

COVID-19 Learning Series

THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURS IN SUPPORTING NUTRITION SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Solvoz

CASE STUDY 4

Solvoz

Bridging the gap between humanitarian organisations and local suppliers with an open access digital procurement platform



Authors

Brenda Akwanyi and Philip James

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Claire Barnhoorn, CEO and Founder of Solvoz, and Stevie Beeby, Sexual and Reproductive Health Technical Support Officer at Solvoz, for giving their time for the interviews, for sharing their experiences and for reviewing and approving the final version. Thank you also to Natalie Sessions, Kelsey Grey, Emily Mates and Tanya Khara for their review and suggestions. We were able to undertake this work due to the generous support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, the Eleanor Crook Foundation and the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland. The ideas, opinions and comments included here are entirely the responsibility of the document's authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect the policies of the donors.

Designer: Marten Sealby **Cover:** WFP/Badre Bahaji

Recommended citation: Brenda Akwanyi and Philip James (2022). COVID-19 Learning Series. The role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition services during the pandemic. Case Study 4: Solvoz: Bridging the gap between humanitarian organisations and local suppliers with an open access digital procurement platform. Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN): Kidlington, Oxford, UK.

This document is a part of the ENN COVID-19 Learning Series (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries). This series comprises:

- 1. A survey report** outlining the results of a survey collecting information from ENN's network on topics still underrepresented within the available learning regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and nutrition services in low- and middle-income countries (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/ScopingSurvey). The results of this survey informed the following work.
- 2. Four case studies and a synthesis document**, focusing on the role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition and health services during the pandemic.
 - **Case study 1: Western Stone Enterprise**, a woman-led business that produces peanut paste, sesame paste and other value-added agricultural products in Kenya (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS1).
 - **Case study 2: Adeck Juice Bar**, an all-

natural smoothie bar run by a young entrepreneur in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS2).

- **Case study 3: Sky Brands**, a food processing company specialising in biofortified products in Zimbabwe (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS3).
 - **Case study 4: Solvoz**, an open-access digital procurement platform connecting humanitarian organisations and local suppliers (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS4).
 - **Synthesis report:** a short summary of the key learnings from the four case studies relevant for nutrition practitioners (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/CS_synthesis).
- 3. A report of practitioners' experiences** of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number and demographics of people accessing nutrition services in low- and middle-income countries (www.ennonline.net/C19LearningSeries/Practitioner_Survey).





Background

This is the fourth case study in a series of four, focusing on the role of entrepreneurs in supporting nutrition and health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that these stories can help highlight how nutrition practitioners and organisations working in the nutrition sector and social entrepreneurs can support one another in meeting the nutrition goals of the communities they serve.

Procurement and supply chain functions play a central role in driving efficient healthcare provision, no more so than ever during the current pandemic, where high-quality goods and services have needed to be obtained flexibly, and with speed and accuracy, to serve populations in urgent need. Procurement always critically underpins humanitarian assistance, typically receiving over 65% of any humanitarian organisation's budget.¹

Alongside this, interest is growing in the potential for digital technologies to strengthen health systems and expand coverage of essential health services. With state-mandated lockdowns and other social distancing measures in effect in many countries, and with more

people relying on the internet for information and advice, many stakeholders (including nutrition and health practitioners, government departments and the private sector) have been deploying effective digital technologies to support the COVID-19 response.

The Solvoz digital platform was conceptualised just prior to the pandemic and further developed as it took hold.² It was conceived to provide affordable procurement support for organisations in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), such as aid agencies, health practitioners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations. The Solvoz vision was to meet the pressing needs of empowering national agencies and localising humanitarian aid responses. This vision aligned with the principles

¹ Moshtari M, Altay N, Heikkilä J, Gonçalves P. Procurement in humanitarian organizations: Body of knowledge and practitioner's challenges. *International Journal of Production Economics*. 2021; 233:108017.

² More information on Solvoz and case study examples, written by their donors, can be found at <https://www.philips-foundation.com/a-w/articles/claire-barnhoorn.html> and <https://da.fmo.nl/2020/performance-on-our-strategy/finture-solutions/covid19-response-projects>

outlined by the Grand Bargain,³ which requires an emphasis on strengthening local markets and local procurement. The hope was that by empowering national agencies to strengthen their procurement

capacity, it would lead to improved efficiency and effectiveness of operations, and that this in turn would further help local organisations access funding. Box 1 provides more details on the Solvoz mission and vision.

