Development (FED) intervened and after weeks of negotiations with local authorities and the District Labor Attache, ten boys and 19 girls (as well as 15 adults) were assisted to return to Myanmar and provided with food, water, pocket money, hygiene kits and covid awareness leaflets.

Image: Myanmar returnees being assisted by Freedom Fund partner FED, 2020. © Freedom Fund





India

Lockdown measures in the city of Jaipur significantly increased risks to trafficked child labourers trapped in workshops. As work dried up, many trafficked children were sent back home unaccompanied on special migrant trains. In an effort to intercept and assist these children, Freedom Fund partners generated civil society pressure and engaged with the Bihar child rights watchdog and police to press for better monitoring and safeguarding of children. Over the summer, as the tide turned and children started being transported back to Jaipur, focus shifted towards preventing the re-trafficking of children. Local partners have been carrying out rescue operations and generating media attention, as well as working with child protection agencies, police forces and other relevant authorities, including training staff at train stations on how to respond to suspected trafficking cases and helping to set up response teams in ten train stations in Bihar, Rajasthan and some other states.

Ethiopia

Partners in both Addis and Amhara provided relief through distribution of food supplies, soaps and sanitisers, and face masks. The food supplies included one-month rations of flour, pasta, oil, rice and beans. Partners adapted their individual distribution mechanisms according to their organisational capacity and community needs, but all followed a similar model. They worked closely with local government offices and government-appointed covid-19 response taskforces, and established clear criteria for beneficiary selection, with a particular focus on returnees, the elderly, people with disabilities, orphans and vulnerable children. Some partners also focused on women-headed households. In some places, home visits were conducted to confirm the needs and eligibility of beneficiaries. During the distribution events, partners also disseminated covid information and anti-discrimination messages to counter the stigmatisation of community members who had recovered from the illness.

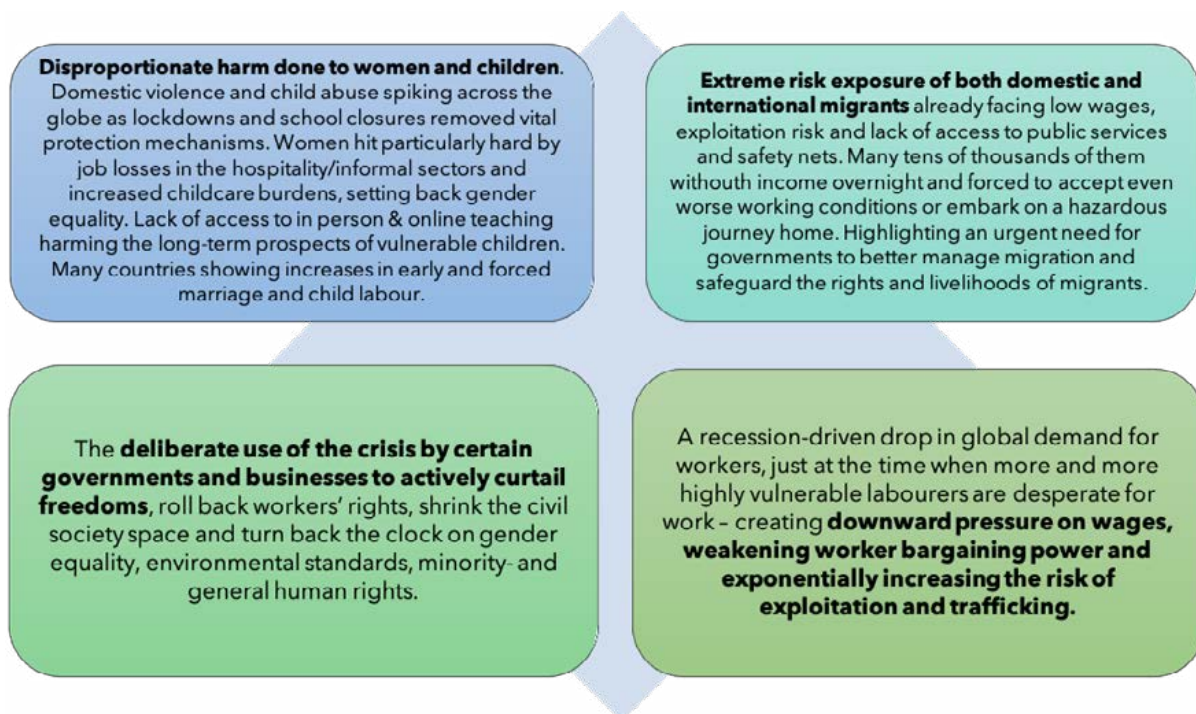
A new kind of crisis - Why the ERF was needed

