

60 \_ decibels



# Listening During COVID-19: A Year In Review

February 2021

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“The virus is like  
an invisible enemy  
that is  
hard to fight.”

- Woman, Philippines, May 2020



# Introduction

# About This Report

## In March 2020

as COVID-19 began to spread, we noticed something: nearly all the data about how COVID-19 was impacting people's lives came from wealthy markets and customers. The 3.5 billion people who are either offline or don't have access to a smartphone were not part of the conversation.

In response, 60 Decibels mobilized to do what we do best: listen to customer voices at scale. We wanted to understand, and share, how this pandemic and the associated government responses were affecting the most vulnerable.

## Our Response

We launched our first COVID-19 surveys on April 1, reaching out to customers across sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Our surveys focused on awareness and concern about COVID-19, and how it was impacting income, food consumption, ability to make payments, and overall household financial health.

We shared our results in real-time on the [60 Decibels COVID-19 Dashboard](#), which we've been continually updating since the start of the pandemic. By tracking and sharing what we've been hearing, we have helped inform action so companies, NGOs, and governments could direct the right kind of support to those who need it most.

As of February 2021, we have heard from more than 50,000 people across 32 countries, with a strong focus on low- to middle-income countries.

## How We Collected The Data

We collected this data through phone surveys conducted by the [60 Decibels global research network](#)—more than 750 Research Assistants across 51 countries who speak more than 125 languages. Using a standard set of COVID-19 questions, we were able to compare experiences within and across countries, sectors, income levels, and more.

In this report, we share a summary of what we've learned so far. We hope this information will help inform further action and support where it is needed most. For more detail on anything in this report, please visit our [Dashboard](#).



Credit: Yohann Libot on Unsplash



Credit: Ashkan Forouzani on Unsplash

# Who We Heard From

## 32

### Countries

Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Madagascar, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United States, Zambia.

## 50k

### Respondents

3,748 responses were through online surveys, the remaining 46,964 were through phone surveys.

## 9

### Months

We collected data from April 2020 through December 2020.

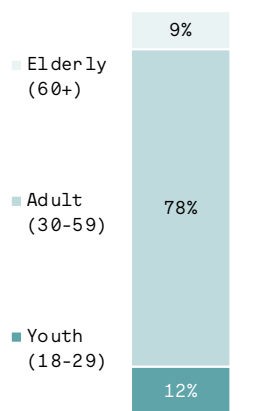
## Demographics of Who We Spoke With

### Gender

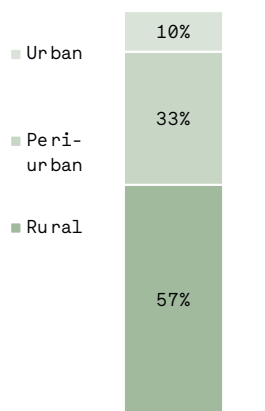
♀ Female 27%

♂ Male 73%

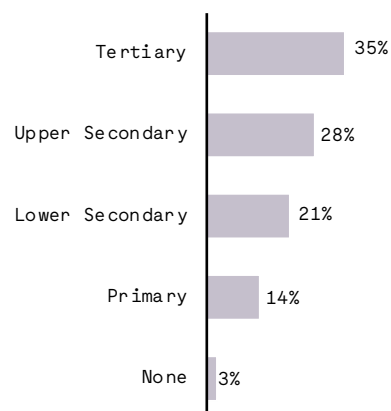
### Age Group



### Location Type



### Highest Level of Education



We wanted to thank all of the respondents who took part in our surveys: thank you for your time, your honest feedback, and your extraordinary comments.

“Yes, we are now saving on every possible front and eating only as much is required.



There is not a single rupee that is spent without thinking.”

- Man, India, May 2020



# 10

## Lessons About COVID-19 in 2020

01.

**The level of concern about COVID-19 varied drastically by region.** In Latin America, 85% of respondents said they were 'very concerned' compared to 65% in Africa and 37% in Asia. Overall, we saw the highest level of concern in April when there was the most uncertainty about the crisis.

04.

**Respondents have relied heavily on savings to cope with the pandemic.** Globally, 59% of people had to rely on savings to make ends meet and 29% borrowed money. As the pandemic continues, we worry about people depleting their savings, making them more vulnerable to other shocks and affecting their ability to recover.

02.

**Respondents care most about health risks, followed by concern about their ability to earn an income.** 46% of respondents said health risks were their primary concern and 33% said they were most concerned about the ability to work or earn an income. Once again, these results varied by region: 66% of Latin American respondents were most concerned about health risks compared to 47% in South East Asia, 31% in South Asia, 30% in East Africa, and 28% in West Africa.

05.

**The 60dB Vulnerability Index, a composite set of indicators to understand the impact of shocks, showed us which populations were hit hardest.** Of the 20 countries surveyed, households in Rwanda were the most vulnerable and households in Tanzania were the least vulnerable. In Rwanda, 26% of households fell into the 'Extremely Vulnerable' category compared to the global average of 7%. Tanzania had the lowest vulnerability score, with less than 1% of people categorized as 'Extremely Vulnerable.'

03.

**Food consumption has dropped as a result of COVID-19.** Nearly one in three respondents said they reduced their food consumption to cope with the pandemic. Some results were truly shocking: in Madagascar, 60% of respondents decreased their food consumption, compared to only 9% in Tanzania. In the second half of 2020, the percent of respondents cutting back on food consumption decreased.







**06. The top two sources of hope during this time were government action and handwashing and sanitation efforts.** Citizens feel that this public health crisis requires a government response, and one-third of respondents mentioned government action as a source of hope. However, nearly 1 in 4 respondents say they have 'no source of hope.' More worrisome still are the outliers: Nigeria, for example, had 65% of respondents saying they have 'no source of hope.'



**07. The financial impacts of the pandemic were felt globally, but things are improving over time.** 28% of global respondents' financial situation had become 'much worse' since the start of COVID-19, but this has steadily improved each month. We saw the percent of global respondents saying their financial situation had worsened to some degree decrease from 75% April 2020 to 28% in October 2020.

**08. Gig economy workers were hit hard.** Globally, 66% of gig economy workers we surveyed said they experienced a 'large decline in income.' This varied by geography with 81% of Indian gig economy workers reporting a 'large decline in income' (the highest numbers we saw) compared to 50% in the U.S. (the lowest we saw). The sectors with largest reported declines in income were ride-sharing (79%) and delivery (64%).



**09. Despite the impact of the pandemic, off-grid energy products and services had a significant positive impact on customers' lives.** 90% of those surveyed said their quality of life had improved thanks to their off-grid energy product or service. The top outcomes customers spoke about were ease of doing tasks (39%), high product quality (36%), and improved energy access (25%).

**10. Nearly nine in ten Kenyan farmers are worse off since the pandemic.** Since June 2020, 88% of Kenyan farmers surveyed indicated they are worse off financially because of the pandemic. After a slight improvement in October, November and December showed more farmers reporting financial distress.

“This disease is not a joke as it is deadly, I am even afraid to go to work because I may contract it



Credit: Alexandros Dimitriou on Unsplash

you see life is better than money.”

- Man, 58, Kenya, May

Part 01:

Sector  
Spotlights

# Gig Worker Spotlight

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic dislocation triggered a significant shift in gig workers' lives. To understand how gig workers are managing these challenges and how they can be better served by fintech companies, we partnered with Flourish Ventures on a global gig workers study.

**Finding 1: Gig workers' livelihoods across the globe were upended during the pandemic, and ridesharing drivers were hit the hardest.**

Check out **The Digital Hustle Global Report** from Flourish Ventures.

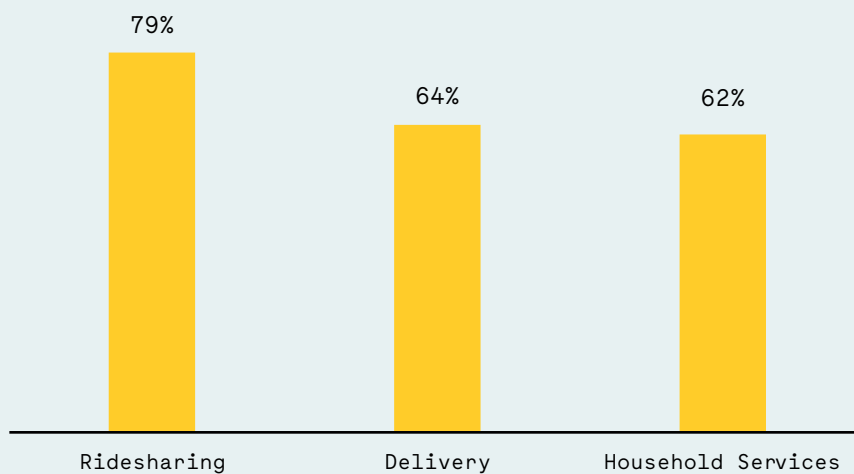
## Decrease in Income Since COVID-19 (By Country)

Q: Has your income changed since the lockdown began on March 22? (% who reported 'very much decreased')



## Decrease in Income Since COVID-19 (By Worker Type)

Q: Has your income changed since the lockdown began on March 22? (% who reported 'very much decreased')



Countries: 5

Respondents: 3,748

Fund Partner: Flourish Ventures

## Finding 2: Women are more likely than men to have taken on additional types of work since COVID-19.

Women are underrepresented in the gig economy in the countries where we conducted research, and this was reflected in our sample. Only 23% of total respondents were women. While we did not find major gender differences across financial resilience or reported changes in quality of life, we did notice that women are 7% more likely than men to take on additional types of work.