Box 1 The Solvoz mission and vision

The mission of Solvoz is to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and responsibility in procurement and planning processes of organisations working across humanitarian and development contexts. Its vision is to facilitate system change to localise (and so shorten) supply chains and empower local organisations. Solvoz envisions a more efficient use of financial resources by increasing the efficiency of the procurement process, increasing market competition, sparking innovation and price pressure, and reducing the duplication of efforts.

Its current focus areas include medical supplies and equipment, supplies needed for COVID-19 vaccinations and patient care, sexual and reproductive health, emergency shelter, energy kits, and water and sanitation.

The Solvoz platform provides an open-access digital platform for organisations, shaped by the following goals:

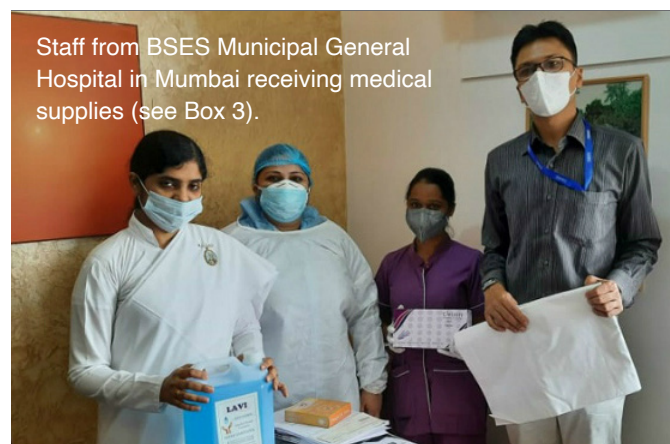
- i. Expert knowledge to support procurement for interventions should be accessible to all, not only to those with large budgets for expert consultants or who have a large in-house team with technical expertise.
- ii. Procurement procedures should be managed by the organisations themselves (empowering in-house capacity).
- iii. All steps in the procurement system should be transparent and properly documented for accountability.
- iv. All organisations, including donors, should be supported to ensure the most efficient and responsible procurement of goods needed in programmes.

The problem

Procurement rules and regulations can be difficult to navigate, particularly with the additional complexities a global pandemic brings.

Humanitarian sector supply chains are especially long and can be fragile, relying heavily on imported materials, with two thirds of supplies flown in from high-income countries.⁴ Procurement is generally an expensive process, often involving large overheads: compared to for-profit multinational companies, international NGOs spend approximately 80% more on tracking their finances and employ nearly twice as many finance staff.⁵ Procurement services are often provided by external consultants, rather than being managed more cheaply in-house. Furthermore, many not-for-profit organisations do not usually share supplier databases or market analysis with similar organisations, leading to inefficiencies in time and money.

When international supply chains collapsed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that the localisation of supply chains would be critical to ensuring a continued effective humanitarian response. While progress towards implementing responsible humanitarian procurement has been made, rigid rules and regulations on procurement set by donors continue



Staff from BSES Municipal General Hospital in Mumbai receiving medical supplies (see Box 3).

BRAHMA KUMARIS

to be a barrier for local NGOs and social enterprises to access funding. This systemic issue can mean that many local organisations who are, or could be, effective emergency responders are left behind due to a lack of funding and access to procurement capacity.

³ The Grand Bargain is an agreement between several donors, member states, United Nations agencies, NGOs, Red Cross movements and inter-governmental organisations, committing to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action so that aid reaches those who most need it.

⁴ Moshtari M, Altay N, Heikkilä J, Gonçalves P. Procurement in humanitarian organizations: Body of knowledge and practitioner's challenges. *International Journal of Production Economics*. 2021; 233:108017.

⁵ Jeri E Queenan (2013). *Global NGOs Spend More on Accounting Than Multinationals*. Harvard Business Review: International business. Available at <https://hbr.org/2013/04/the-efficiency-trap-of-global>.

