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

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November 2020

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

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, and national and local actors in humanitarian and development work. Some claimed that in the Pacific region, COVID-19, and responses to it, would elevate local actors and give them more opportunity to take on leadership and decision-making roles.[1] It was suggested that this could establish new forms of locally led social and collective action and challenge the traditional narratives of aid. Others argued that the humanitarian system more broadly had retreated to known territory, working almost entirely through large multilaterals and minimising the risk associated with new partnerships with national and local actors.[2]

These competing narratives highlight the need to map and learn from how COVID-19 is affecting the planning and delivery of humanitarian and development aid. With this motivation, a group of organisations came together to examine the shifts underway in the delivery of humanitarian and development assistance in the wake of COVID-19 in the Pacific, and the emerging practices of local staff and organisations.

About this think piece

This think piece documents the research conducted over the past six months. It is intended to provide emerging evidence, and pose critical questions for international humanitarian and development actors to consider in their work across the region. The paper sets out three propositions about how, in the context of COVID-19, the delivery of humanitarian and development assistance has changed, and suggests that the sector has a critical window of opportunity to learn and build on the opportunity for positive change. The paper concludes with a series of questions that this analysis raises, and next steps for deepening the research.

Emerging findings

1. COVID-19 has resulted in new spaces for local leadership and shifted traditional ways of working

2. Remote support has worked where strong relationships and trust were in place

3. National and local actors report receiving more funding but a majority of donor funding in humanitarian response continued to go through international mechanisms

About the collaboration

The paper reflects a collaborative effort. The Australian Red Cross (ARC), Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University (LTU) jointly committed to tracking the impact of the COVID context on local leadership in the Pacific, to inform future humanitarian and development programming.

The Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC), Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO), Pacific MEL Community of Practice and Pacific Resilience Partnership's Localisation Technical Working Group (TWG) collected and/or shared data and contributed to analysis of the findings.

Data and methodology

This think piece draws emerging findings from several research initiatives:

▶ Local response in a global pandemic: a case study of the Red Cross response to Tropical Cyclone Harold during COVID-19 in Vanuatu and Fiji (Australian Red Cross)

▶ Mapping Localisation in the Pacific Survey – mapping of key localisation areas and shifts during COVID across the Pacific, involving 123 respondents from 73 organisations (Pacific Resilience Partnership's Localisation TWG, PIANGO and HAG)

▶ Case studies and research on organisational adaptions to COVID (LTU's Institute for Human Security and Social Change, Pacific MEL Community of Practice and APTC)

Key research questions were developed to guide the overarching approach, and data was amalgamated through a joint workshop with research partners and analysis of key documents. Each initiative used different methods, including case studies, surveys, interviews, collection of stories, and the use of online platforms and groups such as Facebook, underpinned by ethical research principles and approaches. Research processes engaged individuals involved in practitioner, policy and activist networks across the Pacific, national, local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and networks of national researchers.

A note on terms: When the paper refers to the humanitarian and development sectors, this should be understood to include local, national, regional, and international actors, recognising that in the Pacific the same actors are often involved in both sectors.

3 research partners

6 partner organisations, networks and platforms across the Pacific

COVID-19 IN THE PACIFIC: A SNAPSHOT

Despite early predictions, the Pacific has demonstrated remarkable resilience in confronting the immediate health risks of COVID-19.[3] However, there are variations within the region, and the wider socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are proving more challenging.

About the response

With health care systems already under strain, keeping the Pacific as virus-free as possible has been a priority for governments, donor countries, international bodies and development and humanitarian workers. Overall, this aspect of the response has been viewed as a success, with only two countries reporting significant case numbers.[4] As of early November there have been zero COVID-19 cases recorded in Samoa, just one in Vanuatu, and 16 in the Solomon Islands.[5] Papua New Guinea, however, experienced a wave of infections in September, and case numbers continue to rise in French Polynesia.[6]

In part, this mostly positive picture is due to the Pacific's geographical remoteness. In addition, many governments made rapid state of emergency declarations to support containment measures such as border closures, domestic travel bans, quarantine requirements, curfews, restrictions on gatherings and school closures. In most cases foreign workers, including aid workers, were required to leave due to government policy or employer requirements. This prompted international advisers to pivot to the provision of remote international assistance through online methods.