The covid crisis has caused immense human suffering and economic damage in rich and poor parts of the globe. It brought socio-economic differences into sharp relief, as the poorest populations were disproportionately affected, both by the virus and the lockdown restrictions imposed to contain it. Often living in more densely populated areas, unable to isolate or work remotely, highly dependent on daily earnings out of the house and with reduced access to medical care and public services, they have been at significantly greater physical and economic risk. For those already suffering extreme vulnerability (like migrant workers or those without documents or legal status) the damage was devastating, immediate and potentially long-lasting.

Right from the onset of the crisis, we began working with our partners to carry out needs assessments and monitor the situation across our programs. In addition to producing alarming but vital data about the life-threatening level of assistance needs in many program locations in the first weeks and months, this also showed the emergence of several broader themes and worrying trends:

Unlike almost any crisis in our lifetimes, the covid fallout has been truly global, causing equally swift and fundamental shocks across the economic, public and societal spheres in both developed and developing countries, all of them combining to dramatically undercut the already precarious livelihoods and coping strategies of vulnerable groups, while at the same time seriously hampering the speed and scope of national and international assistance operations.

However, there have also been upsides. The crisis has shone a light on previously hidden problems and triggered local and national responses. Cancelled purchasing contracts by international brands have exposed the unacceptable power imbalance at opposing ends of global supply chains, generating public scrutiny, and thereby bringing hope for change. And, in fielding an urgent emergency response with our frontline partners, we have seen many inspiring examples of community structures and grassroots civil society coming together to fill gaps in the response and lead calls for more assistance to those in need.



Indian women at the heart of the community response

Parveen comes from a poor family in Jaipur, Rajasthan. She takes care of a family of six, works in her parents' lacquer craft business, and has been taking tailoring and stitching classes offered by Freedom Fund partner SEWA Bharat under the Child Labour Free Jaipur program (CLFJ). Her family's lacquer bangle work earns them about \$200 (Rs. 15,000) a month, but demand is not regular and they don't always receive full payment. Parveen says they are not poor, but lacking education and business know-how, they had become dependent on exploitative middlemen. When the pandemic hit, their income dropped dramatically, so SEWA Bharat connected them with skills training opportunities offered through CLFJ, and coached them in effective bargaining. With the help of her new stitching skills, some YouTube instruction videos and a big dose of enthusiasm and ingenuity, Parveen began making masks from the family's leftover fabric. Wanting to help her community, she produced 200 masks and distributed them for free. Realising that this was also a great awareness raising opportunity, she learned about covid symptoms, precautionary measures and government relief programs. Armed with this knowledge, she started spreading information in her neighbourhood and helping people understand where and how to access various government schemes. With the help of SEWA Bharat and CLFJ, Parveen was not only able to improve her family's situation and long-term prospects, but to become a changemaker in her community.

Anita Devi, 34, member of Sevati Mahila Self-Help Group (SHG), Chandauli: I've been a member of the group for five years. My husband used to work as a day labourer, and I'd opened the small shop by saving money in the SHG. During lockdown, my husband's work dwindled and I had no money to keep my shop stocked with goods. The SHG also lacked the resources for me to borrow more. When I received the micro grant of \$40 (Rs. 3000), I used \$28 (Rs. 2000) to buy cosmetic items for my shop, and the rest for some food items.