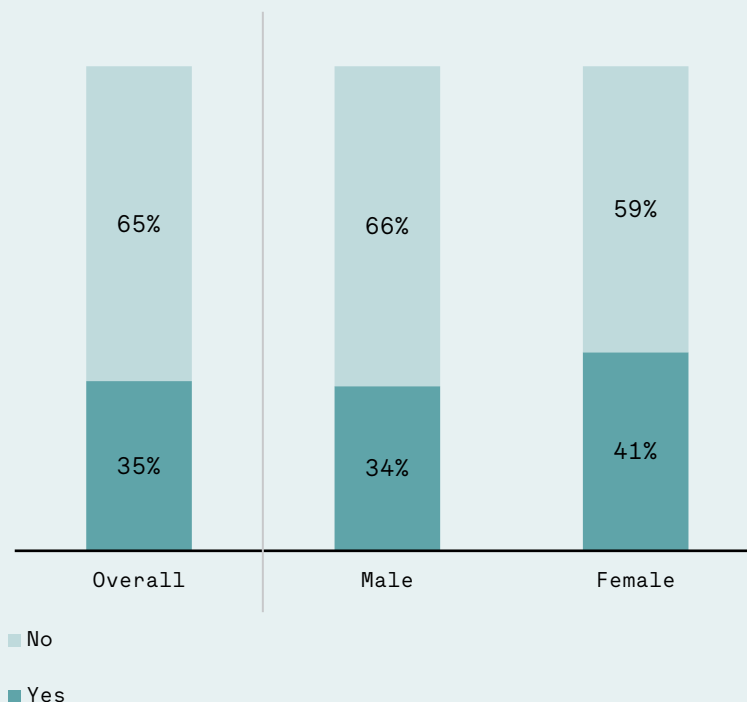
The types of additional jobs that people are taking on also differs across genders. Most of the extra jobs that women are taking on are online reselling (17%), selling food (16%), and on-demand tasks (15%). Most of the extra jobs that men are taking on are delivery (18%), handyman / construction (16%), sales (14%).

## Finding 3: Thinking about future financial goals and aspirations, respondents are most concerned about the ability to save for the future and pay off debt.

[Click here to learn more.](#)

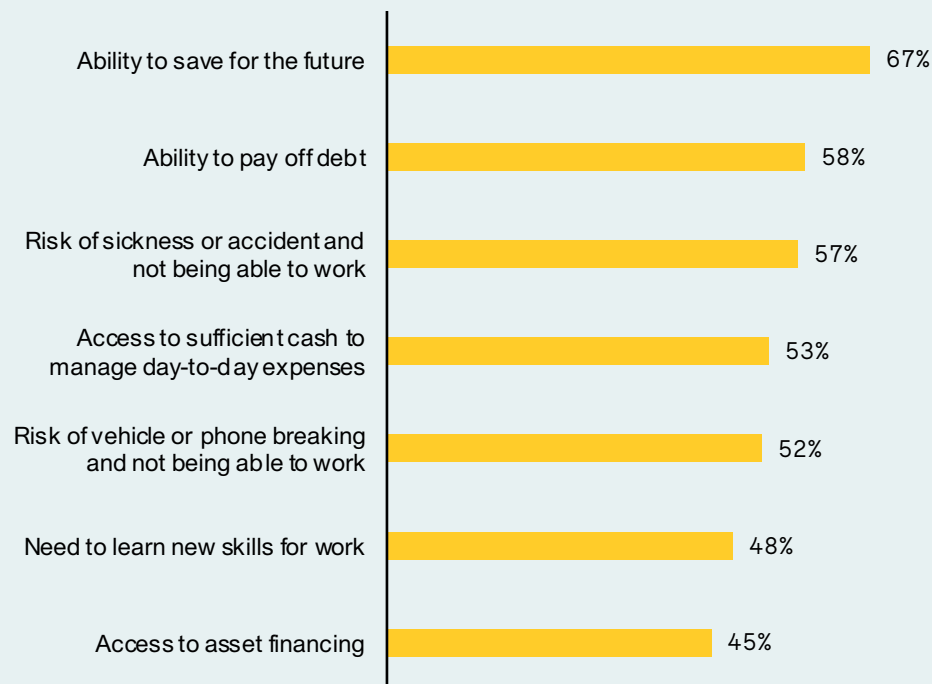
### Found New or Additional Work

Q: Are you doing any additional types of jobs to earn income since the lockdown started that you were not doing before?



### Financial Concerns

Q: How concerned are you about the following? (% 'very concerned')



# Financial Inclusion Spotlight

Globally, there are ~1.7 billion adults who are unbanked or underbanked. This lack of financial access limits economic opportunity and makes people more vulnerable to financial shocks. We set out to understand how microfinance clients have been impacted by COVID-19, and to learn how financial service providers (FSPs) can help them weather this crisis.

## Finding 1: Clients have suffered from a decrease in income and are burdened by loan repayment obligations.

In June 2020, 90% of microfinance clients reported their income had either 'very much' or 'slightly' decreased. While this figure reduced to 77% in November, it's undeniable that clients are struggling to make ends meet.

Similarly, 49% of clients find repayments to be a burden, and half of those clients say they are a 'heavy burden.' Not surprisingly, 63% of clients say this burden has increased since the start of the pandemic.

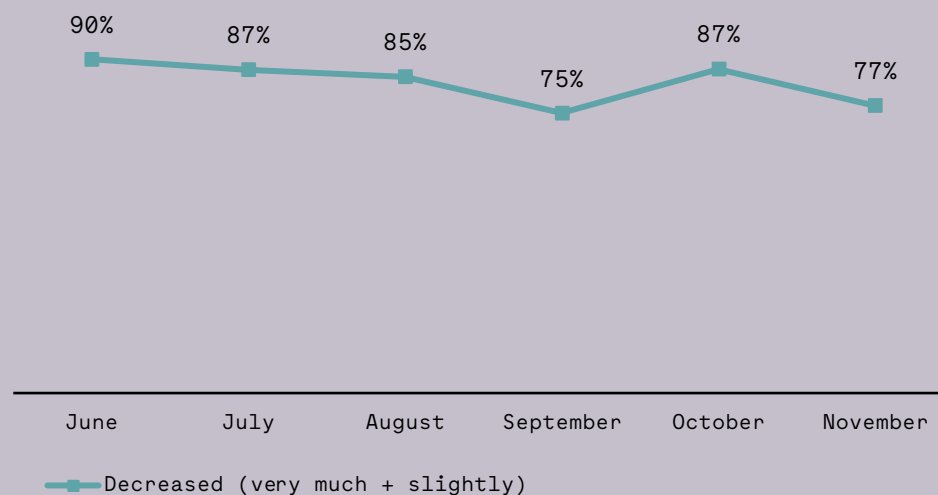
Countries: 21

Respondents: 17,945

Fund Partners: SPTF, ADA, Advans, Symbiotics, REGMIFA

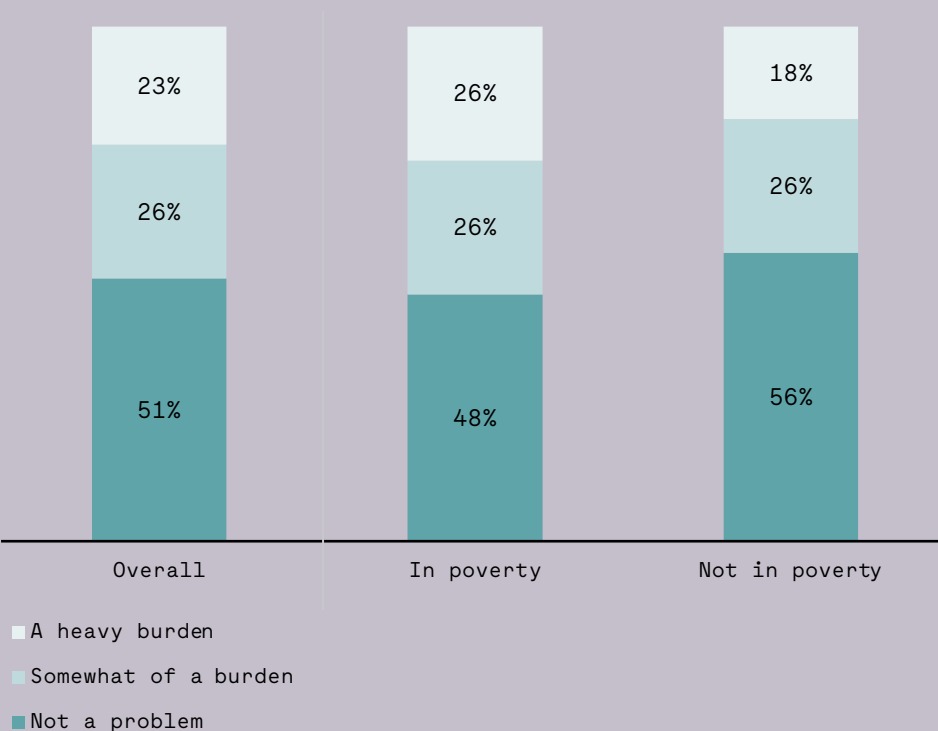
### Change in Income

Q: Has your income from your main income source changed since the start of the coronavirus lockdown? (% of respondents who reported a decrease)



