

# HOW SILCs HAVE RESPONDED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## Learning from surveys in Latin America and Africa

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*SILC members wear facemasks to protect each other from COVID-19 transmission during a savings and lending meeting, Mexico.*

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## Acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus (or 2019 Novel Coronavirus) Disease
CP	CRS Country Program
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
HRD	CRS Humanitarian Response Department
N	Number, Number of
PSP	SILC Private Service Provider
SILC	Savings and Internal Lending Community

# 1. Introduction

This study presents the results of two surveys conducted with representatives of CRS Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILCs) in Africa and Latin America, to understand how their groups have responded to the unprecedented public health and economic crises caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

SILCs are community-based, user-owned, self-managed savings groups designed to serve communities with little or no access to formal financial services (Box 1). Since CRS’ adoption of the model in 2006, SILCs have been and continue to be a central component of CRS’ development programming: as of 30 June 2020, the agency and its partners have supported the establishment of 194,290 groups with over 4.3 million members, in myriad projects in 59 countries worldwide. In addition, CRS and its implementing partners have trained and certified 5,605 Private Service Providers (PSP) who form, train, and support SILC groups in exchange for fees paid to them by the groups.

*Box 1. What SILC is*

Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILCs) are

- 15-30 self-selecting members
- Self-managed/owned by members
- Regular, weekly savings (*main fund*)
- Transparent – all transactions take place during weekly meeting
- Loans from main fund
- *Social fund* for crises/emergencies
- End-of-cycle *share-out* from locked *cashbox* timed to coincide with members’ need for cash

The extent and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic caught the world by surprise in 2020, and country-wide lockdowns have threatened the livelihoods of CRS project participants, including SILC groups and their members. In April 2020, the CRS Microfinance team released [CRS COVID-19 Guidance for SILCs](#) in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. These were distributed to all country programs (CPs). This guidance provided SILC members, PSPs, and CRS and partner staff with information on how to adjust SILC operations while safely confronting the pandemic. Options provided to SILCs were:

- Ceasing to meet immediately, while keeping the funds in the group’s cashbox or depositing the funds into a mobile money account or a group account at a local financial institution;
- Sharing out the money in the cashbox to group members immediately, then ceasing to meet; and
- Continuing to meet, while adopting safety procedures to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 during meetings.

For groups that decided to continue to meet, the CRS guidance provided concrete recommendations to increase members’ safety. These recommendations included providing water and soap or alcohol-based hand sanitizer to permit members to wash or sanitize their hands, having members sit at least one meter apart from each other, having members wear face masks during meetings, prohibiting vulnerable members (such as older members, those who are infirm, ill, have a disability, or children) from attending meetings, establishing a central “cashpoint” for cash transactions with access limited to one group member at a time, shortening meeting times by not

serving food or drink and not combining them with other activities, and holding meetings by turns to reduce the number of members present at any one time.

To evaluate how well the CRS COVID-19 guidance was disseminated to SILCs and learn what decisions the groups had taken (and why), CRS administered surveys to SILC representatives in Latin America and Africa. This report presents the results of the surveys conducted.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Design

To understand how well the CRS COVID-19 guidance was disseminated to SILCs, SILC members' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and SILC groups' operational decisions; the CRS Senior Microfinance<sup>1</sup> team – working with regional, CP, and implementing partner staff – designed and administered two surveys to representatives of SILC groups in Latin America and Africa. The first, administered in March and April 2020 in Latin America, interviewed 411 SILC representatives in Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. The second, an expanded and revised version of the first and administered between May and July 2020 in Sub-Saharan Africa, interviewed representatives of 433 SILCs in Burkina Faso, Chad, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

Both surveys combined closed-ended questions, to provide comparable data across SILCs and countries, and open-ended questions, to probe for details on groups' and members' experiences, and to get explanations for answers given. The Latin American survey was conducted first, and the learning from that survey informed the African survey, which was longer and covered more topics. The topics covered by the survey questions were:

- Perceptions of effects COVID-19 has had on SILC members, including members' economic activities, food security, and access to non-SILC financial service providers (FSPs) (Africa only)
- CRS COVID-19 guidance options communicated to the SILC (Africa only)
- Decision made by the group (both Latin America and Africa)
- If the group shared out, did it do so early? (both Latin America and Africa)
- If the group stopped meeting but did not share out, where is the money stored? (both Latin America and Africa)
- If the group continues to meet, what has happened with group saving and lending, and are members permitted to withdraw their savings? (Africa only)
- What practices have groups adopted to prevent COVID-19 transmission during meetings? (both Latin America and Africa)
- What safety and hygiene practices might groups that have stopped meeting implement, to prevent COVID-19 transmission once they start meeting again? (Africa only)

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- Will groups continue to implement the safety and sanitary practices they have adopted, once the pandemic ends? (both Latin America and Africa)

While individuals were interviewed, the unit of analysis of the quantitative findings presented in this study is the SILC *group*. Both surveys were administered to representatives of SILC groups, who answered the questions on behalf of their groups. However, in response to open-ended questions about the effects of COVID-19 on SILC members' livelihoods, food security, and access to formal finance, SILC representatives' responses varied: some discussed their groups specifically, while others spoke about their communities or only themselves.

## 2.2 Sampling, data collection, and analysis

Country program staff led the selection of SILC groups and their representatives. Each country program drew from sample frames containing lists of the CRS- or implementing partner-trained SILCs from active and closed projects. The comprehensiveness of the sampling frames varied by CP, but each CPs randomly sampled from its list 10-50 SILCs to interview, depending on the staff time the CP and/or local implementing partners had available to contribute to the survey.

Once SILCs were sampled, each CP identified representatives to call by mobile phone, and CP or partner staff members called them to administer the survey. Each interview was administered with 1-3 representatives from a single SILC. These representatives answered the survey questions on behalf of their group, and interviews conducted with more than one representative at a time were recorded as one interview submission, detailing the experience of a single SILC group (the unit of analysis). Once completed, each interview was uploaded to Google Forms (Latin America) or CommCare (Africa) for compilation and analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Once interviews were uploaded, the analyst at CRS headquarters cleaned the data, deleting incomplete, blank, and duplicate submissions. Due to inevitable variation in sampling frames across the 18 participating CPs, and the non-random set of CPs that participated in the surveys, only descriptive analyses were done. These analyses were done separately for each survey, and are presented separately in this study.

