

COVID-19: innovations from governance and justice programs

by Lisa Denney, Leisha Lister and Veronica L. Taylor

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COVID-19 is forcing major changes in the way governance and justice programs are being delivered (Ronald Woan/Flickr CC BY-NY 2.0)

As COVID-19 has progressed across Asia and the Pacific, many of us have been involved in pivoting, repurposing and reframing the work we do in international development. DFAT's [Partnerships for Recovery](#) COVID response includes a commitment that 'We Will Work Differently'. Doing so has been immensely challenging but has also highlighted the importance of how governance thinking – including law and justice development ideas and practice – has shifted over the past decade. Most of us recognise that concepts such as adaptive programming, thinking and working politically, trust and relationships, and locally owned problem-driven approaches are crucially important to delivering effective programs. But a pandemic [challenges](#) us to implement them in new and more purposive ways.

The [Australian Law and Justice Development Community of Practice](#) held a [virtual meeting](#) earlier this year to share experiences of how programs are meeting the challenge of thinking and working politically – and demonstrating results – in the context of COVID-19. Grounding decisions in data and accessing and influencing local decision-makers are critical components of governance and justice programming. But both are difficult to achieve when so many of us are forced to reside in an online and socially distanced world. Adapting to these conditions has yielded some important innovations, lessons and opportunities to be taken forward post-COVID-19.

In Nepal, The Asia Foundation has developed an integrated monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) framework to assist in adapting to program delivery in a context of closed borders, restricted domestic travel and rolling lockdowns. Importantly, the framework includes a strong focus on staff and partner wellbeing, recognising this as central to delivering results alongside more conventional programming components. This involves tracking the overall mood of staff and partners through surveys, phone or online meetings and targeted reporting, as well as understanding how restrictions and changed ways of working are impacting their work. This has enabled The Foundation to remain agile and address program

blockages that have a big impact on whether results are delivered but would otherwise remain hidden from conventional reporting.

Another feature of the MERL framework is expanded use of technology-enabled mapping, using Apps and software solutions, open data and automation to supplement conventional reporting and to analyse the context. Not only does this assist The Foundation in understanding how its results are impacted by the operating environment, but also to capture information about innovations being developed by communities and others in Nepal that can be leveraged.

In Myanmar, work to support the government processes of law-making has required thinking and working politically at a distance. This trust-building and influence work is much harder to pull off at a distance or over Zoom. The Myanmar experience has **underlined** that the relationships most able to weather COVID-19 and remain influential are those where international partners have been in place for extended periods of time; where they are vouched for by a network of contacts; and where they can demonstrate cultural competence. Drinking tea and reciprocity do matter in many of the places we work, and so getting traction in meetings at a distance can depend on how well-established those relationships are. This is an important lesson for post-COVID-19 aid programming.

More optimistically, the new ways of working prompted by COVID-19 are also providing opportunities for change. One such opportunity relates to the way government actors in partner countries interact with donor representatives, civil society and others. Technology itself can be an implicit threat in low-trust environments. The lack of an established culture of video-conferencing is not simply a function of a country's bandwidth – it can also represent anxiety about the state controlling information and about bureaucrats being visible and, therefore, accountable. The COVID-19 crisis, however, also creates the need – and the opportunity – for government actors to recast the style in which they interact with civil society and donor representatives. We need to think about how to find space post-COVID-19 for these new styles of interaction to continue.

A second opportunity, prompted by the inability of expatriate experts to be present in-country, **centres on** enabling local actors greater space to be seen and make decisions in aid programming. In contexts where expatriate staff are now operating remotely and where internet connectivity is poor, the importance of the knowledge, personal relationships and networks of local staff becomes even more starkly apparent. In the Solomon Islands, this is enabling indigenous approaches to narrative storytelling, such as *tok stori* and *talanoa*, to be used as part of monitoring and evaluation efforts to gain an insight into how citizens are experiencing justice issues during the COVID crisis. This provides an opportunity for more locally-led

and relevant ways of assessing impact to gain traction.

Yet while locally-led approaches to development are much needed, there is also a danger of pushing unacceptable levels of risk onto local staff and partners, while expatriates remain safely distant. We have seen this play out in earlier global health crises, such as the 2014–15 Ebola epidemic. Aid programs must therefore find ways to balance empowerment and protection of local staff and partners.

We still have much to learn from the impact of COVID-19 on aid programming and ways of working, and, importantly, from our local staff and partners. But the Law and Justice Development Community of Practice aims to facilitate this conversation in real time, providing space for practitioners to share their experiences about innovations, lessons and opportunities. More to come!

For more information about this topic, watch the webinar, “[Measuring and Influencing at a Distance: Thinking & working politically in an environment shaped by COVID-19](#)”, hosted by The Law and Justice Development Community of Practice on 3 June 2020.

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

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