



## EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

### UNDER THE RADAR: COVID-19'S SOCIETAL IMPACT

Nine months since the first cases of Covid-19 were reported in Africa, the impact of the crisis in Mozambique can be gauged not only in terms of health but also social phenomena such as child marriage, violence and demand for traditional healers. Rising poverty is producing “under-the-radar” reactions that imperil both health and development.

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#### HIDDEN NUMBERS

The Covid-19 pandemic in Mozambique is not only an enormous challenge for the country's already shaky health system; it is also affecting sociocultural dynamics, making manifest often hidden phenomena that impact the health of rural communities. Among these are a worrisome resurgence of the practice of child marriage; a rise in the number of women exchanging occasional sexual acts for money; the regaining of influence and authoritativeness by traditional leaders and healers through the spreading of (erroneous) health-related messages; a significant increase in cases of gender and domestic violence (situations which health facilities rarely pick up on, usually only in extremely serious cases); and a widespread intensification of ethnic and linguistic identity (addressed especially toward non-Africans, who are seen as “importers” of the pandemic). Together they are breathing new life into the same sort of mass psychological mechanisms and beliefs seen years ago vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS, and that tend to appear whenever some far-reaching health problem imperils the already precarious subsistence economy and undermines social cohesion.

Due mainly to the restrictions imposed to curb the virus's spread, commercial and economic flows have slowed down, and sometimes even come to a complete standstill. It is against this backdrop of mounting uncertainty and poverty that the above-mentioned phenomena, which the health system often fails to pick up on, are taking place. It is difficult to expose, track and document them, unearthing evidence in terms of data and cases. But the numerous accounts received by the hundreds of activists who work on the ground for CUAMM are vital for conducting a broad analysis of the situation through a systematic reading of the social response to the worsening life conditions indirectly engendered by the pandemic.

#### THE FALLOUT ON THE WEAKEST

The situation is leading to girls, even very young ones, being seen as “stores of value” that can help rally dire financial cir-

cumstances: our activists have seen cases where instead of actual marriages, parents make formal agreements to “mortgage” off their underaged daughters as future wives in exchange for advance payments of assets by the future husbands.

Even though they are monitored by local health services, especially vulnerable and marginalized groups such as sex workers report worsening life conditions due to the significant rise in the number of destitute women offering occasional sexual services; this, in turn, is heightening both tensions and the risk of sexual and reproductive health problems that the system often misses.

#### THE ROLE OF ACTIVISTS

Carried out through qualitative interviews and door-to-door follow-up (although the effectiveness of these methods has been negatively impacted by the pandemic), the painstaking work of activists, together with the involvement of formal and informal institutions such as health committees, councils of the elderly and community courts, is a precious tool for keeping abreast of the situation on the ground, informing and providing services to the community and keeping a large at-risk “borderline” population from being excluded from the health system.

#### WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Analyzing the current situation through a social lens underscores two points:

- maintaining deep roots in urban, peri-urban and rural areas is an indispensable strategy for reaching the most vulnerable, marginalized and destitute populations;
- health indicators, especially vis-à-vis reproductive health, are a vital prism through which to understand local communities and analyze their care-seeking attitudes and behaviors. Doing so enables the design of the most apt support strategies for local systems, ones able to respond to objective priorities through ever-more timely and effective interventions characterized by expertise and sociocultural sensitivity.