

How to Respond to a Crisis – Shivia/Nirdhan’s approach

A Case Study written by Dr Natalie Schoon

As the world struggled to get to grips with the impact of COVID-19 and started to put in place measures to isolate people and close borders, many NGOs understandably sent their staff home and closed their doors in an effort to make sure everyone stayed as safe as they could. Major donors have, understandably, rapidly shifted their focus to health and crisis management.

Shivia (known locally as Nirdhan in India) has followed a different path, as I found out when I joined one of their webinars in May and also listened to their audio blog published on the Shivia website (<https://shivia.com/conversations-with-kolkata>).

Although equally concerned for the health and well-being of their staff and beneficiaries, their staff did not leave. Because they are already at home. All Shivia/Nirdhan’s people on the ground in West Bengal (*Livelihood Service Providers or LSPs*) are local - they speak the local languages, have the support and trust of the community and understand the issues and concerns of the beneficiaries. This is of great importance at all times, but specifically in times of crisis. They have been able to provide health and safety information to the communities, so they are aware of the risks of infection and how to prevent it, plus dispelling social media rumours that COVID-19 is spread by chickens.

Poultry Development Services is Shivia’s flagship programme – ten chicks are distributed to each family, together with a comprehensive training and inoculation programme. When persistent rumours on social media resulted in farmers killing their chickens, Shivia’s local staff spoke with their communities to dispel the rumours.

Shivia/Nirdhan’s staff has been invaluable in recognising needs and have proactively addressed them. They collected fabrics, thread and sewing machines, sourced a mask pattern and mobilised people to make masks against a fee. With their normal income flow reduced due to the virus, making masks gave the women in the villages an alternative source of income.

The masks are distributed to a wide range of recipients within Shivia/Nirdhan’s beneficiary portfolio as well as families in the wider communities, focusing on the families who cannot afford the cost of the masks and those with vulnerable members. Recipients of the masks have also included civic police, civic volunteers, health and community workers, nurses from the local hospitals on duty during lock down, as well as a charitable foundation in the Sunderbans region of Bengal after cyclone Amphan hit in May.

Making the masks also has a secondary benefit. It had already been noted that there is a reluctance to take up farming among the younger generation, and making masks is providing an opportunity to develop new skills including fabric handling, pattern drafting, sewing, and use of colour.

Given that the requirement to wear masks in public is expected to last for a while, Shivia/Nirdhan is already considering a line of masks for different occasions such as weddings, but also perhaps a limited edition for festivals such as Diwali.

Local staff are known as Livelihood Service Providers (LSP) and are men and women from the local community in the villages. They are educated to at least high school level, speak the local languages and have goodwill in the villages. The LSPs have built strong relationships with the beneficiaries and have a vital role in identifying families that are in need of Shivia/Nirdhan’s assistance. They are committed to help beneficiaries and are great motivators. Due to their job they have regular income and are able to support their own families.

Remaining involved with the community and proactively seeking out opportunities to help current beneficiaries as well as the wider community has raised Shivia/Nirdhan's profile in the community. The field staff have gained a lot of respect in the process, for the organisation as well as themselves.

Dr Natalie Schoon, CFA, LLM is an independent consultant with a main focus on financial services, financial regulations and policy, and gender equality. Besides supporting their work, she is not affiliated with Shivia/Nirdhan.



The Livelihood Service Providers have been issued with PPE so they can safely carry out their work