## 2.3 Data limitations

The data analyses and study conclusions are limited by the structure and timing of administration of the surveys, the country selection, sampling procedures, and the profile of the interviewees. Given that the African survey was designed later and with the limitations of the Latin American survey in mind, the possible analyses and conclusions based on the African survey are more comprehensive than those for the Latin American survey. Some analyses presented in the results section below pertain only to Africa, due to these differences. Moreover, the Latin American data was captured relatively early in the pandemic (March-April 2020), while the African data was collected later (late May – early July 2020), so the regional results present

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<sup>2</sup> [CommCare](#) is a mobile data collection platform developed and owned by [Dimagi](#).

snapshots of two different regions at two different time points. These differences limit cross-regional comparison.

Because the study was voluntary, and required CP staff time, only the CPs that wanted to participate did so. The set of countries in which the surveys were carried out are not, therefore, random. CP sampling frames, as mentioned previously, likely differed in ways both observable (e.g., inclusion limited to SILCs available in project lists, that have at least one member with a mobile phone number listed in CP records) and unobservable (e.g., exclusion of some older SILCs, that had been trained by now-closed projects and for which contact information may be missing or outdated). The non-random CP participation and potential sampling frame limitations precluded inferential analyses and generalization of the findings to the full population of SILCs.

Finally, each representative or set of representatives (where more than one participated in a mobile phone call) spoke on behalf of their SILC, but their recall, subjectivity, and depth of knowledge of their group's situation and decisions could not be independently verified. However, SILC groups, which generally meet weekly, usually consist of members who already know and trust each other. Even groups in which not all members know each other well at the beginning, build group solidarity and come to know each other better over time. So, we are confident that the representatives interviewed had sufficient knowledge of their groups to answer the survey questions thoroughly and accurately.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Profile of SILCs and representatives interviewed

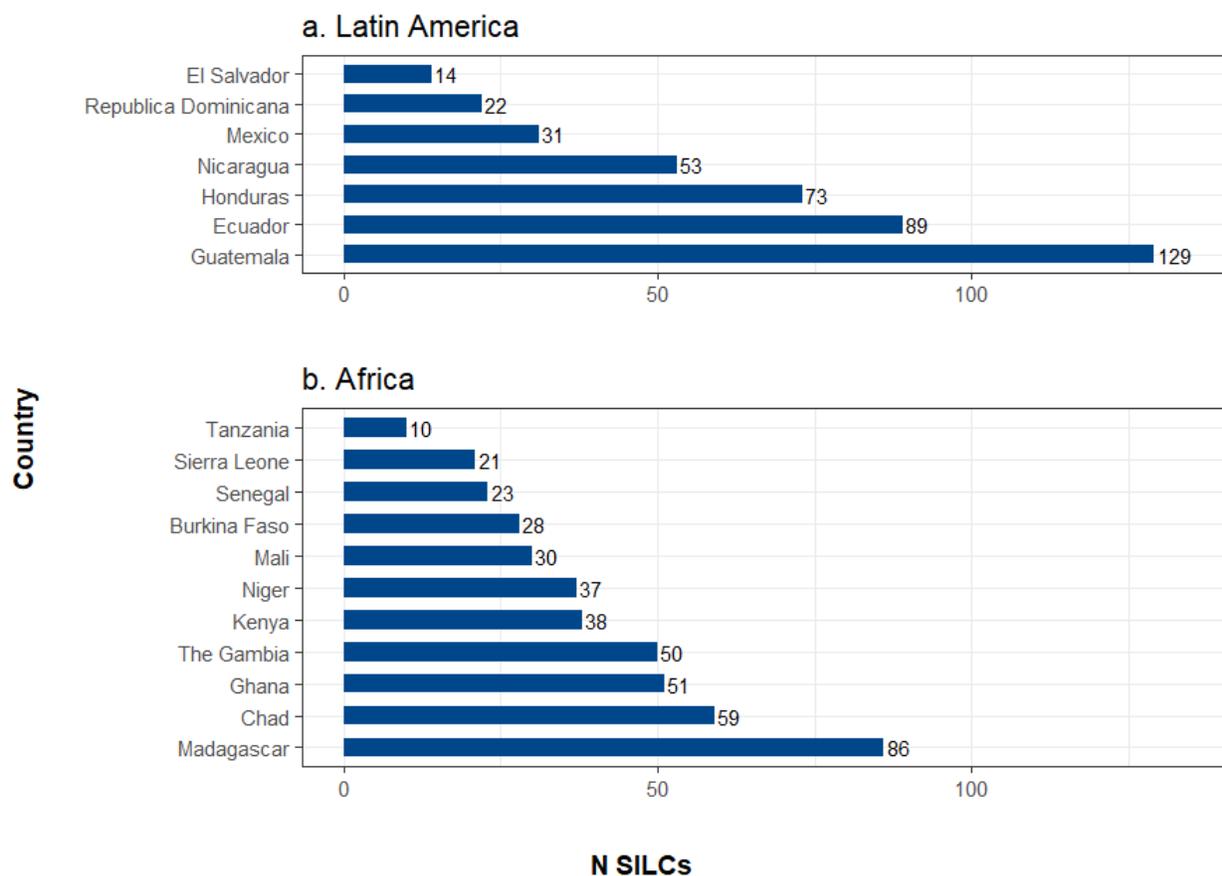
Representatives of 411 SILCs were interviewed in the Latin American survey, and 433 in the African survey.<sup>3</sup> Only the African survey asked representatives for their positions in their SILC groups – and across the 433 SILCs in the African survey, representatives reported their group positions for only 45% (193). Of these, 31% (59) of SILCs were represented by their chairpersons, 29% (56) by secretaries, 7% (13) by treasurers, 4% (8) by money counters, and 23% (44) by ordinary members.

The number of groups whose representatives were interviewed ranged per country from 14 (El Salvador) to 129 (Guatemala) in Latin America, and 10 (Tanzania) to 86 (Madagascar) in Africa. In the Latin American survey, the seven participating countries were the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua. In the African survey, the eleven participating countries were Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and the Gambia. Figure 1 shows the number of SILCs included in the (a) Latin American and (b) African surveys.

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<sup>3</sup> This publication uses the terms “SILC representative,” “informant,” and “interviewee” interchangeably: all refer to the SILC representatives interviewed in the Latin American and African surveys.