### Loan Repayment Burden

Q: Thinking about company repayments at the moment, are they:

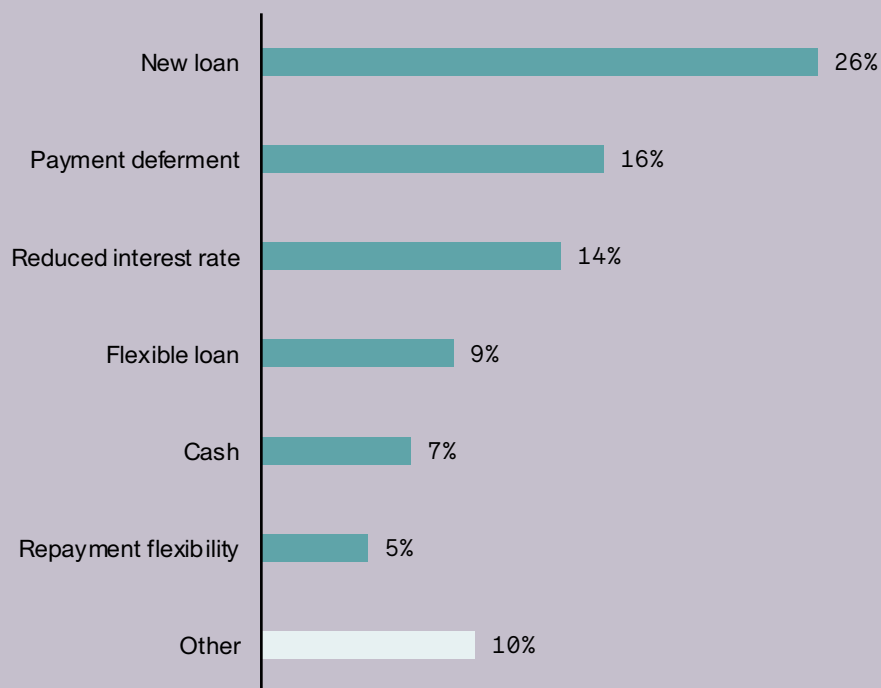


## Finding 2: Clients are interested in a new loan from their financial institution or a payment deferment.

When asked what their respective financial institution could do that would be helpful, 26% of borrowers said they are interested in getting a new loan. This is interesting as most financial institutions have halted lending during this time. Furthermore, 16% of borrowers said that they would be interested in a payment deferment.

### Requested Company Support

Q: Is there anything that the company can do that would be particularly helpful to you?



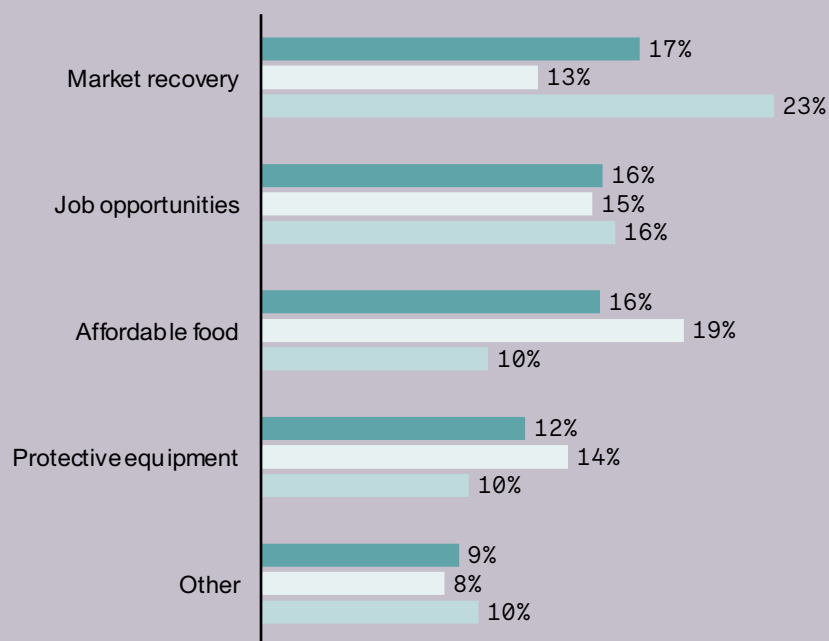
## Finding 3: What these clients want most is market recovery and job opportunities.

We asked respondents what, related to the pandemic, could improve their life at this time and the top mentions were market recovery (19%), job opportunities (17%), and access to affordable food (17%).

Women are far more likely than men to request access to food and protective equipment.

### Requested Overall Support

Q: Related to the pandemic, what one thing could improve your life at this time?



- Overall
- Female
- Male



## Finding 4: Clients' financial resilience has decreased over time, and they are using more coping mechanisms.

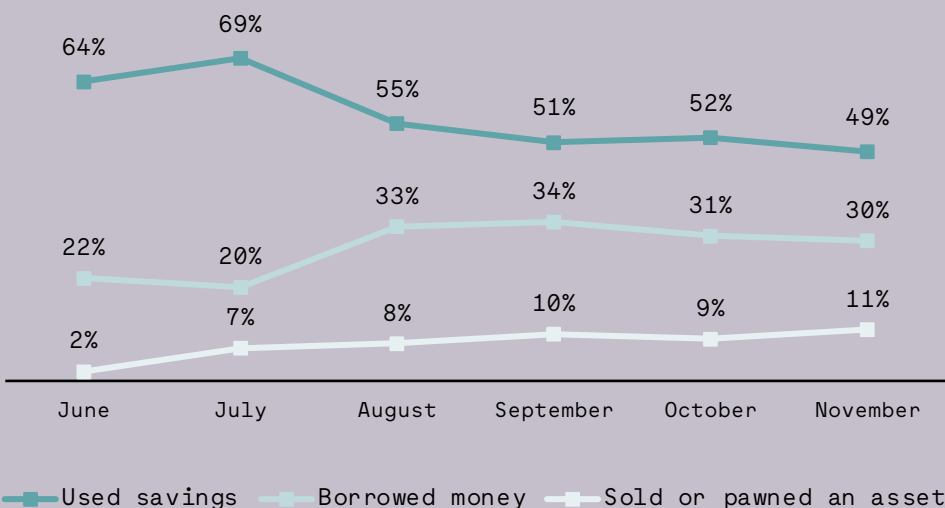
Reliance on savings has decreased over time while the use of more severe coping mechanisms, such as borrowing money or selling assets, has increased. This suggests clients are running out of financial resources to weather the crisis.

When borrowing money, clients have mostly relied on family and friends. However, borrowing from MFIs or banks is on the rise.

The use of coping mechanisms has increased over time, with those using three or more mechanisms tripling from 7% in June to 21% in November.

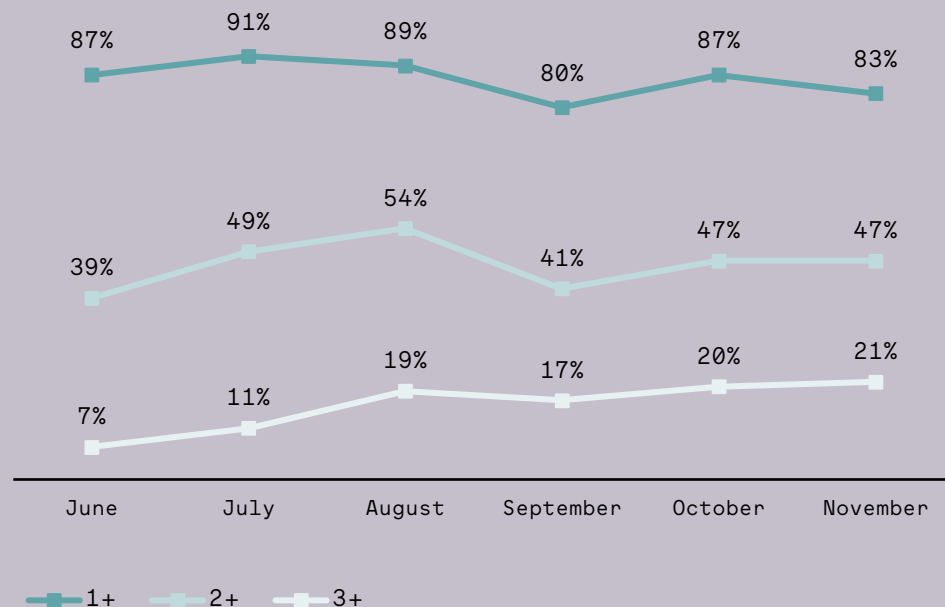
### Main Coping Mechanisms

Q: As a way to cope with the coronavirus situation, have you had to do any of the following?



