



A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY: LEARNING FROM COVID-19 TO PROGRESS LOCALLY LED RESPONSE AND DEVELOPMENT THINK PIECE

Australian Red Cross, Humanitarian Advisory Group and the Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University

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A moment in time: COVID, localisation and the Pacific

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As COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and international travel restrictions, border closures and lockdowns ensued, large numbers of expatriate aid workers returned to their home countries. This significant change in the demography of the aid industry in many countries has led to a shift in roles for international, national and local actors in humanitarian and development work.

So, what are we witnessing? This period is a unique moment in time, one that presents challenges and opportunities for locally led humanitarian response and development. A number of initiatives have sought to explore these dynamics, and to understand what this means now, and what it could mean in the future.

Following Tropical Cyclone Harold hitting the Pacific in April 2020, [Australian Red Cross](#), together with Fiji and Vanuatu National Red Cross Societies, developed a [case study that examined the changes to the nature of the emergency response brought about by the COVID experience](#). The study explored how COVID had impacted on usual ways of working and shifted the modus operandi of international responses. Several significant shifts occurred – local Red Cross actors found themselves with more leadership space and were highly influential and visible in leading and setting national priorities, greater local procurement took place (despite a primarily internationally driven supply chain), and there was an increase in direct funding to the local National Societies.

Local actors had more space and prominence – everyone was looking to the Red Cross to partner with them. Local humanitarian actor, Vanuatu

[No turning back: local leadership in Vanuatu's response to Tropical Cyclone Harold](#), conducted in partnership by the [Vanuatu Association of NGOs](#) and [Humanitarian Advisory Group](#), also outlined key shifts from previous cyclone responses, such as increased local leadership and altered role for international actors in remote support.

COVID-19 has restricted a lot of international experts to step in and help, forcing us to do things within the country capacity. As much of a struggle as it is, this is a step forward for our country. Local humanitarian actor, Vanuatu

Other initiatives such as the [Pacific Resilience Partnership](#) Mapping Localisation Survey sought to explore key localisation areas, and the impacts of COVID-19 across development and humanitarian sectors in the Pacific. A strong emerging perception from the survey was that the impacts of COVID-19 would strengthen locally led response due to the reduced presence of international actors.

The TWG [Technical Working Group] intends to utilise the data from the survey to map out how it will support the various actors through a collaborative approach. It is about extending our network whilst at the same time providing an avenue where we can leverage resources and expertise to assist one another in the midst of this pandemic. The TWG will ensure that we utilise the expertise that we have within the region to support one another. That is localisation in action. Josaia Jirauni Osborne, Deputy Director, Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO)

There are also changed ways of working and dynamics in relationships, due to less international presence and a shift in how international actors are working with national and local organisations. [La Trobe University's Institute for Human Security and Social Change](#), with partners such as the [Australia Pacific Training Coalition](#) (APTC) and others, have been exploring organisational adaptations and the impacts on relationships.

We reached a point where the expats were asked to return at which point the local staff were presented with this opportunity to make things happen. Not only in terms of contributing to the decisions around key functions of the program but more importantly to constructing the response to COVID and how we would impact our core functions. This forced the local team to really take ownership of the situation because we understood the context, had the relationships with key stakeholders, we knew the influences. Jovesa Saladoka, APTC

Common threads

It turns out that there are emerging common threads across these various research

initiatives. [A window of opportunity: learning from COVID-19 to progress locally led response and development](#) think piece explores these emerging findings, poses important questions for international humanitarian and development actors to consider in their work across the region and suggests that the sector has a critical window of opportunity to learn and build on the opportunity for positive change.

First, new spaces for local leadership have emerged. National actors [report](#) that the reduced physical presence of international aid workers has enlarged their space for local leadership and seen them exercise greater influence over decision-making.

Second, remote support has worked where strong relationships and trust were already in place. Some 70% of the TWG survey respondents outlined an increase in remote support (i.e. online mentoring and technical assistance). Many interviewees note that it is useful to have assistance available at the end of the phone, or short-term assistance, rather than creating the relationships of dependency which come from technical assistance being based full-time in Pacific offices.

Third, local humanitarian organisations report receiving more funding; however, most funding still goes through international mechanisms.

From where I see it, the situation may have contributed to a great opportunity to lead, coordinate and decide on what they see best, however it all falls back to funding ... even if there has been increased funding there is still remote control on how it should be spent. National representative, Vanuatu

A total of 66% of national and local actors in the Pacific report receiving an increase in funding in the wake of COVID-19, and 61% of national or local actors report new partnerships with other organisations. However, there is little change to a system where the amount of direct funding to local organisations [remains at around 2%](#) of total humanitarian funding globally, despite the 2016 [Grand Bargain commitment](#) of 25%.

Making the most of the window?

Localisation is a journey and until it is supported 100 per cent by the international actors, it will remain just there – local actors doing the implementation and the international actors coordinating and chances not given to local actors to exercise their powers and their expertise in how to respond to natural disasters. National representative, Vanuatu

As the sector shifts back into a COVID-normal state, international actors will begin to return to the Pacific. There is a window of opportunity to adopt new practices which learn from and

build on the positive adaptations made over the past year. This opportunity might be missed in the rush to return to 'normal'. In all sectors, questions are being asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed ways of working for the better (while recognising that some have changed for the worse) and therefore what features need to be retained.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and international development](#) series.

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