Figure 1. Number of SILCs interviewed by country



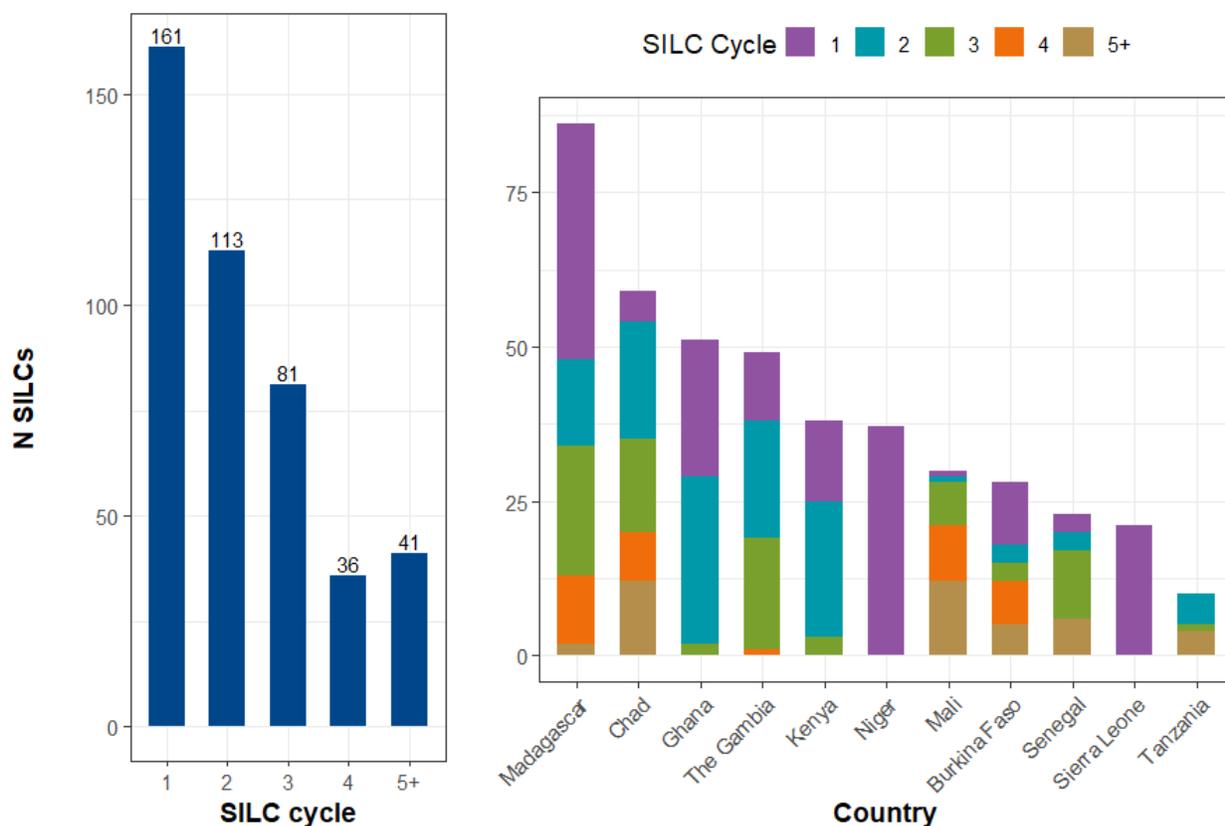
Only the African survey asked SILC representatives about their groups’ most recent cycle number (Box 2). Almost 63% (271) of African groups sampled were in their second or higher savings and lending cycle when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Second- and higher-cycle groups accounted for the majority of SILCs whose representatives were interviewed in Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, Senegal, Tanzania, and The Gambia. Meanwhile, in Niger and Sierra Leone all groups with representatives interviewed were in their first cycle.

*Box 2. SILC cycles*

SILCs save and lend for a period of time determined by their members, usually 9-12 months, which is called a *cycle*. At the end of each cycle, the groups distribute the main fund – including all savings deposited and profits from lending and/or group business activities – to their members, each of whom receives the full value of their savings deposits plus a share of the group profit. This activity is called a *share-out*.

Once the SILC share-out is complete, group members decide whether to begin a new cycle immediately or at a later date, or to disband the SILC.

Figure 2. Number of SILCs interviewed, by cycle and country (Africa)



### 3.2 Consequences of COVID-19 for SILCs and their members

The survey in Africa asked the SILC representatives open-ended questions about their perceptions of the effects of COVID-19 on their groups and fellow members, and the representatives' responses varied in tenor and content from minor to severe – but most informants reported that their fellow members had difficulties related to nationally imposed restrictions on market activities, and several reported lost income, rising food insecurity and prices, and limitations on members' access to formal sources of financing.

Regarding the economic effects on SILCs' members, group representatives in almost all the African countries covered by the study reported that the shutdowns of weekly markets reduced the prices at which they could sell their goods (due to fewer buyers) and raised the prices of necessities (due to fewer sellers). An informant in Mali summed up a common sentiment, saying "It's true that the coronavirus illness has sharply reduced the movements of the group members and that it's therefore not easy to manage small businesses or any other profitable activities. The whole world feels poverty at their doorstep." In Sierra Leone, a SILC representative reported that "Customers are no longer coming to buy our agricultural products and livestock. We [must instead] sell them cheaply to people within the community." In Madagascar, a representative added, "The

revenue [our members] have earned is insufficient because we can't sell our production. Our business has been suspended since April due to the quarantine."

In Ghana, most members of the SILCs interviewed were involved in both trading or professional activities and agriculture – and restrictions on the former affected the latter. In fact, most Ghanaian SILC representatives told their interviewers that due to the reductions in their earnings from their non-farm livelihood activities, they were unable to hire labor or purchase inputs for farming, so they planned to reduce their farm size and production this year – beginning a potential negative feedback loop that may depress future income, thus reducing future production. A SILC group secretary who had worked as a schoolteacher said, "Due to school closures, I lost my job as a teacher in a private school, and haven't received a salary since the pandemic began. Because my savings haven't been good, and I don't have easy access to loans, I cannot finance cropping on a large scale." A representative who had earned money selling food at a local school had a similar experience: "I lost my job due to the school closures, where I used to sell food. Remittances from my family down south have reduced, as well, so there is not much money to finance farming this year – so I will reduce my land size."