### Number of Coping Mechanisms Used

Q: As a way to cope with the coronavirus situation, have you had to do any of the following? (% of clients using 1+, 2+ or 3+ coping mechanisms)



[Click here to learn more.](#)

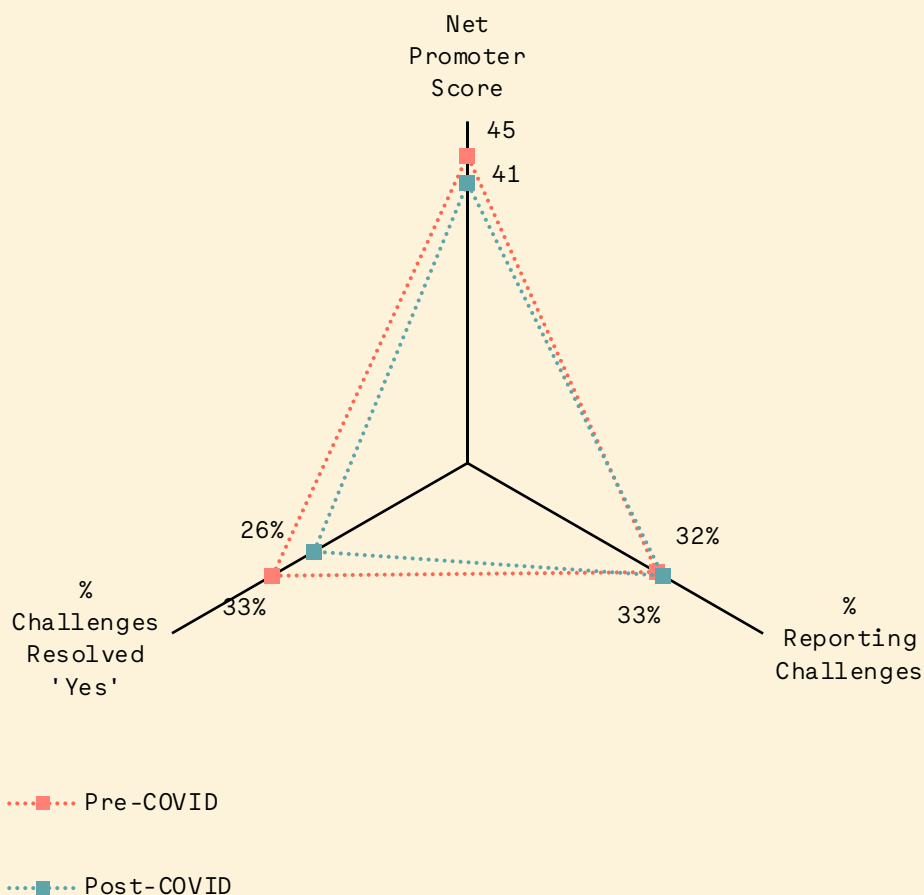
# Off-grid Energy Spotlight

We interviewed 18,521 energy customers from May to November 2020 to understand their experience of COVID-19, and the impact of off-grid energy in their lives. We worked with 50+ energy companies in 12 countries to complete this work.

## Finding 1: Customers have similar levels of satisfaction with their off-grid energy pre- and post-pandemic.

Compared to pre-COVID levels, customers have similar levels of satisfaction and rates of challenges. However, customers were less likely to have their product/service challenges resolved.

**Energy Customer Satisfaction Pre and Post COVID-19**



**Countries:** 12

**Respondents:** 18,521

**Fund Partners:** Rockefeller Foundation, GOGLA Consumer Protection initiative with financial support from the DOEN Foundation and CDC (through CDC Plus, funded by UK Aid), SNV, Efficiency for Access (funded by UK Aid), and DOEN Foundation

## Finding 2: The Impact of energy access is positive and significant.

To gauge depth of impact, we asked customers to reflect on whether their quality of life has changed due to energy access. 90% said that their life had improved.

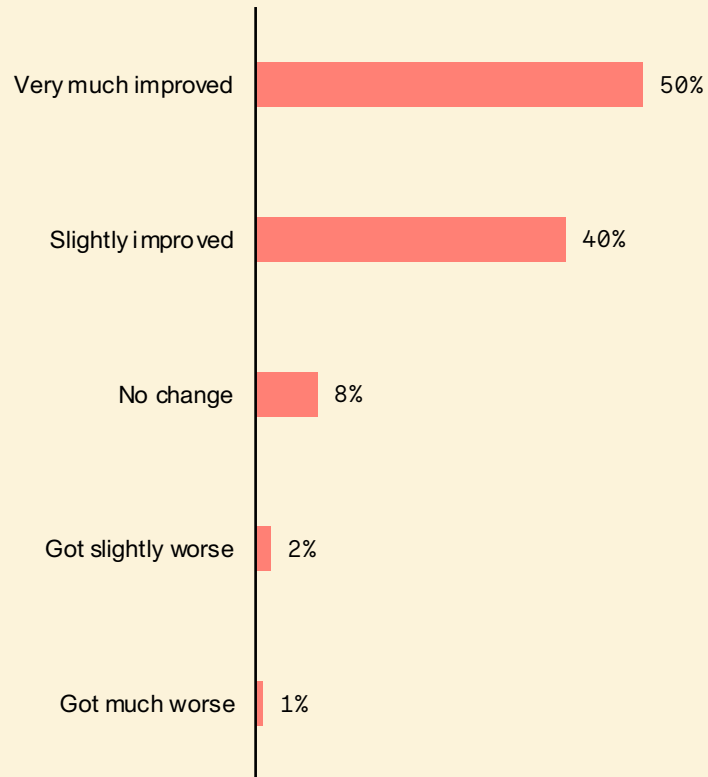
Customers were asked to describe – in their own words – the changes they were experiencing. Top outcomes included:

- The ease of doing tasks** (39%)
- High product quality** (36%)
- Improved energy access** (25%)

“We use it for TV, fan, charging of phone. It makes life easy for us.”

### Change In Quality Of Life

Q: Has your quality of life changed because of the product or service?



Don't miss our [2020 Off-Grid Energy Report!](#)

60\_decibels Feb

Why off-grid energy matters

An Impact Performance Report 2020

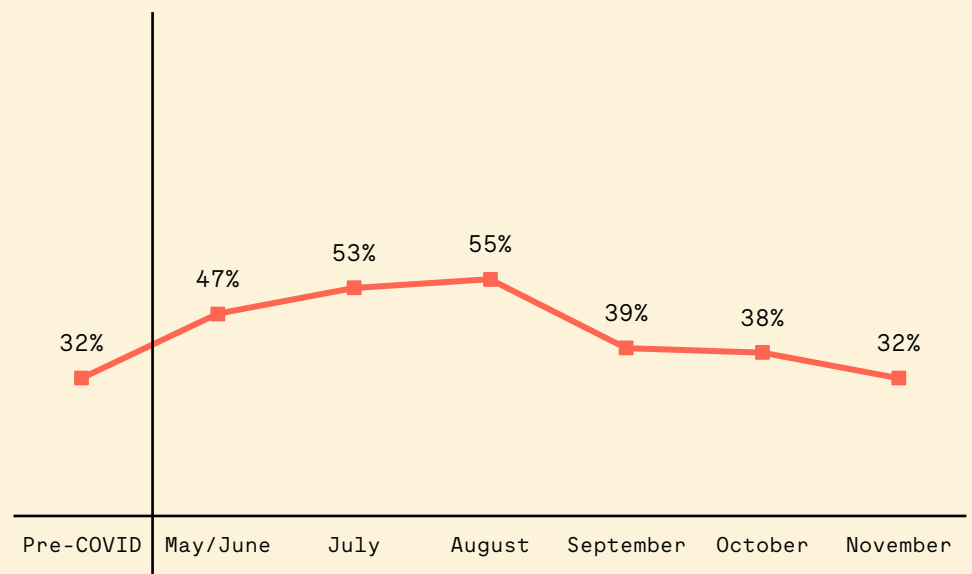
### Finding 3: Repayments are more of a burden than before COVID-19, but the percentage of respondents reporting a burden is decreasing and ability to make payments is increasing.

The proportion of customers saying payments were a burden shot up in June and then stabilized to a slightly higher level than pre-pandemic.

By November, this figure was starting to approach pre-pandemic levels. While only a small proportion of customers say payments are a 'heavy burden,' nearly half of these customers reported cutting back on food consumption.