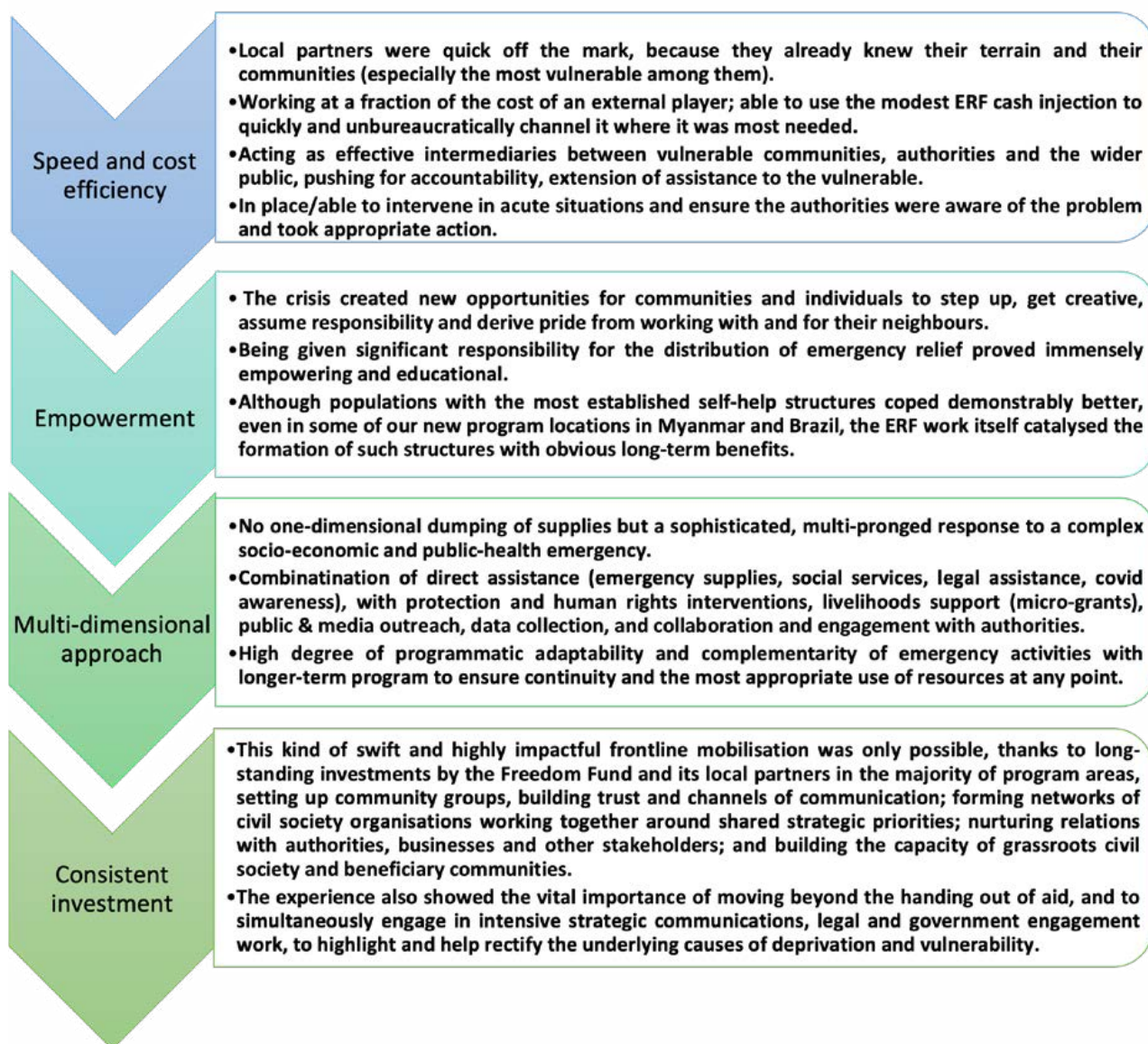


Now my shop has enough stock and is running well. My family and I are very happy.

Raat Rani Women's self help group in Raxaul (Bihar) is part of the Freedom Fund's northern India program and has 14 members, all of whom are from landless families. These women work as agriculture labourers and their husbands work as day labourers across the border in Nepal. During lockdown and border closures the men were unable to find work. Before the pandemic, the group had started a catering business, which was equally hard hit by the lockdown. Desperately looking for business opportunities to survive, the group learned about ERF activities distributing nutritional powder. They proposed to make nutritional multigrain powder, which is a popular food for young children in rural Bihar. Satisfied with their quality and hygiene standards, our program partners from the Ashish Project awarded them the contract, and the group worked for a week to supply 361 kgs of nutritional powder, which was distributed to 361 families. Each member earned \$5 (Rs. 250) per day and the group subsequently decided to go into business producing and selling the powder.

What were the main success factors in our frontline response?

In 2020, all countries on earth went into crisis simultaneously, hit by two and mutually reinforcing calamities: a public health emergency and a global recession. The recession is predicted to push 40-60 million people into extreme poverty and many countries into an acute debt crisis. The human devastation that ensued was swift, pervasive and reaching into the most remote corners and most marginalised populations, too much for overwhelmed or otherwise focused governments to address. In this unprecedented situation, we witnessed the vital importance of community resilience and the lifesaving power of grassroots community mobilisation across all our greatly diverse areas of operation. The type of emergency response proved effective, owing to four central factors:





In addition, the ERF's highly localised frontline interventions happened within a much broader global context. They were informed by our experience working with vulnerable communities, backed by years of intensive research and data gathering. The interventions happened within the longer-term global context of our ongoing work with policymakers, businesses, donors and peer groups to drive systemic change, promote human and labour rights, clean up supply chains and push for people-centred solutions.