Reduced income from smaller and less frequent remittances, along with difficulty accessing the cash received at service provider locations, arose repeatedly as a theme. In Mali, one informant said, "We are in a zone of strong migration, where the majority of [SILC] families depend 95% on [remittances from] the exterior. Our children and parents who live in Europe or in Asia regularly send us money to pay for our expenses. With COVID-19, most of them are confined [at home in] their host countries and suddenly face financial difficulties. So, they are no longer able to send us the money to pay for food and essentials. We wonder how we are going to survive for the rest of the year." In some cases, high transport costs and reduced FSP services made accessing remittance money by SILC members from local money transfer agents more difficult, even when it was available: per one SILC representative in the Gambia, "Money transfer has been a problem for our people in Europe." Another in the same country said, "I can't receive any money from my friends in Italy because of the lockdown – he can't send it. And it affects me during Ramadan, since I can't buy many things that I used to buy in the month of Ramadan." In Mali, "Access to MFIs, banks and mobile money are difficult and limited, and family members who are abroad cannot send money."

Closed country borders affected some SILCs in Mali and Niger. A few informants in Mali stated that they had difficulty acquiring necessities due to the closed border with Mauritania: "Here, our products come largely from Mauritania. With the closure of the borders, there has been a sudden shortage of basic necessities, and those that remain [available to buy] have become expensive and are insufficient." Similarly in Niger, the closure of the border with Nigeria prevented Nigeriens from selling their livestock and buying staples: "We've had difficulty going to Nigeria, which is the only place where we can purchase our food. [Our] animals can't be sold anymore because we cannot get them into Nigeria."

SILC membership has helped some group members during the crisis: In Sierra Leone, one SILC representative explained that "SILC group members now get access to food and other basic necessities through our farming products, which we sell within the community because of the inter-district lockdown." But for many it is not sufficient to replace the lost income and access to formal financial services due to the economic shutdowns. According to a Ghanaian informant, "Due to a reduction in [SILC group] savings, access to the amount of money I required [to borrow] from my SILC group was unavailable." A second Ghanaian SILC representative lamented their members'

inability to access formal finance: “Banks are not willing to give loans out to SILC members, who are businesspeople, because banks think they can’t pay back loans because business has slowed down.” In Tanzania, a SILC representative mentioned that, “We are now unable to borrow as much as we want, because the saving fund [in our SILC] was not enough due to the drop in savings revenue. And some [formal] financial institutions have stopped lending.” COVID-19-related barriers to formal finance, however, are not universal in Tanzania. Another Tanzanian informant told their interviewer that “the banks are still operating, and people are doing their daily transactions as usual.”

Regarding food security, many informants complained that food had become more expensive even as their incomes declined, due to the closure of weekly markets. In Ghana, according to one SILC representative, “There is a scarcity of food products because people can’t travel. Farm produce has reduced in price because we can’t travel to sell, and [people from] other regions can’t travel to us to buy.” In Burkina Faso, some informants said that certain necessary items had become rare because of the closures of markets and routes: “Food has become rare and expensive, since some vendors have raised their prices.” In the Gambia, some SILC members had difficulty accessing food “because there’s no weekly market at which to buy food at a reasonable price. We get most of what we need – including food – from the weekly markets, but now those are closed. We don’t have money or enough food to sustain us, and our families are suffering. We can’t sell our goods to make money, so buying food is difficult.” Respondents in Niger reported similar experiences of scarcity and increased prices for staple foods and other critical goods, while in Sierra Leone, “it’s very difficult to access food, because we used to take our agricultural products to the trade fair... for sale, and buy food in return, and take it with us to our community to eat.” Nevertheless, farming and lucky timing provided a buffer for some farmers: SILC members who farm rice in Madagascar were harvesting their crops when the pandemic arrived, so for some, “accessing food is not a problem for us [now],” even though – as elsewhere – the prices of necessities had risen. Finally, some Ghanaian informants reported resorting to a negative coping strategy. The reductions in cash and remittances, compelled some SILC members “to start selling our stored food, which is another form of savings [for us].” Because the Ghanaians’ stored food was meant to be sold later, when food prices rose – and not consumed immediately – this coping strategy will likely reduce these Ghanaian SILC members’ medium-run income-generating potential.

### 3.3 CRS guidance options communicated to SILCs

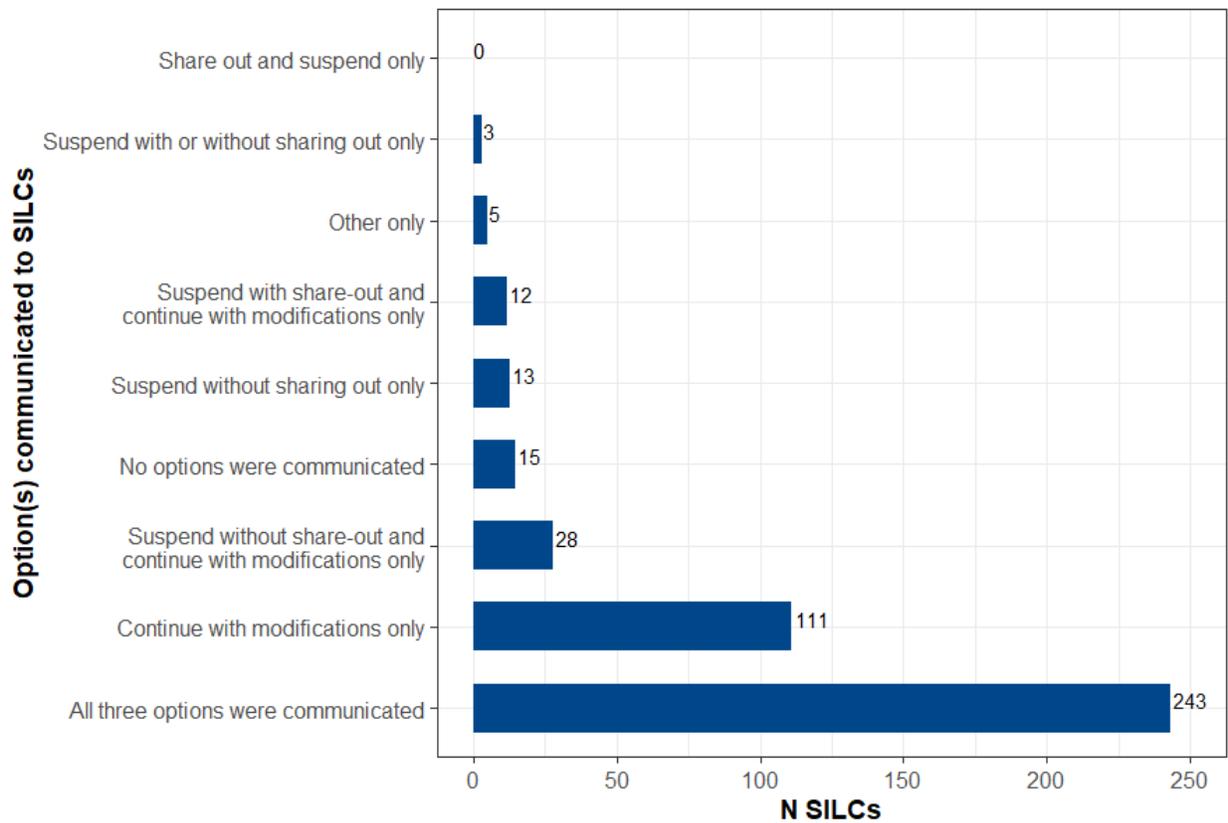
Shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CRS Senior Microfinance team, in consultation with Senior Technical Advisors from the CRS Health & Social Services team and Humanitarian Response Department (HRD), as well as regional and CP stakeholders, produced guidance with options regarding how SILCs could respond to the pandemic and associated government restrictions. The guidance outlined three broad options:

1. To stop meeting without sharing out the money in the group’s cashbox;
2. To share out the cashbox money to group members immediately and stop meeting; and
3. To continue meeting, with modified procedures to reduce risk of COVID-19 infection during meetings.

The challenge for CRS regions and CPs was to communicate these options quickly and clearly to field agents, PSPs, and implementing partners; who in turn would clarify the options with SILC members to ensure that the SILCs could make fully informed decisions.

The CRS guidance was disseminated to all CPs. But not all groups were informed of all options – or some SILC representatives interviewed did not recall learning about all the options. The African survey asked representatives about which options they had heard: of the 433 SILCs included in the that sample, only 56% (243) reported being informed about all three guidance options, while 26% (111) reported that they had only been informed about a single option: continuing to meet, with modified procedures for safety and hygiene (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Combinations of CRS guidance options communicated to SILCs in Africa



Fully 86% (375) of SILC representatives reported that all the members of their groups had been informed of the CRS guidance options, while only 6% (24) reported that the guidance had not reached all members, and 3% (13) were unsure.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The remaining SILC representatives either reported that they had not been informed of CRS guidance, or did not answer the question.

## 3.4 SILCs' operational decisions in light of CRS' COVID-19 guidance

### 3.4.1 Latin America

In Latin America, most SILCs interviewed had already stopped meeting by the time their representatives were interviewed in the March-April 2020 survey period, except in Nicaragua. Of the 410 SILC whose representatives answered the question, 75% (309) had stopped meeting, while 25% (102) were continuing to meet at the time of their interviews.<sup>5</sup> In Ecuador, 89% of groups had stopped meeting, in Guatemala 69%, and in Honduras 100%. According to CRS regional staff in Latin America, most SILCs that were continuing to meet when their representatives were interviewed, were rural SILCs whose members were confident they could practice physical distancing and other safety and sanitary measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission during meetings. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, 70% of groups interviewed were *continuing to meet* at the time of their interviews (Figure 4a). The trends across countries have likely been primarily influenced by national prohibitions on large gatherings, which were implemented in much of the region – but had not been imposed in Nicaragua at the time of the interviews.<sup>6</sup>

Across the Latin American sample, only 5% (15) of groups that had ceased meeting had shared out the cash in the cashbox prior to stopping. Just 1.6% (5) of groups did so in the Dominican Republic, 1% (3) each in Mexico and Nicaragua, 0.7% (2) in Guatemala, 0.3% (1) each in Ecuador and Honduras, and no groups that ceased meeting shared out in El Salvador. Of the 94% (171) of groups that did not share out before they stopped meeting, 80% (137) left cash in the cashbox, 24% (33) had at least some cash out in loans, and 0.7% (1) had deposited at least some of its money in a bank account.

Although most groups interviewed in Latin America had stopped meeting, a majority planned to meet again once the pandemic recedes and government restrictions are lifted: of the 309 of groups that had stopped meeting, 86% (265) planned to meet again at some point, 7% (22) were unsure, and just 4% (12) did not plan to resume meeting.<sup>7</sup> This finding indicates that while many SILCs were obeying their governments' quarantine orders – including prohibitions on gatherings – members value their participation in their groups, and want to reap the benefits of SILC membership once again, as soon as conditions allow.

### 3.4.2 Africa

African SILCs' experience contrasts markedly with LACRO's: in Africa, 81% (351) of groups decided to continue meeting with modifications for safety and hygiene, 9% (37) had stopped meeting without sharing out, and 6% (28) had shared out and stopped meeting (and 1% (6) continued meeting *without* modifications). Across African countries, the majority of SILCs continued meeting with modifications – save in Senegal, where 77% (14) of the 18 groups that reported their decision had stopped meeting without sharing out (Figure 4b).

The length of time that SILC groups in Africa had been meeting, saving and lending together was not associated with groups' decisions to continue or cease meeting. Eighty-seven percent of groups in their first cycle – whose members were still learning SILC methodology and had

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<sup>5</sup> One SILC representative did not answer the question.