#### Payment Burden Over Time

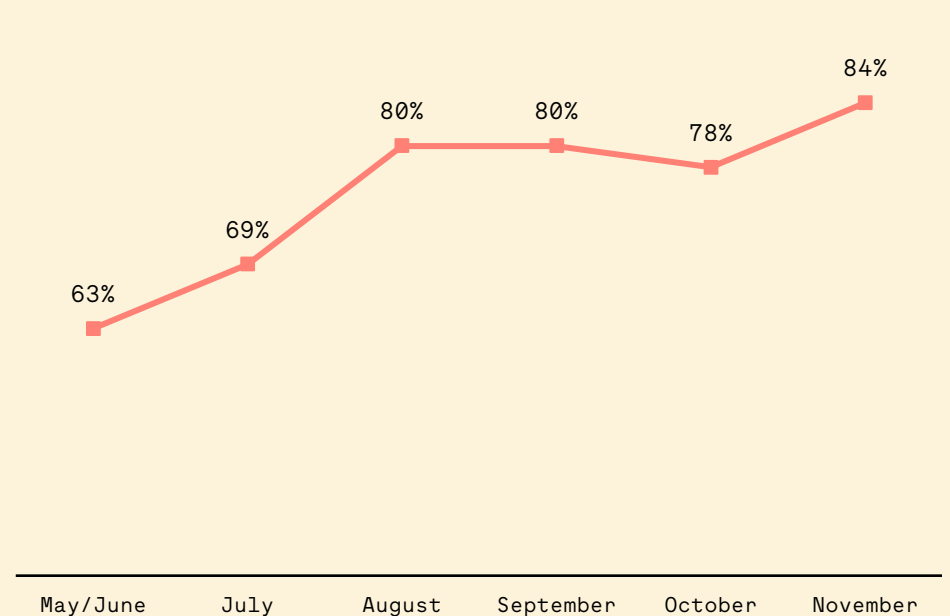
Q: Thinking about your repayments at the moment, are they [not a problem, somewhat of a burden, or a heavy burden]?



—■ A 'heavy' burden and 'somewhat' of a burden

#### Confidence in Making Repayments

Q: How confident would you say you are in your ability to make payments as you normally would for the next month?



—■ 'Very confident' and 'Slightly confident'

[Click here to learn more.](#)

# Kenya Agriculture Spotlight

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns enacted by governments are disrupting supply chains and posing a lasting threat to global food systems. At the center of these supply chains are 500 million smallholder farmers who are the source of one-third of the food we eat. From June to December 2020, we spoke to 3,596 Kenyan crop and livestock farmers (roughly 500 a month) to bring their voices to the center of conversations on farmer and food systems recovery.

## Finding 1: Financial stress increased over time.

Nine in 10 farmers say their financial situation has worsened since the pandemic. While the majority have been able to tap into their savings, a third have had to borrow money and a fourth have sold assets. As farmers deplete savings and saleable assets, they could become more dependent on borrowing, leading to a slower recovery.

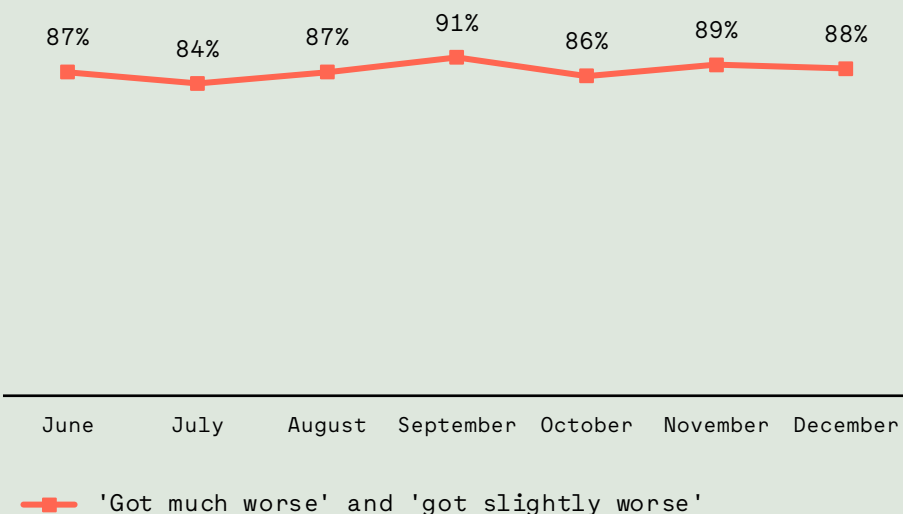
Countries: 1

Respondents: 3,596

**Fund Partners:** Strengthening Impact Investing Markets in Agriculture (SIIMA) programme through UK Aid, Acumen, CDC, Shell Foundation, CGAP, and Mercy Corps' AgriFin Accelerate Program.

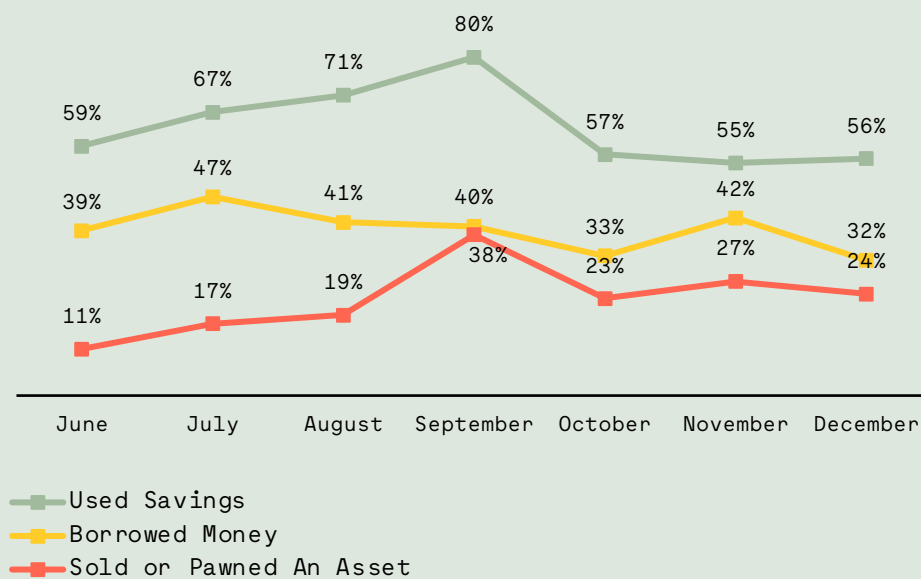
### Financial Well-being

Q: So far, overall, has the financial situation of your family changed since lockdown?



### Use Of Coping Strategies

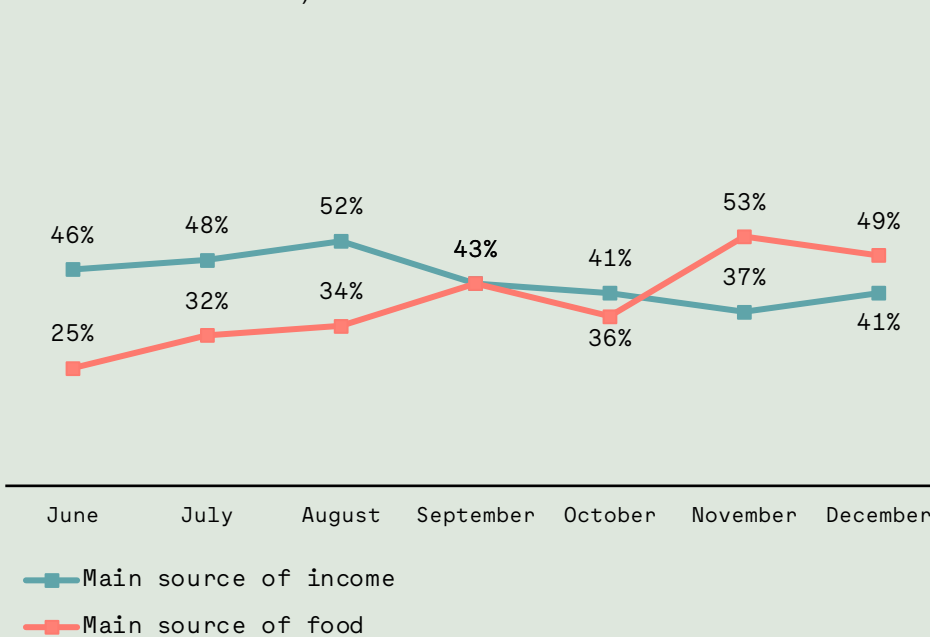
As a way to cope with the coronavirus situation, have you or anyone in the household had to do any of the following that you wouldn't normally have to do? Have you:



## Finding 2: Farming is increasingly important.

Thanks to restrictions on economic activity, 25% of Kenyan farmers have lost at least one source of income. Almost all of this loss is concentrated in regular income sources like wages and business earning. 46% of farmers say that farming is playing an increased role in their ability to earn money. They are also increasingly reliant on farming as a source of food.

