Integrated response reduces impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods

Buenos Aires, Argentina

When COVID-19 reached Buenos Aires on 19 March 2020, the City Housing Institute (IVC), in collaboration with local grassroots organizations, built on prior upgrading of community infrastructure and strengthened resilience in the Villa 20 neighbourhood through a set of interventions to help meet the community’s food, health, and social and economic needs. The result has been a lower number of confirmed cases and deaths, and high level of community willingness to participate in social distancing, food distributions, and testing.

Collaboration between local government and grassroots organizations – to ensure a strong and unified COVID-19 response

Villa 20 is an informal urban settlement in southern Buenos Aires, and is home to 30 000 people. Almost 25% of residents rent their homes, 14% of families have at least one member with a disability, and 30% have some type of chronic or pre-existing disease. IVC’s work from 2016 to 2020 to develop neighbourhood infrastructure and housing with the involvement of local residents and organizations – including building new homes, opening streets and constructing public spaces and community facilities – improved basic services such as water provision. Nonetheless assuring hygiene and disinfection remains difficult.

When COVID-19 broke out in Buenos Aires in March, the government rolled out its mandatory isolation policy (ASPO). However, the exponential spread of the disease in poor neighbourhoods showed that complying with ASPO guidelines was difficult, as inhabitants faced overcrowded, precarious housing conditions and limited public space. Moreover, many residents had either lost or seen their incomes drop since the onset of the pandemic.

A comprehensive package of measures

As a public agency responding to the social and health emergency, under the authority of the Ministry of Social Development and Housing and the Ministry of Health of the City Government of Buenos Aires, IVC implemented prevention and detection measures, and provided assistance to families. The relationships that had been forged during the IVC redevelopment process allowed preventive measures to be rapidly adopted, as community and grassroots organizations were ready and willing to participate in the response.
The interventions covered five areas: food security, health, urban hygiene, emergencies and communication. Together IVC and neighbourhood organizations distributed food supplies and hygiene kits for older adults and families in critical situations, set up COVID-19 testing centres, spread the word about preventive measures, guaranteed security of tenure for those renting their homes, and cleaned and disinfected public spaces including streets and alleyways.

These measures, carried out in collaboration with community organizations, helped quickly stabilize the spread of the virus, resulting in fewer COVID-19 cases. For example, as of July 8 2020, Villa 20 had recorded 1307 positive cases – 4.3% of the population – compared to 9.4% in Villa 1-11-14; 8% in Carrillo; 6.7 % in Villa 31; 4.6% in Rodrigo Bueno; and 4.5% in Villa 21-24.

The measures subsequently slowed the daily contagion rate from 16% in the first week of June to 3.3% in the first week of July.

Testing was prioritized, with 3134 people swabbed for suspected COVID by July 8 2020, through the DetectAr programme, funded by the Ministry of Health of the Government of Argentina and implemented jointly with IVC in the neighbourhood (80 tests average per day). Temperature testing posts were installed in different parts of the neighbourhood to help detect those with COVID-19 symptoms.

In addition, 5500 families (more than 60% of the families in the neighbourhood) received twice-weekly food assistance packages dispensed from the premises of 25 local social and political organizations. Drinking water was also distributed to families with no water supply to their home.

To enhance housing security, suspension of payment for mortgage loan instalments was mandated by the IVC, benefiting more than 700 families who had moved to the new buildings in the Papa Francisco neighbourhood during the last year. This is addition to a countrywide prohibition of evictions.

Photo: Instituto de Vivienda Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires.
The experience of IVC’s pandemic response in Villa 20 demonstrates that community participation and strengthened ties between public agencies and neighbourhood groups and organizations build social capital and community resilience that can help communities to respond to unexpected risks. IVC’s redevelopment the city’s Villa communities helped create the networks and links between public agencies and grassroots organizations that could enable effective responses in the face of the pandemic. Villa 20’s COVID-19 experience has shown that community participation can be generated with the right encouragement, and is fundamental to public interventions meeting the needs of families living in informal urban neighbourhoods, and to creating resilient neighbourhoods that are capable of facing adverse events.

Photo: Instituto de Vivienda Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires.

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