Longer-term impacts

Understanding of the longer-term impacts of the pandemic is evolving. There are emerging reports of strengthened resilience in several contexts due to communities increasingly returning to traditional forms of livelihoods and exchange.[7] Others have pointed to increased self-reliance, strong leadership in acting on expert advice, increased engagement with the informal economy, and the emergence of collective forms of action, such as the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway.[8]

While the direct health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in most Pacific Island countries and territories have been minimal to date, the economic impact of the pandemic has been more severe. Revenue from tourism has fallen sharply,[9] but remittance flows seem to be holding up.[10] Increased government debt, decreasing government revenue and shrinking incomes are exacerbating the financial crisis.[11]

There is concern that some governments have sought to use the health crisis to extend unchecked authority over their populations.[12] Reports also show that family-related violence and demand for response services have increased.[13] At the same time, there are mixed reports on the degree to which local food systems are proving resilient in the face of the pandemic.[14]

COVID-19 cases across the Pacific
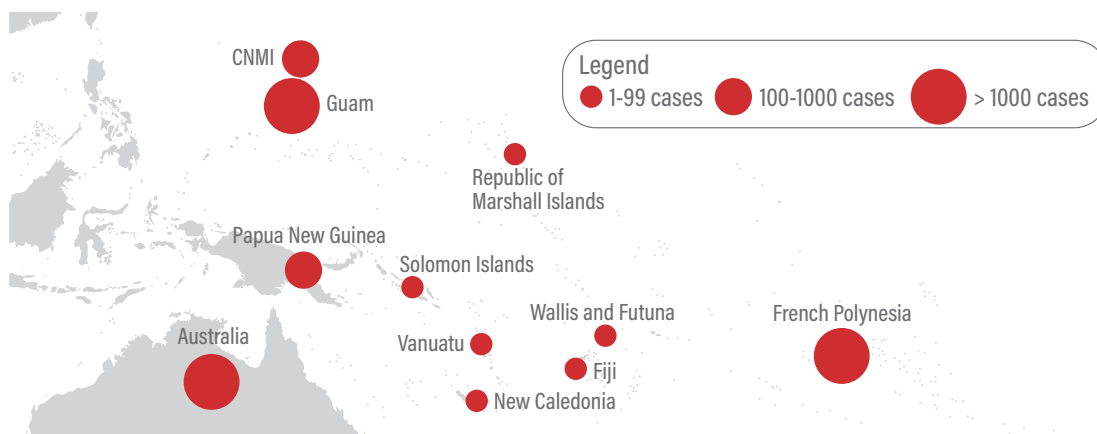
COVID-19: Pacific Community Updates, 9 November 2020.
https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2020/11/covid-19-pacific-community-updates

EMERGING FINDINGS: WHAT ARE WE LEARNING ABOUT HOW COVID-19 HAS AFFECTED LOCALLY LED RESPONSE AND DEVELOPMENT?

While the full impacts of the pandemic will take more time to be understood, it has already significantly affected traditional ways of working, and the relationships between international, and national and local organisations. Outlined below are three key findings about how COVID-19 has impacted locally led response and development in the region.

FINDING 1: COVID-19 HAS RESULTED IN NEW SPACES FOR LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND SHIFTED TRADITIONAL WAYS OF WORKING

The reduced physical presence of international aid workers has considerably strengthened local leadership. National actors report greater influence over decision-making as programs have opened, expanded or altered as a result of COVID-19, as well as a greater sense of empowerment. There has been increased collaboration among local actors, with more decentralised responses (in part because of restrictions on domestic travel) and greater use of local relationships and networks. More than three quarters of survey respondents from development and humanitarian organisations agree or strongly agree that the COVID-19 pandemic will strengthen locally led response and programming in the future due to reduced international presence.[15] Meanwhile, a few Pacific Islanders interviewed note that in the absence of international staff there has sometimes been greater jockeying for power amongst local staff, particularly at senior levels.[16]

77% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that COVID-19 will strengthen locally led response and programming because of less international presence[17]

In the humanitarian sector, these changes are also apparent in responses to Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold. The restrictions on the surge of international staff have altered the dynamics of leadership and decision-making. National actors' increased visibility, voice and control in sector and cluster meetings has enhanced their roles in setting priorities at national and sub-national levels. Importantly, local leadership was also more visible. Local actors took the lead on policy decisions and in meetings that are traditionally dominated by internationals. This visibility is important to gaining further authority and confidence.[18]