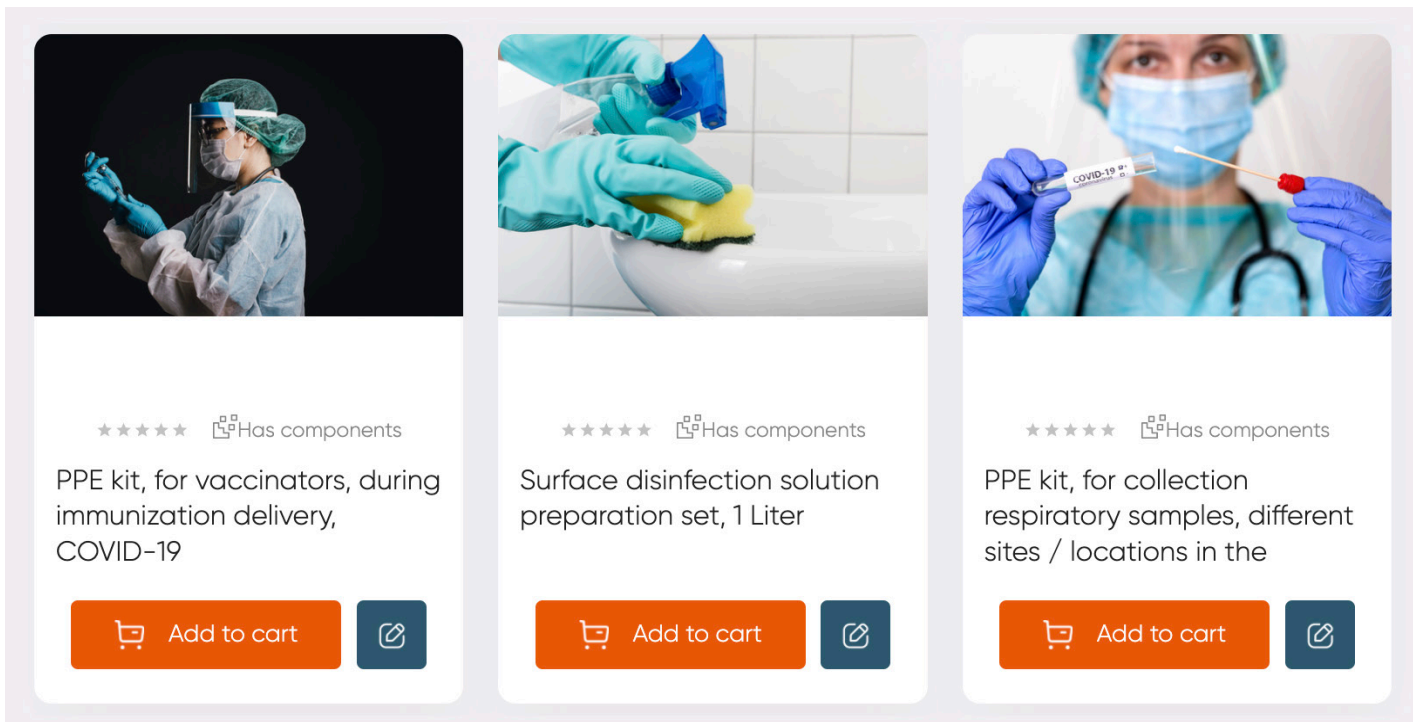
The response

The Solvoz digital platform was specifically designed to address the fragile supply chains commonly encountered in humanitarian emergencies. The worsening of these challenges by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a large effort being made by the Solvoz team to accelerate development and then launch the full platform during the pandemic (see Box 2 for a timeline of key events).

The digital platform consists of two main integrated components:

1. An **open-access catalogue**, maintained by the Solvoz Foundation: This free catalogue provides users with expert advice on recommended goods, services and kits tailored to the programme context. It also includes a dynamic 'kit builder' tool, enabling organisations to create their own catalogue of items, or modify existing kits, to meet their own specific programming requirements. See Fig. 1 for an illustration of the catalogue, showing some of the personal protective equipment kits available for the pandemic response.

Fig. 1: Screenshot from the Solvoz website detailing some of the personal protective equipment kits provided for the COVID-19 response. Source: Online catalogue at <https://solvoz.com/>



2. An **integrated e-procurement platform**: This provides expert sector-specific procurement support to organisations, and advice integrated within the catalogue. A variety of subscription plans are available for individualised support throughout the procurement procedures, and this paid component enables the Solvoz platform to be a sustainable social enterprise. This support continues throughout the tendering and supplier award process, and includes aspects such as:

- ensuring that technical specifications are accurately defined;
- providing step-by-step guidance through the procurement procedures, with a focus on common donor requirements, adapted to the systems used in a variety of United Nations agencies and NGOs; and
- providing accessible, auditable documentation.

See Fig. 2 for an illustration of the Solvoz digital platform workflow.