**Farming as Primary Income and Food Source**  
 (% of respondents who reported reliance on farming for income and food sources)

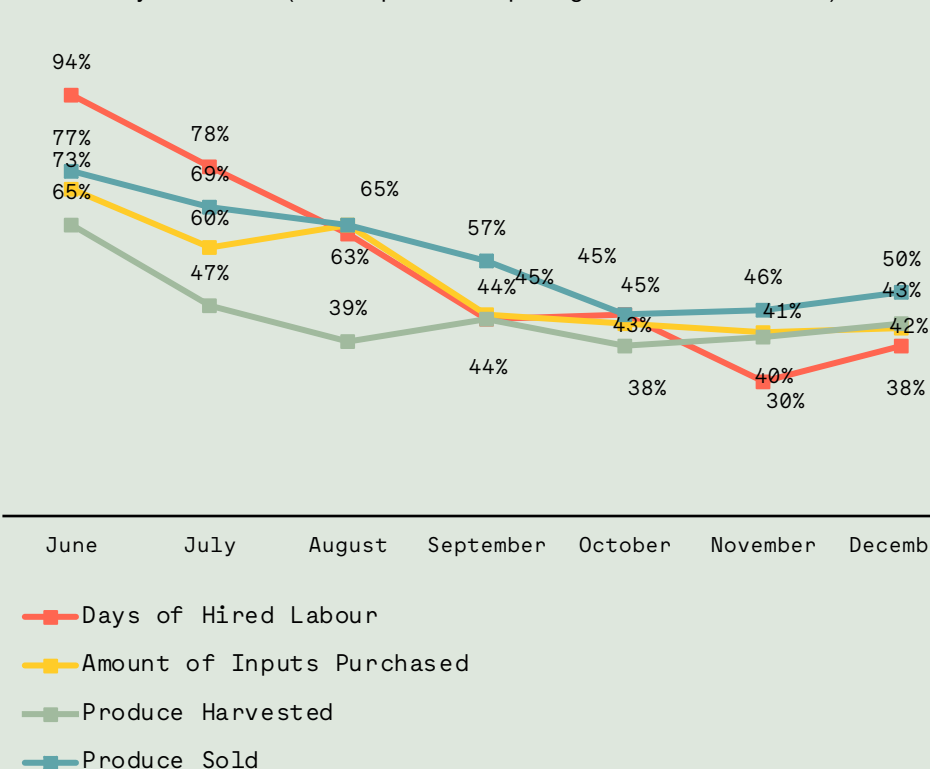


## Finding 3: Kenyan Farmers scaled back significantly in June, but things are improving.

Farmers decreased the amount of hired labor, inputs purchased, produce harvested, and produce sold. More than 60% of those who sold less produce said this was not a choice—they wanted to sell more but could not.

**% Reporting They Have Reduced Key Farm Activities**

Q: As a way to cope with the coronavirus situation in the last two weeks, has your household had to do any of the following farm activities differently from how you would have normally done them? (% of respondents reporting a decrease in activities)



## Finding 4: The high price of inputs puts future earnings at risk.

Since the start of the pandemic, 69% of farmers reported an increase in the price of agricultural inputs and 67% of farmers say that the price their household is paying for food is higher.

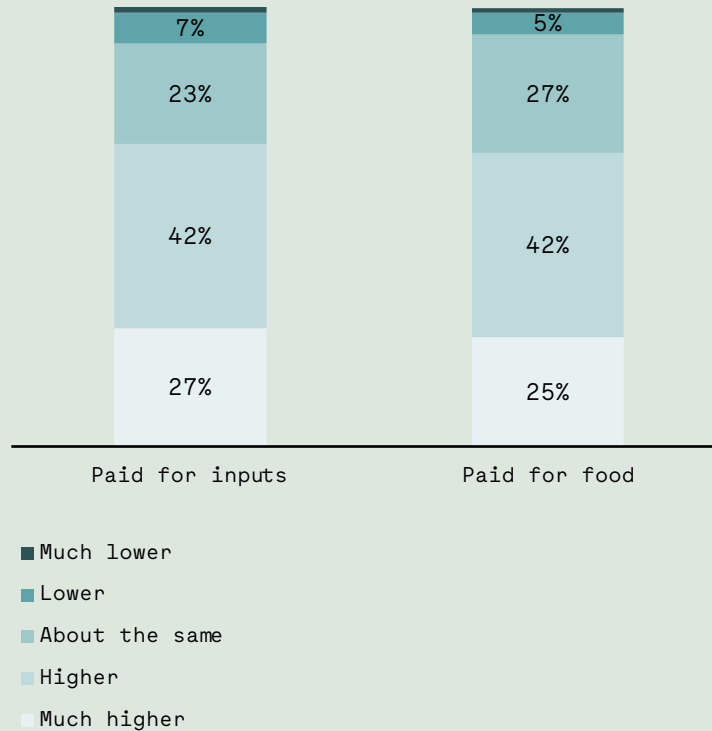
However, this increase in the price of food is not yet making its way to farmers at the start of the supply chain. In fact, 63% of farmers say that they received lower prices for their produce. Additionally, farmers want to sell more but they are unable.

“Both lives and livelihoods are at risk from this pandemic...we risk a looming food crisis.”

- Female farmer, Age 26, June 2020

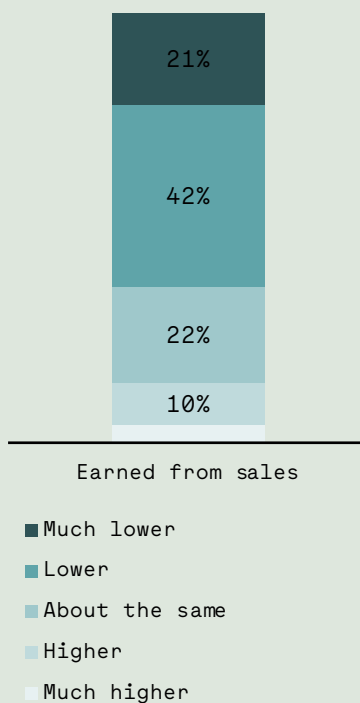
### Impact on Price of Inputs and Food

Q: Was the price you paid for [food / inputs] in the last two weeks higher, lower or about the same as usual?



### Impact on Farmer Revenue

Q: Was the money you earned in the last two weeks higher, lower or about the same as usual?





## Gender Disaggregated Agriculture Data



Women



Men

We analyzed our agriculture data to understand differences in well-being, financial hardship, and requests for support based on gender.

Overall, financial hardship is somewhat worse for women: 45% of women reported a 'much worse' financial situation compared to 39% of men. They are also making more adjustments than men to cope with the pandemic and are less confident in their farming activities. 46% of women asked for cash-based support as a coping mechanism compared to 40% of men.

Finally, looking at digital use, we found that more targeted support is required to reach women.

Female farmers' usage of digital tools is concentrated in cheaper ones like radio and feature phones, while men are far more likely to use smartphones and internet.

### Farming Impact

% of 'very confident' in next month's farming activities	<b>29%</b>	<b>36%</b>
----------------------------------------------------------	------------	------------

% who sold 'much less' produce to cope with pandemic	<b>23%</b>	<b>19%</b>
------------------------------------------------------	------------	------------

### Financial Impact

% reporting 'much worse' financial situation	<b>45%</b>	<b>39%</b>
----------------------------------------------	------------	------------

% confident about loan repayment	<b>43%</b>	<b>59%</b>
----------------------------------	------------	------------

### Top Requests

% asking for cash as top support to cope	<b>46%</b>	<b>40%</b>
------------------------------------------	------------	------------

% asking for 'market information' to increase sales	<b>72%</b>	<b>67%</b>
-----------------------------------------------------	------------	------------

### Digital Use

% used feature phone last month	<b>71%</b>	<b>61%</b>
---------------------------------	------------	------------

% used radio last month	<b>74%</b>	<b>79%</b>
-------------------------	------------	------------

% used smartphone last month	<b>35%</b>	<b>47%</b>
------------------------------	------------	------------

% used internet last month	<b>12%</b>	<b>18%</b>
----------------------------	------------	------------

**Click [here](#) to learn more.**

“COVID-19 is  
everywhere in  
the world,  
we can't go  
anywhere, so  
we are  
afraid.”

- Woman, Rwanda, May 2020

# Part 02:

# Global Trends

# 60dB Vulnerability Index

The 60dB Vulnerability Index helps illuminate the overall impact of COVID-19, and the associated lockdowns, on households. The Index weights clients' reported change in financial situation, the coping mechanisms they employ, changes in food consumption and likelihood of living in poverty. Higher scores indicate that a respondent is exhibiting more vulnerability to COVID-19.