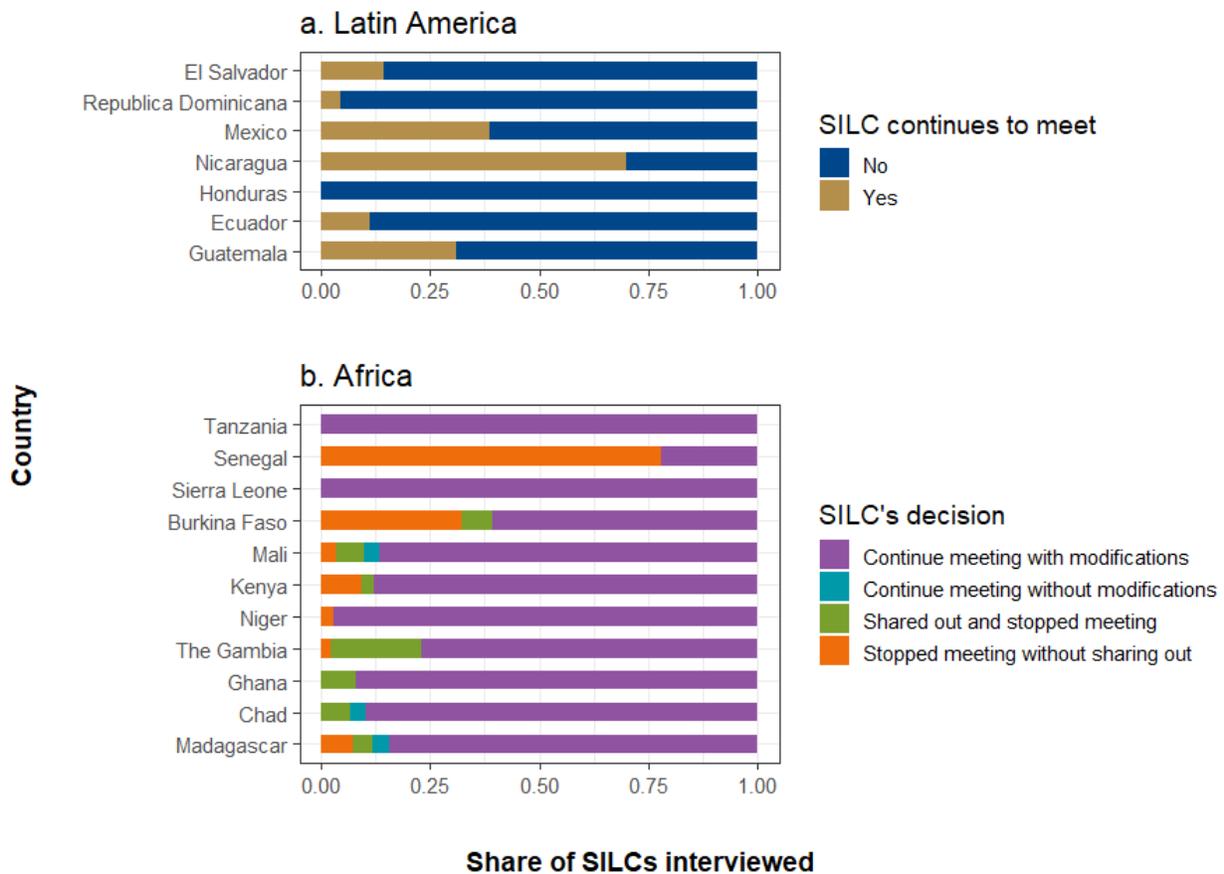
<sup>6</sup> According to regional CRS staff in Latin America, as of 9 September 2020, the Nicaraguan government had still not imposed restrictions on movement and gatherings, in contrast to its neighboring countries in Central America.

<sup>7</sup> Another 5 SILC representatives did not answer the question on their groups' future plans.

not yet reached their first share-out – continued meeting with modified procedures for safety. A similarly high share (81%) of groups in their fifth or higher cycles – many of whose members likely had years of experience saving and lending together in SILC – did the same. Looking at all cycles individually (1-5 or higher), over 80% of groups in each (81-87%) had decided to continue meeting with modified procedures, 5-14% of groups stopped meeting without sharing out, and 3-9% shared out and then stopped meeting.

SILC representatives whose groups decided to continue to meet were asked why they had taken that decision. Respondents were given a list of possible reasons, and could select all that applied to their SILCs, and/or select “other.” Forty-seven percent (169) of SILC representatives responded that they considered the risk acceptable, 39% (141) that their groups needed to ensure that outstanding loans were repaid, 35% (124) that their groups needed to get ready for share-out, and another 35% (125) listed various other reasons. The most common other reasons were the members’ need to access lump sums of money for business, farm financing, and community development; to have money to save and lend during the COVID-19 crisis; and members’ uncertainty regarding when the COVID-19 crisis would end.

Figure 4. SILCs' decisions in Latin America and Africa



### 3.5 Savings and lending trends

While most SILCs in Africa had decided to continue to meet with modified safety and hygiene procedures, the economic shutdowns threaten to impede the functioning of SILCs. Among the groups that continued to meet, 75% (263) experienced decreased and/or less regular savings deposits from members, 19% (66) saw no change, and just 3% (5) saw an increase in regular savings deposits. Possibly due to the hardships imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and economic shutdowns, 13% (46) groups were at the time of their interviews allowing their members to withdraw some or all of their savings, without conducting a share-out – a practice typically not permitted (85%, or 297, were not). The countries with the highest shares of groups permitting their members to withdraw savings were Burkina Faso (59%), Mali (42%), and Niger (33%).

Although savings and lending deposits had decreased and/or become less regular for most SILCs that continued to meet, many SILCs continued to issue loans to their members. Of the groups that continued to meet, 74% (260) were still issuing loans, and 26% (90) had ceased.<sup>8</sup> There is no evident correlation between groups' savings and lending trends: fully 75% of groups that had seen declines and/or reduced regularity in members' savings were still issuing loans at the time of their representatives' interviews, while 100% of groups that had seen increased and/or more regular savings were doing the same.<sup>9</sup> The countries with the highest shares of SILCs continuing to meet that had ceased issuing loans were Burkina Faso (47%), The Gambia (45%), and Kenya (31%).

### 3.6 Procedures adopted to reduce COVID-19 transmission risk during SILC meetings

In both Latin American and Africa, most SILCs that were continuing to meet at the time of their interviews had implemented at least one of the modified safety and hygiene practices to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission during their meetings, recommended in the CRS guidelines.