Increased opportunities for women

Women had a stronger and more visible role in the COVID-19 response in Vanuatu and Fiji than in responses to other recent disasters, such as cyclones. The local response to the pandemic builds on skills in community engagement, risk reduction and health programming. This represents a shift away from the more typical male-dominated 'command and control' mode of cyclone response to one that emphasises engagement and communication. The response also draws attention to women's socio-economic roles in ensuring community cohesion and mobilisation of communal resilience structures. [19]

Pacific Islanders perceive a more culturally literate work environment with the absence of expatriates.[20] This has meant more relational and culturally appropriate ways of working, including meetings in local languages, more systematic inclusion of prayers and generally less formality. They speak of a more relaxed atmosphere, with more laughter and less sense of surveillance. Moreover, Pacific Islanders point to less need to negotiate their professional and personal lives, for instance, with children more commonly present in offices after school. They also identify that they feel freer to identify

options and solutions, and think more creatively about their work, in the absence of international staff. Increased levels of communication and collaboration between Pacific Islander staff, within organisations and between organisations, is consistently cited as one of the positive results of the absence of expatriates.[21]

The empowerment being experienced is nonetheless caveated by legacies of colonialist approaches to aid practice that continue to reverberate. Pacific Islanders note a nervousness to step into leadership roles because of a fear that their leadership must resemble the model established by international approaches, and that they will not be supported by their international colleagues if they fail. Respondents spoke about a continuing 'colonisation of the mind,' whereby they feel as if they are unable to match the expertise of expatriates, even when they know this is not the case. Such legacies continue to have an impact beyond the simple presence or absence of actors from outside the region.[22]

FINDING 2: REMOTE SUPPORT HAS WORKED WHERE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST WERE IN PLACE

According to the regional survey, 70 per cent of actors believe that there has been an increase in remote support in the context of COVID. However, the proportion of international and regional actors that held this perception is higher than the proportion of national and local organisations.[23] This difference highlights how the 'digital divide' and existing power hierarchies affect the aid world. While there have been benefits from increased online working, such as additional channels or rates of participation, in some cases remote working has exacerbated pre-existing disparities in systems and structures. Access to digital infrastructure, the availability or choice of information technology (IT) systems, and familiarity with remote support technology are all factors.

70% of actors identified an increase in remote support in the context of COVID-19

Interviews with national and local actors reveal strong approval of remote support.[24] Many interviewees note that it is useful to have technical assistance available at the end of the phone, or for short-term assistance, rather than creating relationships of dependency by being based in Pacific offices full-time. An important factor here is having the right technical assistance; this was mostly conceptualised as strong cultural and country understanding, as well as a willingness to perform mentoring or accompaniment functions. International staff can provide effective and valued support, but past relationships, cultural literacy, genuine willingness and trust are vital, and require knowledge of and experience in the region to work well. Paradoxically, all these attributes flow from being physically present.

Sometimes the preference for remote support was expressed as a rejection of surveillance or control: 'We don't need white people hovering over us.'[25] International remote support was also valued for allowing local actors to get on with the job and 'buffer' them from the compliance demands of the international project management system. Remote support was most positively viewed where there was an ideal combination of skill sets, with international staff providing technical advice and coaching and mentoring from a distance, and local staff filtering that through their cultural/political expertise, and then having the freedom to lead on the ground.[26] In addition to this, the Red Cross case study also found that not all remote surge was effective due to mismatched scale and technical requirements in areas such as procurement and logistics.[27]

The strength of pre-existing relationships and trust is an important consideration in the effectiveness of remote support. This finding should be considered in light of the more diverse participation and leadership (particularly regarding women's roles) during the COVID-19 response. Other comments highlight that the role international organisations are playing through remote support differs from their in-country contributions. More research is needed to understand these dynamics, as well as how they interact with technology access and preferences.