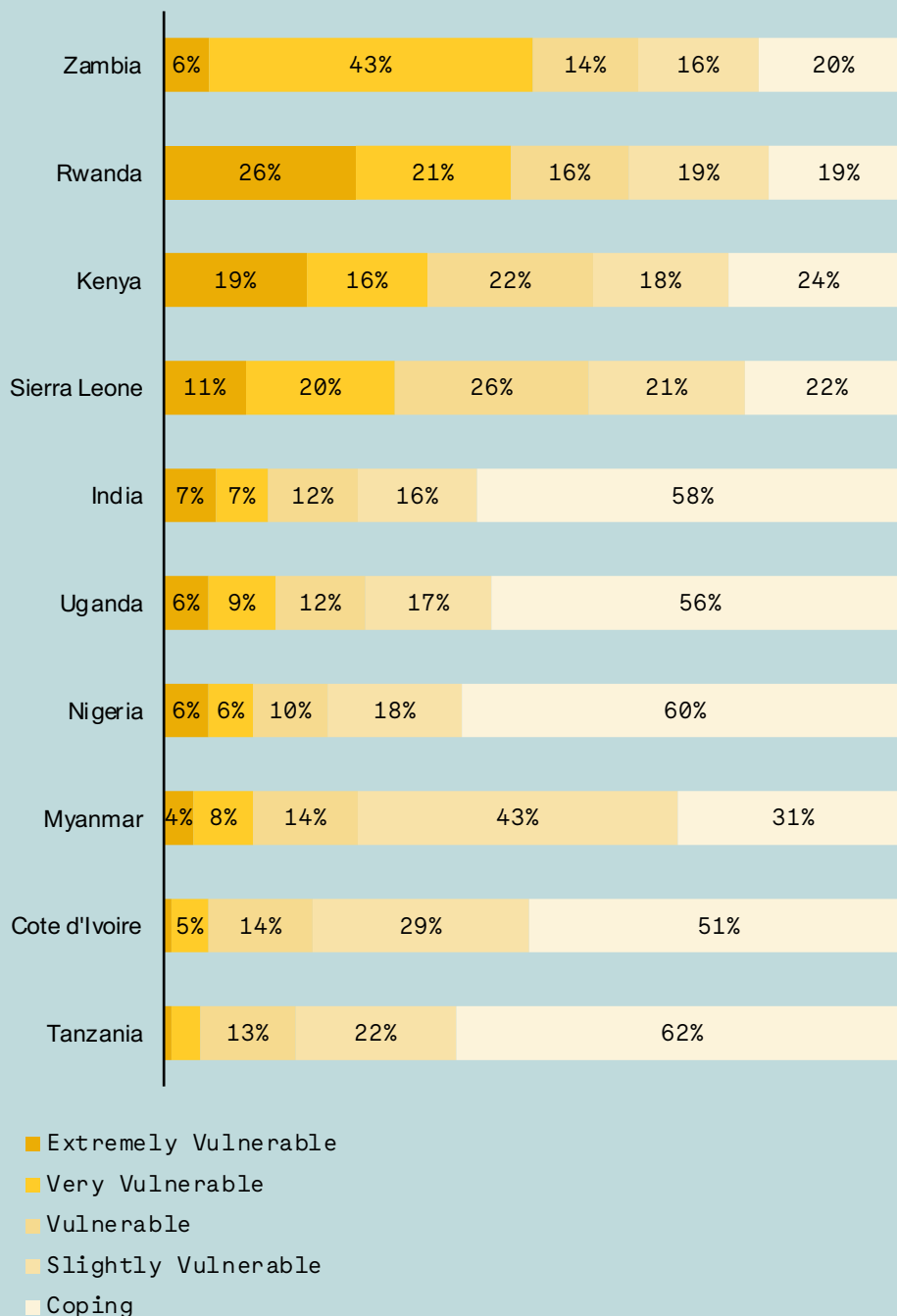
At a regional level, we found that overall vulnerability is highest in Zambia and extreme vulnerability is highest in Rwanda.

At a sector level, we found that microfinance clients were more vulnerable overall. Comparing the Vulnerability Index results for microfinance clients to our global 60dB COVID-19 benchmark, we found that 48% of MFI clients we spoke to are 'very vulnerable' as compared to our benchmark of 18%, and these trends hold when controlling for poverty levels. We are still investigating these results as we would expect MFI clients to be more, not less, resilient to shocks.

Lastly, we saw a correlation between our Vulnerability Index and reported levels of concern: extremely vulnerable customers were more likely to have higher levels of concern. Levels of concern appear to be linked to how significant the economic impacts are for families.

## 60 Decibels Vulnerability Index

Vulnerability Scores By Country (Sorted by 'Extremely' and 'Very' Vulnerable)



[Click here to learn more.](#)

# Concern & Income

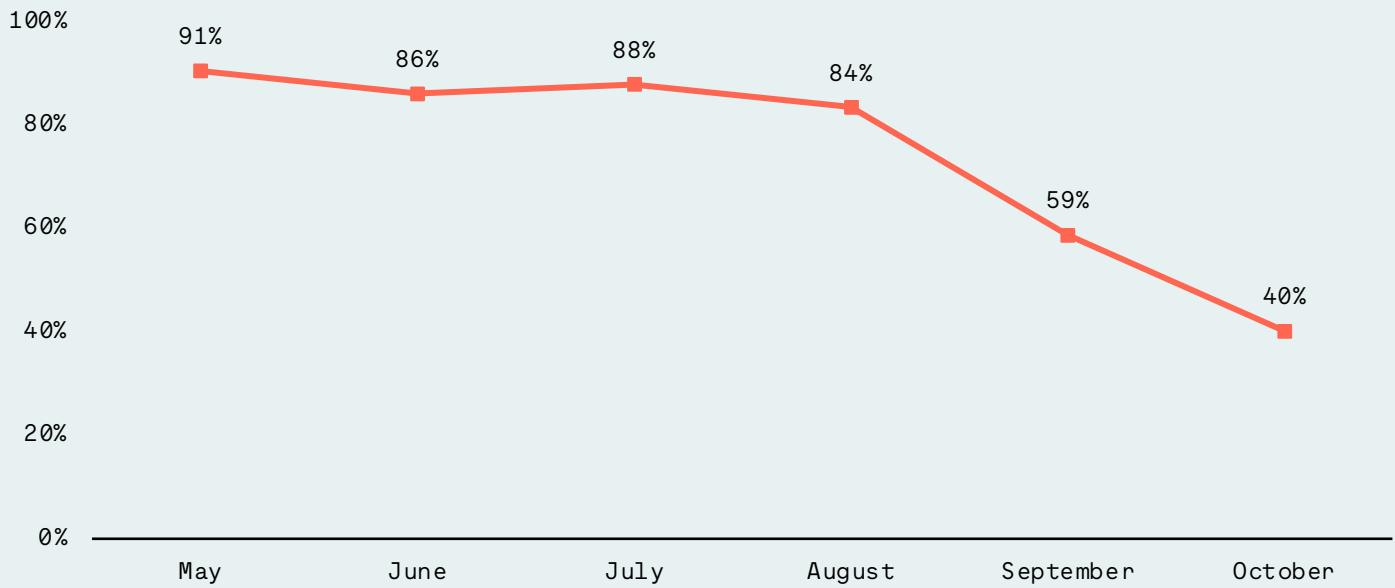
25k  
Respondents

19  
Countries

6  
Months

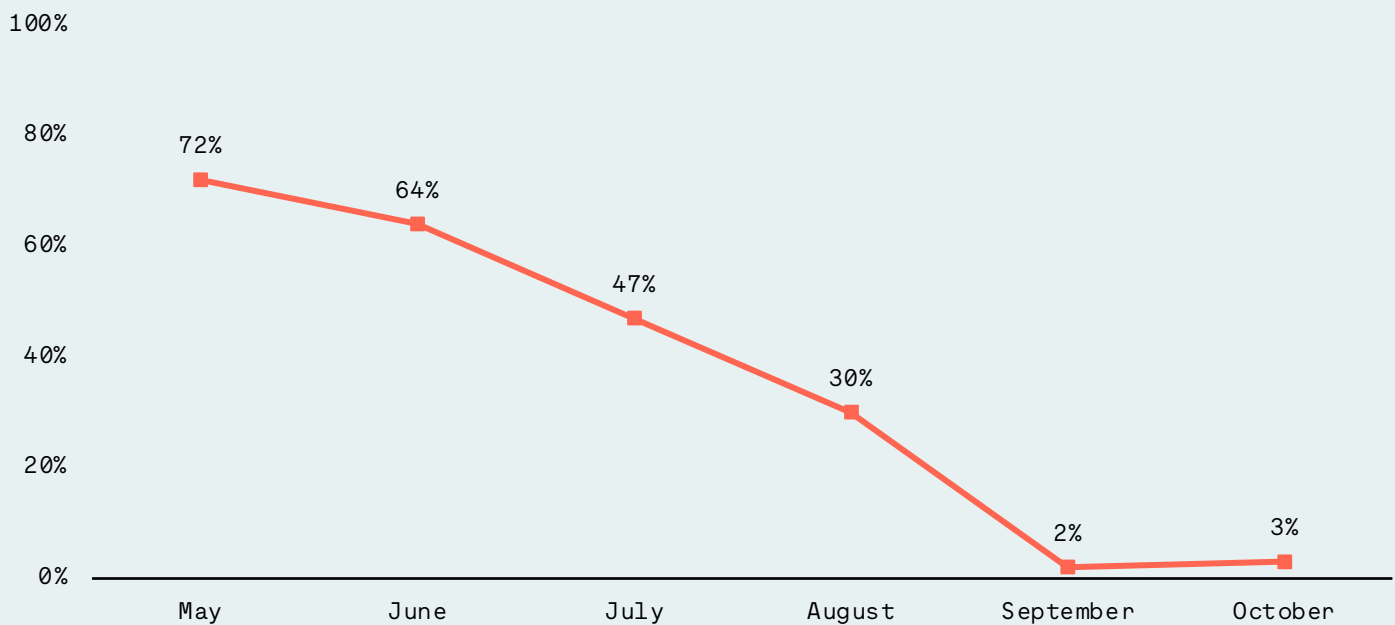
## Level of Concern About COVID-19

Q: Are you concerned about COVID-19? (% 'very much' and 'slightly' concerned)