#### 3.6.1 Latin America

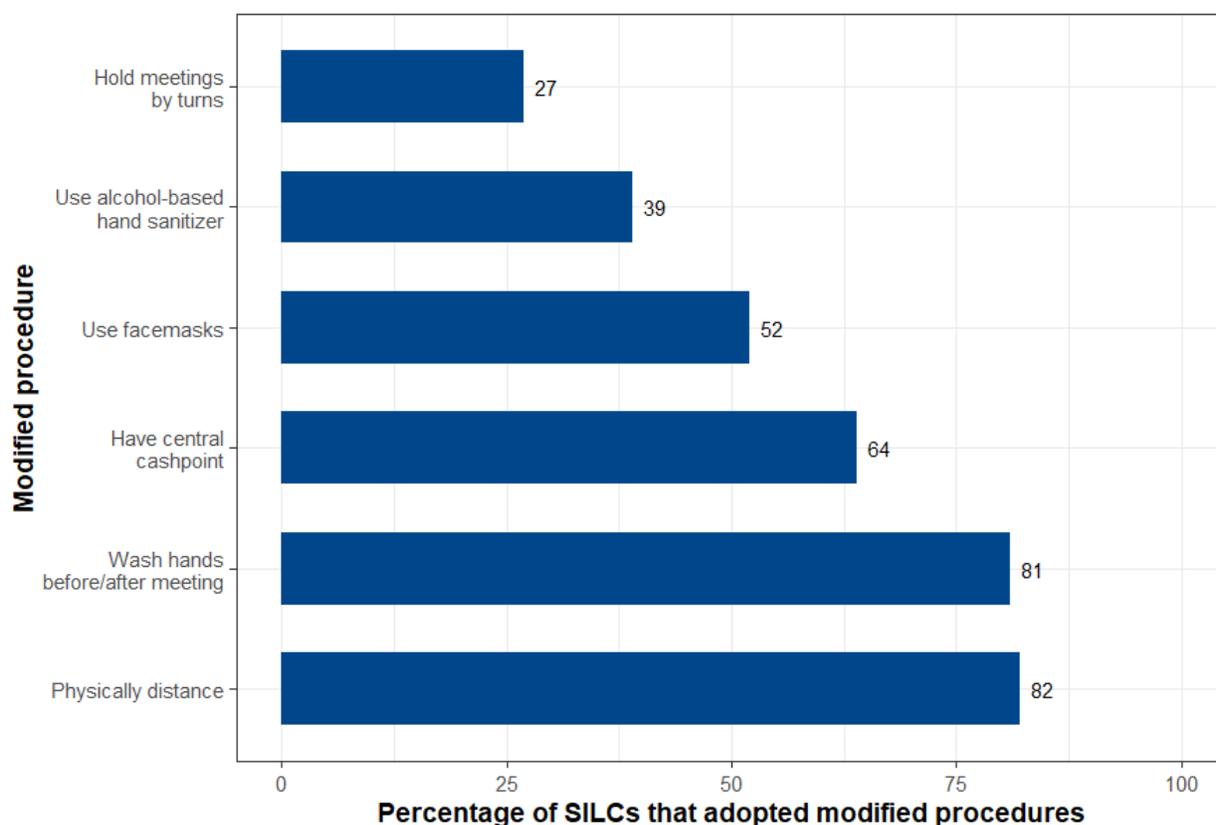
In Latin America, of the 101 SILCs that reported implementing modified meeting procedures to reduce COVID-19 transmission risk, 82% (83) had their members sit at least one meter apart from each other, 81% (82) had their members wash their hands before and/or after the meeting, 64% (65) established a central “cash point,” which only one member at a time could access to deposit savings, social fund, and other contribution (if any), 52% (53) had their members wear masks, 39% (39) had their members use hand sanitizer, and 27% (27) held meetings by turns (Figure 5). In addition, several groups reported providing bleach and water, while others held their meetings outside or in a well-ventilated room, some prohibited physical contact between members or used rubber gloves or plastic bags to prevent direct contact with cash. A few prohibited older and vulnerable members from attending meetings but allowed them to send a representative.

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<sup>8</sup> One SILC representative was unsure whether their SILC was continuing to issue loans.

<sup>9</sup> The survey did not ask about savings and loan sizes, so we do not know if loans to members became smaller as members' savings decreased and/or became less regular.

Figure 5. Modified procedures adopted by SILCs in Latin America



Once the COVID-19 pandemic recedes and their national governments remove restrictions, representatives of 30% (30) of SILCs in Latin America said their groups planned to continue applying the modified safety procedures they had adopted, 68% (69) planned to return to normal meeting procedures, and one did not know.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.6.2 Africa

In Africa, 81% (351) of the 433 groups included in the sample continued to meet, using modified procedures to reduce COVID-19 transmission risk during meetings. Of these groups, 68% (239) provided water and soap, 67% (235) required members to sit at least one meter from each other, 64% (225) required members to wash their hands at the beginning of each meeting, 52% (182) at the end of the meeting, and 49% (171) after handling money. Forty-four percent (153) of groups established a central “cash point” for transactions with access restricted to one member at a time, 41% (144) reduced their meeting times by not combining their SILC meetings with other activities, and 33% (117) ceased providing food or drink at meetings. Thirty-eight

<sup>10</sup> One SILC representative whose group continued to meet at the time of their interview, did not answer the question.

percent (135) of groups held meetings by turns to limit gathering sizes, and 34% (120) required their members to wear face masks (Table 1).

*Table 1. Modified procedures adopted, or to be adopted, by SILCs in Africa*

<b>Modified procedure</b>	<b>% of SILCs that continue to meet</b>	<b>% of SILCs that have stopped meeting, but plan to meet again</b>
Provision of running water and soap	68	83
Members sit at least 1 meter from each other	67	70
All members wash and/or sanitize hands at the beginning of the meeting	64	83
All members wash and/or sanitize hands at the end of the meeting	52	78
All members wash and/or sanitize hands after handling money	49	50
Central cashpoint with access limited to 1 member at a time	44	37
Meetings not combined with any other activities, to reduce meeting time	41	24
Meetings held by turns to meet legal requirements limiting gathering sizes	38	20
Children not brought to meetings	37	28
Members use face masks during the meeting	34	65
Food and drink not provided at meetings	33	26
Elderly and other vulnerable persons send representatives to meetings	23	24
Elderly and other vulnerable persons not permitted to attend meetings	22	28
Provision of alcohol-based hand sanitizer	9	35

The principal contrast between African and Latin American groups pertained to the use of hand sanitizer: in Latin America, 39% of groups that continued to meet provided hand sanitizer at their meetings, while only 9% of groups in Africa did so. According to SILC representatives interviewed, the lack of hand sanitizer provision in Africa was primarily due to its scarcity and high cost.