Support has been provided to help organisations adhere to procurement rules and best practices across the

entire tendering process, thus reducing the requirement for large, expensive procurement departments within organisations. The digital platform has been used by organisations operating across LMICs during the

COVID-19 pandemic. Box 3 provides one illustration of how the platform has been used in India to secure urgently required healthcare resources rapidly.

Box 2 An overview of the Solvoz platform development timeline

Pre-COVID-19 pandemic: The Solvoz team worked on the concept and started building the full prototype of the digital platform, with the support of the Philips Foundation.

March 2020: The prototype was launched in March 2020, in the first week of lockdown. As the pandemic progressed, the Solvoz team quickly realised how relevant their digital platform was and the potential it had to support organisations given the large-scale, rapid procurement requirements of the pandemic.

April/May 2020: With continued support from the Philips Foundation and the Dutch Entrepreneurial Development Bank, Solvoz scaled up their operations and tailored procurement modules to the COVID-19 response.

June 2021: The Solvoz Foundation officially launched its open-access knowledge platform to scale up procurement support for subsequent waves of COVID-19 infections across LMICs. They also launched working groups to tailor support to certain sectors; for example, a maternal health working group was specifically designed to support the procurement needs of healthcare workers.

Box 3 An example of using the Solvoz digital platform in India during the pandemic

Expediting the procurement of personal protective equipment kits and medical supplies:

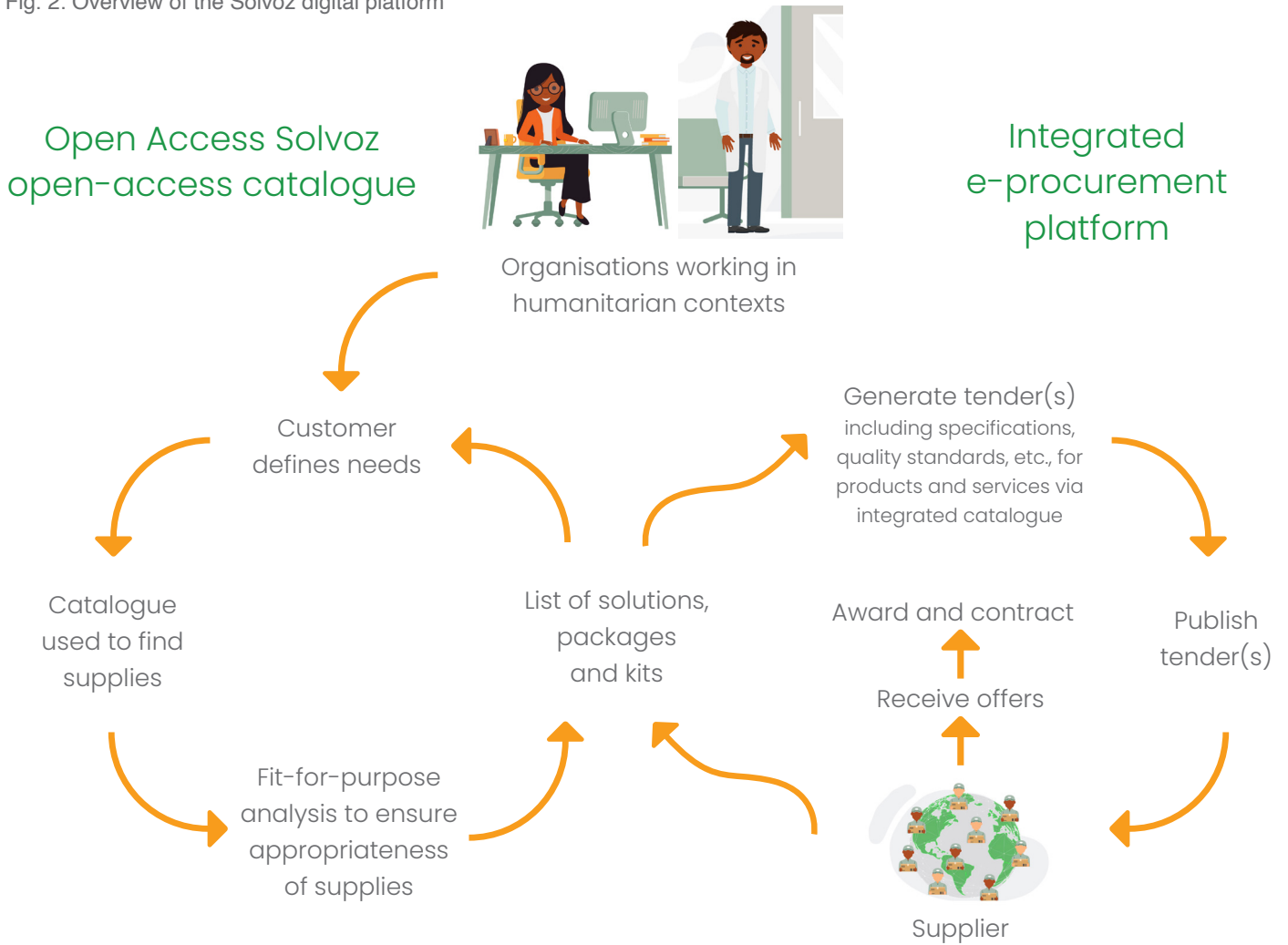
During the onset of the highly contagious Delta variant during the second wave of COVID-19 in India, the BSES Municipal General Hospital in Mumbai reached out to Massachusetts-based non-profit organisation Health e-Villages, requesting medical supplies and technologies. Familiar with the Solvoz digital platform, Health e-Villages utilised Solvoz to support the procurement of goods required by the hospital. The open access catalogue contained solutions, including personal protective equipment kits and medical supplies, which were adapted to the hospital’s needs. Thus, the Solvoz platform expedited the procurement process and medical staff were able to use these materials to deliver medical assistance to their patients within just five days of launching a tender and connecting with local suppliers. In the process, Health e-Villages were also assured that their resources were used effectively and efficiently to provide the necessary humanitarian assistance.