In short, this ERF 'experiment' achieved so much with limited resources and time, because the intervention was largely **owned and driven by affected communities and frontline groups** and it did not happen in a vacuum but **through the activation and customisation of existing structures, networks and capacities** - both within those communities and grassroots groups and in the external support that the Freedom Fund and its donors brought to it. In this way, it demonstrated effective local-global partnership.

Lessons and opportunities for the future

With the arrival of mass vaccinations in 2021, the world is eager to move out of crisis and into recovery mode. However, many of the structural consequences of the pandemic will continue to blight lives for many years to come: The rollback of decades of hard-won progress towards gender equality and child protection; the loss of vital education and opportunities for underprivileged children, many of whom will never return to the classroom; a vastly increased gap between rich and poor both within countries and globally; the pressure on the poorest to leave their economically ravaged villages and find precarious work further afield; the diversion of government attention and resources away from programs for the vulnerable; and the infringement of workers' rights and civic freedoms driven by some governments and industries under the guise of 'crisis management'.

Together and individually, these factors greatly increase marginalised people's vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking, further raising the stakes in our fight to end modern slavery. However, amid all its challenges, the covid crisis has also provided all of us with an extraordinary opportunity to evaluate and reset. Invaluable learning has occurred at all levels and in all our program areas. From highly practical and localised learning about procurement, storage and distribution of emergency supplies, early detection of risk factors and support gaps, to broader insights about what happens when economies and supply chains grind to a halt. We learned the importance of established community structures, especially in the absence of effective national and international relief efforts. We also learned about the particular risk-exposure of certain groups like migrants and unaccompanied children, as well as the critical importance of frontline organisations serving as a link between the vulnerable and authorities.

We move into the future with an even greater sense of purpose and opportunity, and a firm belief in the vital role that we and our partners have to play in the protection of vulnerable groups and the promotion of social, environmental and economic justice. Although donor governments and multilateral bodies have been quick to call for a just recovery and 'build back better' approaches, decision-makers come up against the reality of their own political and economic constraints at a time of global recession. Numerous donor countries are slashing their aid budgets, which had already been shifting from grants to interest-carrying loans in recent years. Thus plunged into an acute debt crisis by the pandemic, the recipient countries are facing enormous challenges in their efforts to reign in the virus and save their economies, leaving limited capacity to prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable. Some are actively using the crisis as an excuse to cut back on social services and civil liberties and workers and human rights, a trend exacerbated by global pressures on prices.

In this fraught environment, civil society will be more vital than ever, to offer direct assistance and amplify the voices of the most vulnerable, provide vital data and policy recommendations and hold decision-makers firmly to their commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals. Drawing on the lessons and successes of the ERF, we at the Freedom Fund will therefore be emphasising three key areas going forward:

Localisation: Investing in community resilience and local civil society has always been at the heart of our innovative frontline approach. Post-covid, our networks are stronger, our approach crisis-proven and our data and understanding much advanced. Continuing to invest in these frontline efforts and partners remains the most impactful way for us to drive positive change and to serve as a model for others in the space.

Focus on the most vulnerable: With decision-makers juggling many different priorities and often lacking the data and knowhow to cater for marginalised groups, civil society needs to act as an intermediary and amplifier to ensure no-one is left behind. We will continue to leverage our and our partners' experience, data, influence and deep embeddedness in the most vulnerable communities to effectively play that role in our program areas. In recent months, Freedom Fund partners have proven their ability to get public, media and government attention, ensure people's access to services, catalyse necessary responses by the authorities and constructively engage with policymakers to change policy frameworks and service structures. As a result, we have collectively honed our skills and advanced our standing and influence as reliable partners and intermediaries in the countries we work. There are opportunities for us to build on this and become an even more effective voice for the vulnerable going forward.

Human rights: The pandemic caused severe short and long-term consequences across the whole spectrum of human rights, from workers rights and womens' rights to political freedoms and broader economic and social rights. The global economic downturn will create further pressure to curtail or disregard the rights of the most vulnerable (e.g. through lower prices leading to lower wages and worse working conditions). Together with our partners, we have shown that constructive government engagement, combined with joint media and outreach work can be highly effective in countering some of the worrying trends we are observing, and in holding governments and businesses to account. We will continue to intensify our policy and engagement work at local, national and international level to ensure marginalised groups are not only getting the assistance they need, but that their rights and status are respected and enshrined in legal frameworks, business practices and social norms.