Group representatives indicated that they were confident that their SILCs would continue to practice several of the safety and hygiene practices they had adopted, after the COVID-19 pandemic recedes. Principal among these group practices was hand-washing, including washing hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand sanitizer. This was mentioned by 56% (197) of the 351 informants whose groups continued to meet, with modified procedures. Many informants emphasized that hand-washing is good practice, whether or not COVID-19 is spreading, as it can help prevent other illnesses.<sup>11</sup> Nine percent (32) of groups said they would continue to practice some form of physical distancing and 7% (26) would continue to ask members to wear masks. In addition, 2% (7) of groups said they would continue to use a central “cashpoint,”

<sup>11</sup> See CDC, *Show Me the Science – Why Wash Your Hands?* URL: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/why-handwashing.html#:~:text=Handwashing%20with%20soap%20removes%20germs,mouth%20and%20make%20us%20sick>. Accessed 8 September 2020.

although not all would do so for health reasons. For example, one SILC representative felt that the central “cashpoint” increases the transparency of their group’s transactions. Finally, 2% (6) of groups said they would continue to keep meetings short by not serving food or drink, 1% (5) would not combine the meetings with other activities, 1% (5) would continue to forbid children from attending meetings, and 0.9% (3) would do the same for ill, old, or vulnerable members. Only 0.6% (2) of groups said they would continue to hold their meetings by turns.

Representatives of the 46 SILCs that had stopped meeting, but planned to meet again once the pandemic recedes, were asked what modified procedures their groups planned to adopt, when they started meeting again.<sup>12</sup> Eighty-three percent (38) plan to provide water and soap at their meetings, an equal number plans to require all their members to wash and/or sanitize their hands at the beginning of each meeting, 65% (30) to require members to wear face masks, and 70% (32) to require their members to sit at least one meter from each other (Table 1). Fifty-nine percent (27) plan to implement all four of the safety and hygiene procedures listed in the previous sentence, while only 4% (2) plan to implement *all* the safety and hygiene practices recommended in the CRS guidance.

Of the 351 groups that continued to meet, with modified procedures, 36% (126) reported that they had not implemented one or more of the safety and hygiene procedures because those procedures were too difficult or too costly to implement. Fifty-eight percent (73) of the representatives of these 126 groups said that acquiring hand sanitizer was difficult due to scarcity and/or expense. Thirty percent (38) said the same of face masks, with several representatives adding that their group members found masks uncomfortable to wear. Another 10% (13) were hesitant to urge members to wash their hands, especially at the end of meetings, and 6% (7) said their group members had difficulty practicing physical distancing, since physically touching upon meeting is a fundamental part of their culture.

## 4. Lessons for future crises

From the experience of disseminating the CRS SILC COVID-19 guidance to SILCs in all CPs quickly, and the learning provided by the surveys regarding the modified safety and hygiene procedures adopted by groups that continue to meet during the pandemic, informants’ reflections on their groups’ decisions and safety and hygiene measures, and growing global understanding of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19; some lessons can be learned for future CRS SILC guidance and strategy when confronting future pandemics or similar crises.

### 4.1 For SILCs

1. Washing hands correctly for at least 20 seconds, as the World Health Organization and U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommend to help prevent COVID-19 transmission,<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Of the 65 groups that had stopped meeting at the time of their representatives’ interviews, 46 (71%) said their groups planned to meet again once the pandemic has receded.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), *When and How to Wash Your Hands*. URL: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html#:~:text=Lather%20your%20hands%20by%20rubbing,for%20at%20least%2020%20seconds>. Accessed 8 September 2020.

requires little cost and effort to promote. Most groups that adopted the practice to combat the pandemic expressed willingness to continue to ask members to wash their hands with soap and water, once the pandemic recedes. Hand washing should be embedded in SILC training, and materials for hand-washing stations should be added to the required SILC kits, along with cashboxes and ledgers.

2. SILC trainings and materials should include modules on contingency planning for emergencies, so that SILCs can pivot quickly and easily from standard meetings to either early share-out or modified safety and hygiene practices – including those discussed in this study – should another crisis disrupt SILC members’ ability to conduct standard meetings and savings and lending procedures.

#### 4.2 For CRS and its implementing partners

3. CRS must ensure that it has robust communication channels between its CPs, implementing partners, and SILC field agents and PSPs; so that new guidance can reach its target audience (SILC members) efficiently and without loss of information.

CPs and partners should ensure that they have updated contact numbers for SILCs and PSPs. Once established, these communication channels should be tested periodically, to ensure that they function properly should another crisis occur.

4. Guidance – especially relating to SILC members’ health and safety during crises – should be reinforced through repetition, using the media available to CRS’ regional offices, CPs and partners. SILC representatives’ ability in the COVID-19 surveys to recall the guidance that had been communicated to them and their groups may have been imperfect. While most of the SILC representatives interviewed recalled being told at least one of the SILC operational options included in the CRS SILC guidance disseminated to CPs for communication to SILCs, several might have forgotten or misunderstood one or more of the options communicated to their SILC group; and some groups may have made operational decisions based on incomplete or imperfect understanding of the guidance options. Therefore, periodic reinforcement of CRS guidance messaging is warranted.

In Latin America, the regional and CP staff crafted and sent WhatsApp messages to SILC members to clarify and reinforce the COVID-19 SILC guidance, provide psycho-social support to SILC members, and share photographs of members practicing proper safety and hygiene measures (such as wearing masks and physically distancing). Similar efforts may help SILC members in other regions, in addition to demonstrating CRS’ and its implementing partners’ commitment to current and former project participants.

5. Finally, frequent and open communication between CRS or IP staff and SILC members can help encourage members to commit to changes in their practices in response to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In Latin America, SILC members expressed appreciation to project staff for the mobile phone calls and text messages they received from CRS and its

partners about the CRS SILC COVID-19 guidance – as well as the survey, which CP or IP staff conducted by CP or IP mobile phone. SILC members appreciated the attention because, according to CRS Latin American regional staff, “the phone call served to encourage them, as some people felt lonely because they were no longer going to normal [SILC] meetings.”

The results of the SILC COVID-19 surveys discussed in this report suggest that SILC members value their membership in their groups, such that many are willing to adopt new safety and hygiene precautions to continue their regular SILC meetings. While in Latin America, due to strict quarantine orders early in the pandemic, most SILCs ceased meeting, 86% of SILC representatives of those groups said that their groups planned to meet again once the pandemic recedes and national restrictions are lifted. In Africa, despite the pandemic, 81% of groups continued to meet, and adopted modified procedures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission among their members during meetings. Given the value that SILC members attach to their membership, CRS programming should apply the lessons learned from this study, to ensure that SILC members are sufficiently trained to adapt their operations to the next crisis, and can continue to save and lend with each other with minimal disruptions to their groups’ operations once the crisis has passed.