Find what you need in the Solvoz catalogue



Screenshot from the Solvoz website detailing Solvoz’s catalogue. Source: <https://solvoz.com/>

Fig. 2: Overview of the Solvoz digital platform



Lessons learnt

A digital procurement platform such as Solvoz can help smaller organisations, in particular those that do not have sufficient resources for a dedicated procurement and supplies department. In addition, such organisations may struggle to get funding, can often find the management of tenders challenging, and may lack sufficient information both to find the ideal suppliers and to establish the technical specifications of the appropriate products. Support that can be provided to help ensure procurement systems are made as accessible and as accountable as possible can assist with simplifying complex bureaucratic procedures, and can help to establish trust between organisations, suppliers and donors.

Digital platforms can therefore have a considerable impact on the more efficient use of financial resources, and can also reduce the draw on precious staff time. This can result in a more streamlined procurement

process by organisations and can also play an important role in helping to provide faster and more responsive programming where it is most needed, as was illustrated in the India example in Box 3. Furthermore, shortening supply chains can benefit local economies and help to reduce the climate change impact of shipping goods across the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to highlight the critical need for fast, effective, transparent supply chains and procurement procedures. Implementors of nutrition services can learn much from the principles of effective procurement that the Solvoz platform demonstrates. Indeed, many organisations working in the nutrition sector may not realise the potential inefficiencies within their own current procurement procedures. They may benefit from some reflection on where procurement can be made more cost-effective, local and sustainable, as demonstrated in this case study.



Conclusion

There remain exciting opportunities for those working in the nutrition sector to collaborate more with those working in procurement, such as Solvoz. Such collaboration can help strengthen the information on nutrition programmes detailed in digital platforms of this kind, including, for example, increasing the knowledge around products needed for key nutrition interventions and the knowledge to run effective and responsible campaigns, and connecting to suppliers (particularly local ones) who would be best placed to help meet the needs.

The lessons described here on effective, responsible procurement systems provided by Solvoz have great

relevance to donors and nutrition implementation organisations across both humanitarian and developmental contexts. Easier, more transparent procurement systems that can be facilitated by tailored support to organisations throughout the tendering process can help improve efficiencies and responsiveness of programmes. These aspects are key components in helping improve the impact of nutrition interventions. Localising the supply chain is important for strengthening economies at local level and helping to improve the sustainability and resilience of interventions.

Solvoz is actively looking for partnerships to develop a new area of procurement support for nutrition programming and welcomes interest from potential collaborators and donors.

More information on Solvoz can be found at www.solvoz.com
Contact: Claire Barnhoorn, CEO Solvoz at claire@solvoz.com
General inquiries: info@solvoz.com **YouTube introduction** [here](#)



ENN

2nd Floor, Marlborough House, 69 High Street,
Kidlington, Oxfordshire, OX5 2DN, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1865 372340 | office@enonline.net | www.enonline.net

Charity registration no: 1115156. Company registration no: 4889844

