DEVPOLICYBLOG

(Credit: Stefano Campolo/Flickr CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

COVID-19, localisation and locally led development: A critical juncture

By Chris Roche and Fiona Tarpey
23 March 2020

The humanitarian sector has been debating localisation and the Grand Bargain, for a number of years. The development sector has also seen a renewed interest in locally led development, as part of calls to 'Do Development Differently' and 'Think and Work Politically'. However, in both domains there is a strong view that the institutional inertia, self-interest and disincentivising business practices of development agencies, consulting companies and, dare I say it, universities and research institutes, combine to hamper progress in transferring power and decision-making into the hands of local people, and organisations. It has also been suggested that the broader political economy of the aid sector, and the domestic political pressures on foreign aid in donor countries, means that to date it is not able to transform itself given the vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

So, does the tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic provide a critical juncture which will shift things so profoundly that this status quo will be quickly disrupted? There are perhaps a number of reasons to think that it might.

- Restrictions on travel imposed in nearly all countries, and the large reduction in international flights, will in particular mean that the flow of international aid workers, experts, advisers and traditional humanitarian 'surge' methods is liable to be much lower than usual. The actual supply of humanitarian actors will also be seriously constrained by the demand in their home countries given the impact on health systems in developed economies and aid agencies' duty of care to their own workers. This will probably be compounded by the ongoing repatriation of international aid workers, volunteers and bureaucrats.

- Although it is very early days, one possible scenario in some parts of the Pacific is that the virus might be somewhat contained on relatively remote islands, for example. Others argue that countries with weak health systems will be unable to

cope, and the pandemic will be more devastating than in richer countries. In the first case this is liable to mean that Pacific countries will seek to preserve their self-isolation from international visitors; in the second scenario the restrictions on international travel emerging in donor countries and associated quarantining on return may well inhibit the usual 'large influx of humanitarian assistance' associated with disasters. Local services and people will step up, as they do in every emergency in the Pacific, only this time their efforts are less likely to be camouflaged, or indeed undermined, by their international partners.

- Elsewhere, the impacts of coronavirus on refugees and settings with extremely limited health systems, such as in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, is shining a light on the challenges of international supply chains and going to scale under these conditions.

- The associated economic and social crisis that is looming is already redirecting government spending to focus on COVID-19 and its domestic social, economic and health impacts. Already we are seeing large stimulus packages across multiple sectors. There will need to be efficiencies found elsewhere to allow for this. Reducing travel costs across all sectors is already happening and is liable to continue.

- Restrictions on travel are already leading to a greater emphasis on different ways of communicating at a distance. Within the humanitarian operations at Red Cross, we have already moved to online training on pandemic preparedness with our Pacific partners. We are likely to see further innovations over the next few months as universities, businesses, governments and civil society organisations all have to get to grips with working differently.

- As this social distancing continues it is also possible that amid the tragic downsides, a number of positive unexpected benefits emerge. The declines in pollution seen in [China](#), [Lombardy](#) and [Venice](#), and the emergence of [local collective self-help](#) groups are early signs of this. If this is the case – and in particular if forms of isolation and lack of travel last for a significant time – it may be that some of these benefits and the new habits which emerge could mean that returning to the status quo ante becomes less likely. As [some are optimistically arguing](#), this could even in turn lead to 'a significant shift in the way individuals, institutions and politicians discuss our responsibility to protect vulnerable groups in our societies', and the role of the state in doing so. As always, context matters,

and how this plays out in different settings and with different vulnerabilities will be critical.

- Finally, it is also possible that isolation and everyone 'staying at home' might create a space where power will be claimed, if not ceded. If this is the case then we may well see local development actors not only claiming the new space afforded them by setting the agenda but insisting more powerfully for greater ownership over humanitarian responses and development cooperation. Perhaps this will also lead to a tipping point that leads to an end to the [undermining of Pacific knowledge and expertise](#), which we in and around the development and humanitarian industry have contributed to.

So, what might all of this mean for those working in or around the international development and humanitarian sector in countries like Australia?

- First, international development actors should be experimenting with new approaches, in particular delegating authority, not just responsibility, to local actors, and covering their core costs. It could also mean providing opportunities to create space for NGOs, donors, research organisations and consulting companies to learn collectively about how they might transform themselves. This would include adapting their business practices, contracting processes, insurance demands, etc, so that they are better able to identify, engage with, and be directed by, local expertise as opposed to international consultants and researchers.

- Second, it could mean recognising the opportunity that circumstances provide to undertake some serious investment in creating the physical and human infrastructure which allows for the [arm's-length](#), carbon friendly, at-a-distance support that enables the emergence of locally led processes. Drawing on the evidence of what seems to support both localisation and locally led development this could be done in partnerships with universities in the region such as the [University of the South Pacific](#) and beyond that are already investing heavily in online learning, local regional groups like [PIANGO](#) and [the Pacific Community (SPC)](#), and communications and media companies, as well as those with experience of providing other services remotely.

- Third, it could mean supporting the pooling of local skills, knowledge, contacts and potentially staff at a country level across organisations and sectors who could provide each other with peer support and mentoring. This country and regional peer approach is already a strong part of Pacific engagement. As budgets become

tighter it may become more attractive for NGOs, research organisations, and others to share resources and staff, rather than working more individually.

- Fourth, it could mean supporting an ongoing learning process of defining what locally led development looks like in the different countries of the region, and which starts to become the 'new normal'. This kind of process might allow Pacific islanders to be in a position where they can start to set the standards by which they hold international donors, NGOs and governments to account. An example of this is the call by the former head of PIANGO for a Pacific Charter for Change that looks to define what locally led humanitarian action in the Pacific could look like.

- Fifth, it could also mean greater recognition for the role that local volunteers and those who work outside of the formal system bring to crises. This is particularly the case in the Pacific where local responders *are* the first and primary responders. It may also give rise to increased attention to digital volunteerism and other online communities of care.

- Finally, it will require strong domestic advocacy in order to ensure that shifts in mindsets and policies which have proved to be beneficial to vulnerable people and the environment are maintained, and our underinvestment in human security and international cooperation that has contributed to this crisis in the first place is jettisoned.

It is of course impossible to predict what is going to happen over the next few months. However, what is clear is that the perturbation of our economic, political and social landscape in this region is going to be significant. It flips traditional ideas of efficiency and the dominant role of international agencies on their heads. Like other historical disruptions this pandemic is liable to create new expectations, new ways of thinking and new ways of working. It is important that this reimagining does not perpetuate old systems of power but looks to new voices, new forms of organisation and social systems.

This post is part of the #COVID-19 and international development series.

About the author/s

Chris Roche
Chris Roche is Director of the Institute for Human Security and Social Change, and Associate Professor at La Trobe University and a Senior Research Partner of the Developmental Leadership Program. Chris has worked for International NGOs for nearly 30

years, and has a particular interest in understanding the practice of social change and how it might be best catalysed and supported.

Fiona Tarpey
Fiona Tarpey is the Head of Advocacy for the International Programs Department at Australian Red Cross in Melbourne and co-chair of ACFID's Development Practice Committee.

The Devpolicy Blog is based at the Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.