The past year has vindicated many of our long-held beliefs in the power of local, people-centred solutions; the need for investment in community resilience and the need for holistic, multi-dimensional interventions to tackle complex socioeconomic issues. It also highlighted areas in which to redouble our efforts, like the need to push even harder for better regulation and safeguards for vulnerable migrants. Perhaps most importantly, the crisis has opened new doors and new ways of thinking. It has driven home our shared susceptibility to the global problems of our time, from climate change to pandemics and the destabilising impact of extreme social and economic inequalities. Instead of rushing to return to a pre-covid state, we must use this opportunity to reset, leave our siloed thinking behind, and work across disciplines and geographies to jointly meet the challenges ahead. In the words of Ian Goldin, Professor of Globalisation and Development at the University of Oxford: "We are at an inflection point in history; change is being compressed. A normalisation would take us back to a route to a

dystopian future". We all have a responsibility and an opportunity, within our own sphere of influence, to help establish a better, more equitable system.

Our ERF 'experiment', in many ways, helped us to better understand the interconnectedness of the issues we are tackling, and the need for similarly complex and interconnected responses at the government, business and civil society level. The crucial and proactive role played by local communities and grassroots groups was inspiring, demonstrating the ability of people and systems to adjust - if adequately supported. We are starting 2021 with a much clearer picture of where and how we can best invest our efforts and resources, and with the knowledge that we and our partners are better set up than many to find creative, impactful and sustainable solutions, working with and through local stakeholders and communities, whose stories and voices we will continue to share.

List of partners providing emergency assistance

Access Development Services in Rajasthan
Adithi
AGAR Ethiopia Charitable Society
Alliance Against Trafficking in Women and Children in Nepal
Association for Forced Migrants
Awaj Aviyan Nepal
Bethsaida Restoration Development Association
Beza Posterity Development Organisation
Bhawani Integrated Development Centre
Bhusura Mahila Vikas Samiti
Biswas Nepal
Casa Menina Mulher
Centre Direct
Centre for Action and Rural Education
Centre for Awareness Promotion Nepal
Centre for Legal Research and Resource Development
Change Nepal
Chhori
Coletivo Mulher Vida
Community Development Forum
Community Improvement Center
Dalit Janakalyan Yuba Club
Dalit Society Welfare Committee Nepal
Emmanuel Development Association
Fakirana Sisters' Society
Foundation for Education and Development
GoodWeave India
Gramin Mahila Srijanshil Pariwar
Grupo Adolescer
Grupo Comunidade Assumindo suas Crianças (GCASC)
Grupo Ruas e Praças
Htoi Gender and Development Foundation
Human Rights and Rural Youth Change
Institute for Development Education and Action
Integrated Development Foundation
Janachetana Dalit Sangam
Kakani Center for Development of Community
Mahibere Hiwot for Social Development
Manav Sansadhan Evam Mahila Vikas Sansthan
MAP Foundation
Migrant Workers Rights Network
Mission for Community Development Program
National Council of YMCAs of Myanmar
National Institute for Rural Development, Education, Social Upliftment and Health
Netsebrak Reproductive Health and Social Development Organisation
Organization for Prevention Rehabilitation and Integration of Female Street Children
Partners in Change
Partners in Change
Peace Trust
People's Action for Development
Pragati Gramodyog Evam Samaj Kalyan Sansthan
Prayas Juvenile Aid Centre
Professional Alliance for Development
Raks Thai Foundation
Regions Beyond Medical Union Society
Rights Education and Development Centre
Rural Organisation for Social Advancement
Samriddha Foundation
SathSath
SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Bharat
Shakti Samuha
Shripurraj Community Development Center
Society for Peoples Education and Economic Change
Stella Maris Seafarers' Center
TAABAR SOCIETY (Training Awareness and Behaviour Change about Health and Rehabilitation Society)
Tamil Nadu Rural Reconstruction Movement
Tapeshwori Social Welfare Organisation
Tatvasi Samaj Nyas
The Salem Don Bosco Anbu Illam Social Service Society
Trust for Education and Social Transformation
Vaan Muhil Trust
Vizhuthugal Social Education and Development Trust
Women Forum for Women in Nepal
Women Youth Empowerment in Social Service and Human Right
Women's Leadership Empowerment and Development
Women's Organisation for Rural Development
Women's Organisation in Rural Development
Youth for Social Transformation



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