

Adapting Common Funeral Practices in South Sudan Communities During COVID-19

The following cultural funeral practices have been developed out of conversations with South Sudanese staff. Naming of tribes have been deliberately left out, to maintain anonymity. However, targeted conversations should be conducted by national staff to identify where specific practices are practiced. The recommendations outlined below will help aid agencies, religious leaders and authorities to facilitate mourning and funerals in a manner minimizes the risk of spreading COVID-19.

In assessing different means of responding effectively to COVID-19 in South Sudan, it is important to take note of the local context, norms and practices of the South Sudanese people. Funeral practices across South Sudan vary, but all will be affected by the new measures of social distancing and discouragement of handshakes and hugs. The CSRF encourages aid agencies to engage with religious, cultural and opinion leaders, as well as national staff in particular cultures to understand mourning and funeral practices. Engaging through trusted community leaders in both the development and delivery of messages around burial and funerals will be critical to their uptake and acceptance. They may also provide valuable insights into community concerns, rumours, conflicts and cultural dynamics than outsiders.

Mourning

- In some South Sudanese communities, when a person dies, the alarm is raised by sounding a drum, wailing, or phone calls. This is intended to inform relatives, in-laws and friends that a death has occurred. At this time all relatives, friends, in-laws and well-wishers are expected to gather immediately with the family of the deceased, to mourn with the family members and provide support. Some of the immediate actions by gathered mourners include: making temporary shelters, erecting tents, fetching water and gathering chairs, mobilizing financial and material support, organising for necessary services during the funeral.
- If the deceased was an elderly person, in some communities there is normally less crying than if it was a young person. People tend to cry bitterly for young people, especially if s/he died without children. In most communities, women are the ones visibly crying and weeping, with some throwing themselves on the ground. But there're instances where men also cry openly especially if a young man or woman has died. There are some traditions where both men and women cry publicly.
- In some South Sudanese cultures, a sign of mourning for a person who has lost a loved one is to not take bath or change clothes for a number of days.

Recommendations

- Where possible engage with the most influential person in the family and the person leading the family meeting to discuss social distancing and steps to protect mourners.
- Assess how attached the bereaved family is community's cultural norms/practices and how they could be adjusted to minimize the spread of COVID-19
- Limit number of people visiting the family at one time
- Establish handwashing stations and require all visitors to wash their hands before entering the compound/residence
- Encourage/require visitors to wear a covering over their mouth and nose (masks or pieces of clothe). Where affordable, provide face masks to mourners arriving (as per gov't guidelines)
- Contact Gov't for body handling in suspected COVID-19 cases

Body preparation and viewing

- Some communities bury the body immediately after the person passes on, as the feeling is that having a dead body in a household generates a lot of emotions and depression. Burying quickly creates a sense of disconnect with the deceased.
- Generally, in most communities, the dead body is treated with care. If a married woman dies, the family she was married into will shave and wash the deceased body and wrap it with a white cotton material. The men wash the body of a deceased man, while women wash the body of a deceased woman. Some communities do not wash the body at all.
- Amongst Muslims, the body is washed at the mosque, with the Imam or mosque worship leader blessing the body and performing services before burial. During this time, family and friends can pay their respects to the deceased.

Recommendations

- For confirmed COVID-19 cases, the COVID-19 Body Handling SOPs should be followed
- A family member or nominated religious/community leader should be present for the preparation of a COVID-19 confirmed case
- For non-confirmed COVID-19 cases, individuals should be allowed to wash or prepare the body for burial.
- Where possible, body preparation should be conducted in a well-ventilated or outside space
- Number of people participating in body preparation at one time should be limited to a number that social/physical distancing can be practiced.

Burial

- Muslim families would normally bury the body within 24 hours.
- In both Muslim and Christian burials, there is a ritual of conducting prayers and throwing dirt on the casket inside the grave.
- In some communities, the body may not be buried for several days, as ransom for unfulfilled requirements. This normally happens in a marriage situation. In most cases, maternal uncles draw the place for the grave, and at the time of burial, they are given a goat or money for them to open and bless the grave.
- In most communities, burials are done at the deceased's home, but can be done at family graveyards. People, especially in urban centres, will bury the dead in their family plots, a public cemetery or take the deceased to the village if it is accessible and safe to do so.

Recommendations

- For confirmed COVID-19 cases, the COVID-19 Body Handling SOPs should be followed
- For non-COVID-19 cases, traditional burial practices could be followed

Funerals

- During funerals in most cultures, people gather around the corpse, crying and singing songs of sorrow and religious songs.
- In some South Sudanese communities, women are usually the closest and can touch the deceased body while crying, while in other communities, the dead body should not be seen by women and children. Often men, usually older men are allowed to view the body. Middle aged men often bury the body. Women and children stay in the house of the deceased where other mourners will

join them. Finally, some communities do not have men and women sitting together - women gather in the house, while men sit under a tree outside, in the compound of the deceased.

- Typically, there is a lot of physical contact during funerals in many communities. Usually the immediate family and relatives of the deceased are hugged, and there is a lot of hand-shaking as signs of consolation and encouragement.
- Generally, amongst the South Sudanese it is considered an offense not to attend a funeral and burial of a person who was close to you. You are expected to attend in person regardless of your work commitment. Failure to do so will result in a pay back if you have a funeral at your own home.
- During the funeral, people including neighbours spend days with the family of the deceased. After the burial, some can disperse, but close relatives will remain until the funeral rites is done. During that period people are in close contact to each other. The elderly aunts or uncles are expected to sleep on the bed where the dead body was laid. The last funeral rite is conducted 3 days (for a male) or 4 days (for a female) after burial, depending on different traditions. The last funeral rites in many South Sudanese cultures is marked as a way of celebrating the life of the deceased and releasing the soul. Other cultures believe that the last funeral rites marks the day death is chased away from home and the spirit of the dead is brought back home.
- The last funeral rites involve family members, relatives, friends, in-laws and well-wishers gathering together, making prayers, family meetings, a bull or goat is slaughtered, and people eat and drink local brew, singing and dancing.

Recommendations

- All burials should allow for community customs followed to the degree that they do not increase the risk of spreading COVID-19 amongst mourners attending the funeral
- Social distancing should be practiced, with the number of people attending funerals limited to allow this.
- Handwashing stations should be established and all participants should be required to wash their hands before entering the funeral area
- Require and provide face masks to mourners arriving (as per gov't guidelines)

Management of the Deceased's Belongings

- In some communities, the clothes, shoes and sleeping materials of the deceased are kept in a place where they are not tempered with by family of the deceased. Sometimes, they are kept for months before disposed or handed to family members to inherit. In other communities, the deceased's belongings have to be cleansed through traditional prayers or for Christians, a pastor prays over them. Any yet in other communities, the deceased's clothes are washed and distributed among some close relatives according to their gender.

Recommendations

- For confirmed COVID-19 cases, the COVID-19 Body Handling SOPs should be followed
- For non-COVID-19 cases, traditional practices could be followed