## Change In Income During COVID-19

Q: Has your household's income changed from last month? (% 'very much' and 'slightly' decreased)



# Consumption & Repayment

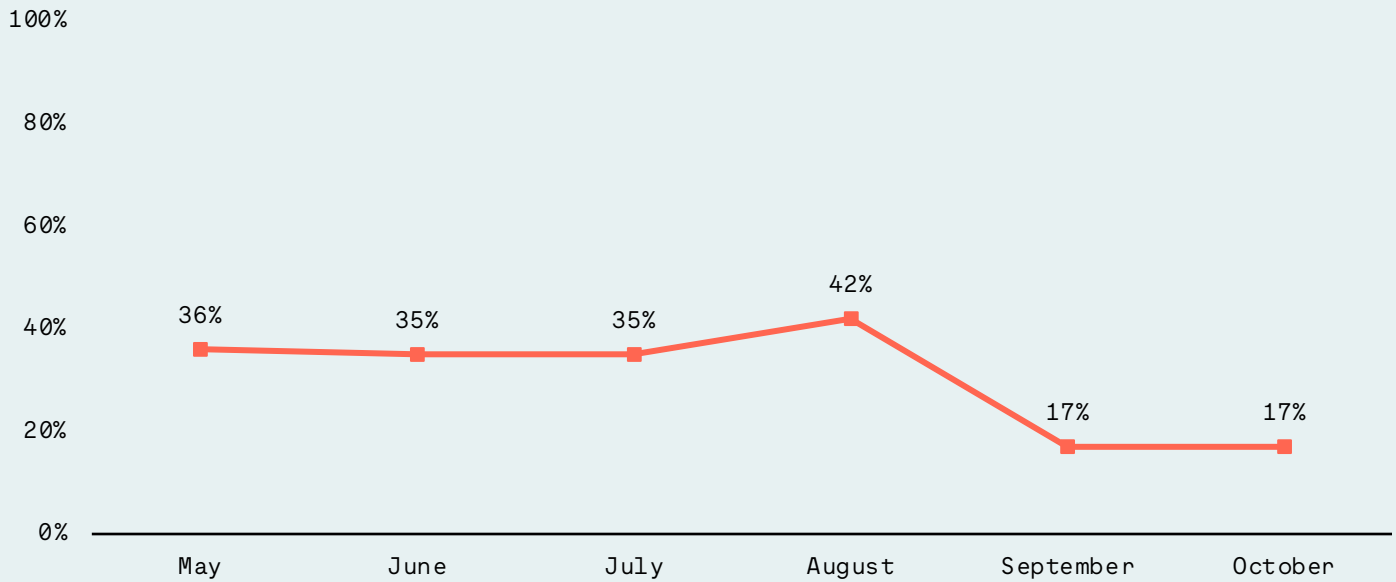
25k  
Respondents

19  
Countries

6  
Months

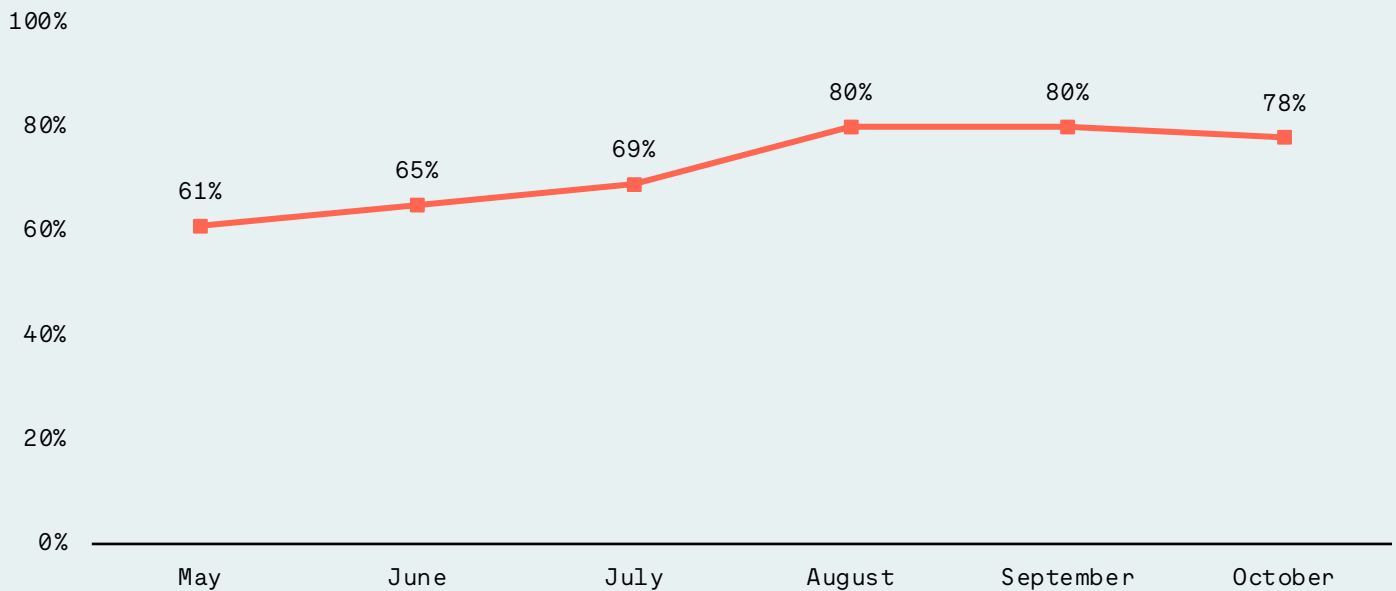
## Change In Food Consumption During COVID-19

Q: As a result of COVID-19, have there been changes in food consumption in your household per person, from last month? (% 'very much' and 'slightly' decreased)



## Confidence in Repayment During COVID-19

Q: How confident would you say you are in your ability to make repayments as you normally would for the next month? (% 'very' and 'slightly' confident)



Part 03:

Closing  
Thoughts



# The Road To Recovery

As of writing this report, there is increasing promise that global vaccine availability will allow us to see our way out of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. However, the road to recovery will be long. Current vaccine availability is heavily skewed towards wealthier countries, and the most vulnerable populations will continue to be most affected.

Here are some specific calls to action that we suggest based on the data we've collected. We invite all decision-makers across the globe to engage with this data and share how they are acting on it.

## 01. Gig Economy

As we saw from our data, most gig workers need support to manage debt, save for the future, and mitigate the risk of not being able to work due to illness or an accident. Our partner, Flourish Ventures, has emphasized the important role of financial technology companies in advancing economic opportunity, improving gig workers' financial resilience and access to financial services.

## 02. Financial Inclusion

Clients need flexible, low-cost access to liquidity to help their households and businesses cope. That could mean supplying access to new capital (unconditional cash transfers, new low-cost loans) or making existing loans more flexible in terms of use and repayment. The segmented data on our dashboard highlights the need to support different sectors and business types differently.

## 03. Off-Grid Energy

While off-grid energy customers are faring worse than before the pandemic, our research showed just how much energy access is valued, and the positive impact it has on quality of life, opportunities to earn an income, and safety and security. Nevertheless, nearly one third of customers are struggling to make repayments for energy products or services purchased. Finding ways to financially support these customers and companies during this time is essential.

## 04. Agriculture

Prioritize smallholder farmers as a group that needs special attention in recovery efforts: despite the notion that COVID-19 may not be as widespread outside of city centers, we know that farmers, particularly those in rural areas, are struggling. These farmers have been most severely impacted by lockdowns—affecting their input prices and access to markets—and they will require special support. Specific challenges that are top of mind for farmers are: liquidity, access to affordable inputs, and market access.

# Acknowledgements

## Participating Partners



## Participating Companies

(Note: not all participating companies are listed.)

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# Thank You To The 60dB Team

In March 2020, our global offices started to close and it became clear we were headed into the unknown. Our team's first question was 'What can we do to help?'

The 60 Decibels team demonstrated an unwavering resilience and a commitment to stepping up and sticking together during these difficult times.

We want to thank you all for the extra hours you gave, even during lockdown, and your commitment to amplify the voices of those struggling most during this pandemic.

This report is all your hard work!

# 60 \_ decibels

## Get Involved

### About 60 Decibels

We're a tech-enabled impact measurement company, best known for our Lean Data approach spun out from Acumen in 2019. We've pioneered the use of (mostly) phone-based surveys to measure social impact across the world. Our targeted, repeatable approach to gathering customer insights and social impact data has been used by more than 500 of the world's leading impact investors, companies, foundations, corporations, NGOs, and public sector organizations.

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