Tuberculosis (TB) is the world’s leading infectious disease killing around 1.5 million people each year. In response to early warnings of COVID-19 having devastating impacts on people affected by TB and TB programs around the world, 10 diverse global networks quickly came together to take action. A survey collecting voices from the ground affected by TB was launched on May 26, 2020. Separate questions and findings were collected for people with TB, frontline healthcare workers, program and policy officers, TB researchers, and TB advocates. Findings present lived experiences, lessons learned, advocacy recommendations, and opportunities for mitigating the damage done by COVID-19 to get countries back on track to achieving elimination targets, as well as building back better to end TB.

The impact of COVID-19 on the TB epidemic: A community perspective

**Key Findings**

**01** COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on the number of people seeking and receiving healthcare for TB.

- **IN KENYA**
  - 50% of people with TB reported having trouble finding transport to care facilities.

- **IN INDIA**
  - 36% of people with TB reported health facilities they normally visit closed.

- **GLOBALLY**
  - Policy and program officers reported significant drops in TB notification.

- **75%** of advocates from Global Fund Eligible Countries reported a decrease in TB testing during the pandemic.

- **73%** reported people with TB to be facing significant challenges accessing treatment and care.

**02** COVID-19 is driving people with TB into poverty, and social isolation is increasing inequities and human rights related barriers to TB services.

- **IN KENYA AND INDIA**
  - 50% of people with TB said they feared contracting COVID-19 at a health facility.

- **61%** of advocates from Global Fund Eligible Countries reported an increase in misinformation and stigma in relation to people with TB, identifying stigma, human rights barriers, and fear as serious challenges to effective TB and COVID-19 responses.

- **50%** of people with TB in Kenya reported an increase in misinformation and stigma in relation to people with TB.

**Build back better:**

There is an urgent need for a recovery plan to get TB responses back on track to reach United Nations High-Level Meeting (UN HLM) TB targets and commitments to end TB by 2030. COVID-19 has demonstrated the important role that affected communities play in responding to health crises, reporting barriers to access, supporting peers and filling gaps in services. The pandemic is an opportunity for national TB responses to be more people-centred and to involve communities.

**Provide social protection:**

COVID-19 has emphasized the critical importance of social protection systems. There is an urgent need to promote equity and access to financial support, transportation, healthcare and food for all people with TB, free from discrimination, and to involve communities.
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03 Health systems around the world are weak and ill equipped to respond to simultaneous COVID-19 and TB epidemics.

**GLOBALLY**
There is not enough personal protective equipment (PPE) for people working in TB, resulting in unsafe and challenging working conditions.

Healthcare workers reported lacking PPE to safely care for people with TB and COVID-19.

62% US
48% GFIC

Policy and program officers reported an increase in stockouts and delays of TB medicines.

65%+ POLICY AND PROGRAM OFFICERS
reported healthcare facilities to be reducing TB services during the pandemic.

59% OF ADVOCATES FROM GLOBAL FUND ELIGIBLE COUNTRIES
reported resources for people with TB being diverted to respond to COVID-19

04 People working in the TB field are seeing significant interruptions and diversions of their work and research to COVID-19.

**GLOBALLY**
50%+ OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS
reported reductions in TB services where they worked, particularly in private settings.

A majority of TB policy and program officers reported being reassigned to respond to COVID-19.

87% US
59% GFIC

**GLOBALLY TB RESEARCHERS REPORTED:**

90% Work/travel disruptions

81% Delays in research

Advocates from Global Fund implementing countries expressed frustration with political attention being diverted to COVID-19 and its dominance of the information and media space.

**Strengthen healthcare:**
Frontline health care workers and health volunteers have been the first line of defence against COVID-19 around the world. Yet, COVID-19 has weakened health systems everywhere, forcing healthcare workers to contend with unsafe working conditions. Healthcare systems need to address TB and COVID-19 in an integrated way. Fever and cough are symptoms of both TB and COVID-19, and simultaneous screening and diagnostic services are needed in both public and private health sectors.

**Build Capacity:**
Essential TB health services and research should never grind to a halt. The ‘covidization’ of research and the overall health sector (communication, politics, implementation and research) has diverted attention away from TB activities. Interruptions need to be addressed, underscored by real time data received from those on the ground.
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05  TB funding has decreased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic.

**Advocates**
53% said funding for TB was diverted to the COVID-19 response.

51% said donor support for TB had decreased.

**Policy and Program Officers**
65% said funding for TB was being diverted for the COVID-19 response.

Invest:
COVID-19 has diverted funding away from TB. To meet the UN HLM TB targets and commitments, TB financing must reach US$13 billion a year by 2022. The US$3.3 billion funding gap posted in 2019 is being amplified by the additional funding required to address pandemic-related disruptions.

06  Many health facilities and programs have adapted the ways they deliver services and resources in response to COVID-19, which presents an opportunity for the future of TB care and prevention.

**Globally**
60% of researchers said COVID-19 related research projects they were working on could be repurposed or leveraged for TB.

**All groups emphasized that people-centered adaptations and empowering measures should be sustained beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Innovate and adapt:
COVID-19 has made health a priority on the political agenda, and it must remain a priority beyond the pandemic. There are opportunities to draw on this momentum to strengthen the overall TB response by adapting strategies and taking advantage of innovative digital health platforms. A new paradigm is required to effectively meet current challenges and to champion the human rights, empowerment and engagement of people affected by TB.

Respondents reported the successful use of innovative solutions in telemedicine and digital health (video, phone, WhatsApp, apps, social media, etc.), as well as greater family and community support for people on TB treatment.

All groups identified an opportunity to strengthen the TB response during the pandemic: Investments in COVID-19, such as in contract-tracing or diagnostic capacity, can be leveraged for TB, while heightened interest in and awareness of infectious respiratory diseases and global health offer an entry point for increasing the political will to end TB.