FINDING 3: NATIONAL AND LOCAL ACTORS REPORT RECEIVING MORE FUNDING BUT A MAJORITY OF DONOR FUNDING IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE CONTINUED TO GO THROUGH INTERNATIONAL MECHANISMS

Emerging data suggests an increase in funding for local and national actors from the development and humanitarian sectors, as well as more partnerships. Sixty-six per cent of national and local actors in the Pacific report receiving an increase in funding in the wake of COVID-19, and 61 per cent of national or local actors report new partnerships with other organisations.[28] There are also some positive aspects in relation to increased funding to local actors during disaster response. During the Red Cross response to TC Harold, 60–80 per cent of funding went directly to the National Red Cross Societies, in part due to much lower implementation costs through reduced international surge personnel and travel. There are also positive signs of greater engagement from the private sector in humanitarian response. The Fiji Red Cross was able to secure substantial in-country funds from local donors, financial institutions and corporate partners to respond to the double impact of TC Harold and COVID-19.[29]

However, this is still taking place within a broader donor system that prioritises funding through traditional international mechanisms and intermediaries in humanitarian response that ultimately control the direction, quality and model of funding to local actors. The amount of direct funding to local and national actors remains low globally. It is currently sitting at around 2.1 per cent of total humanitarian funding globally, despite the 2016 Grand Bargain commitment of 25 per cent.[30]

National and local actors also however report increased funding requirements in the context of more need. Some also report reduced funding for existing programs. National and local actors have had to rapidly establish new programs and adapt existing ones to respond to COVID-19, while also assuming responsibility for implementing measures to protect their staff from infection. Despite signs of increased funding more generally in the context of COVID, the experience of the humanitarian sector in the response to TC Harold was that international donor funding remained international NGO-centric and was difficult, if not impossible, for local actors to access.[31]

66% of local and national respondents from local and national reported that there is increased funding available to them

NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL: COMMUNICATIONS, MONITORING AND EVALUATION AND PROCUREMENT

Communicating

National and local organisations report changes in the forms of communications programs use, with greater use of social media (Facebook messenger, WhatsApp, personal skype accounts) as compared to more formal, traditional sector meetings. These forms of communication are more informal and encourage more horizontal and personal conversations, and function best where relationships are already established. The widespread use of these methods during COVID-19 has arguably changed the power dynamics between international and local staff. People are spending less time in formal meetings, being encouraged to contribute to conversation, and local actors have more control over when they let an international perspective into the conversations. These new informal methods of communications also created new spaces for women to 'share experiences as citizens and social protection leaders.'[32]

60% of local and national actors reported that their organisation had conducted more work online in adapting to the impacts of COVID-19

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Similarly, while monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) in development and humanitarian programming is frequently seen to be a rigid activity focused on upwards reporting, the empowerment of local actors is driving some innovations that challenge this perception. Building on initiatives to articulate a Pacific approach to MEL prior to COVID-19,[33] some programs are experimenting with more varied and locally relevant forms of MEL. In the Solomon Islands, Pacific Islander staff working on official aid programs have found that the limitations on data collection during the pandemic provided some space for local innovation. As a result, they have been drawing on narrative storytelling – a common way of capturing and sharing knowledge in the Solomon Islands context that values experiential knowledge.[34] In some cases, these forms of monitoring have resulted in more locally meaningful data that staff would like to see retained beyond the pandemic. Others, however, reported that the demands for information from remote colleagues has increased in regularity, and can be uncoordinated.[35]

Procurement processes

Procurement processes for humanitarian response in the region are typically designed for large-scale international supply chains. These international supply chains were significantly interrupted by COVID-19, and the standard international procurement processes have proved to be cumbersome and relatively inflexible in adjusting to local procurement, requiring a high degree of administrative and financial oversight. Local procurement therefore became a more important source of relief items, in particular for domestic private sector agencies. For example, agreements with local suppliers in Fiji mean that some goods, such as hygiene kits, were purchased locally.[36]

Background photo by Nahil Naseer on Unsplash

WHERE TO NOW? MAKING THE MOST OF THE WINDOW

Our preliminary findings point to some common features across both humanitarian and development agencies in the Pacific.[37] In particular, it seems that the natural experiment of the withdrawal of expatriates has created unforeseen dynamics which are of interest and significance. These include, the emergence of new spaces for local leadership to flourish, a deepening understanding of what makes for effective international remote support of local agency and leadership, and increased funding for local and national actors. All these features raise questions about the degree to which pre-pandemic ways of working and relationships were, or were not, conducive to more locally led approaches to aid practice.

Crises often shine a bright light on power relations and inequality. Our research suggests important questions about funding models and remote and non-remote ways of working remain to be answered, as well as questions about the long-term economic and social consequences of COVID-19. Moreover, there is a bigger question about what the role of

international agencies will be in supporting local governments and organisations to address these consequences and build resilience for future shocks.

As the sector shifts back into a COVID-normal state, international actors will begin to return to the Pacific. A new natural experiment will begin. We are presented with a valuable window of opportunity to learn from and adopt new practices and approaches that will build on the positive adaptations made over the past year. One fear expressed by several participants during this research was that 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 (whilst recognising that some have changed for the worse) and therefore what features need to be retained. Our real-time monitoring of events and experiences in the Pacific strongly suggests that the humanitarian and development sectors need to engage in similar analysis at both individual agency and collective levels.

Questions for the humanitarian and development sectors to consider

Local leadership

▶ If local empowerment and leadership is better achieved in the absence of international actors, what does this reveal about how the sector has been approaching this goal in the past?

▶ What are the explicit and implicit understandings of successful leadership in the humanitarian and development sectors, and how do these value systems promote or marginalise different actors?

▶ How can local leadership and empowerment be amplified in the future?

Remote support

▶ Would ongoing remote support exacerbate existing inequalities in access to technical support and funding?

▶ How can organisations and funding focus on the establishment of appropriate IT systems and processes as part of institutional capacity-building? Is there a greater role for private sector IT partners?

▶ How can remote support be responsive to shifting leadership roles within communities?

▶ Is remote support sustainable in the longer term, with respect to building relationships, ensuring complementary contributions and cultivating and deploying expertise?

Funding

▶ Is the increase in funding to national and local actors proportionate to the increase to international actors?

▶ How can international agencies increase direct funding and support to local and national organisations in alignment with their expanded role in COVID-19?

▶ To what degree did funding become more flexible, adaptive and locally driven and how do we sustain this change?

ANNEX: BRINGING LEARNING TOGETHER

This initiative recognises that many other organisations and partnerships are tracking and trying to understand the impact of COVID-19 on local leadership. Multiple actors and approaches must be combined to tease out the implications. In order to understand where this research sits and what else is going on, we have outlined relevant pieces of work in the table below.

Initiative	Implementing agency	Research Questions and methods
DFID (global)	British Red Cross	▶ How do different stakeholders perceive the localisation agenda and its intersection with institutional racism and anti-racism within the international humanitarian sector? ▶ What have been the experiences of National Societies and other national and local actors in terms of implementing localised responses during the pandemic? ▶ Has the global pandemic and disruption to the status quo for major humanitarian responses prompted a leap forward in the localisation agenda? ▶ Has a principled humanitarian response to COVID-19 and simultaneous crises been impeded by international actors being unable to respond as they might have pre-COVID? ▶ What risks are evident in a less internationally dominated response context, and how should these be managed? ▶ What can be learnt about the impact of how responses have been led, funded and conducted during the pandemic, and how do these compare to other responses?

ODI/HPG (global)	Numerous previous studies on localisation: https://www.odi.org/publications/11471-rethinking-capacity-and-complementarity-more-local-humanitarian-action https://www.odi.org/events/16964-covid-19-time-support-local-humanitarian-action	▶ Current research question: How is the humanitarian system adapting to support more localised humanitarian action, and greater complementarity between local, national and international actors, in the COVID-19 context? ▶ HPG to document how humanitarian practice is changing (or not), explore the barriers to humanitarian action and record the perspectives and work carried out by humanitarians during the critical time – diary method, case studies, kobo
Centre for Global Development	Lead researchers: Jeremy Konyndyk and Patrick Suez	▶ Reforming the humanitarian model
Duncan Green	Emergent agency in the time of COVID-19 Strong link to Pacific civil society experience https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/launching-a-new-research-and-action-programme-on-emergent-agency-in-a-time-of-covid-want-to-join-us/	Exploring one of the important and potentially positive side effects of the pandemic – the response it triggers among low-income/excluded communities around the world.
Charter for Change	https://charter4change.org/resources/	Regular case studies of humanitarian localisation, accountability and reform
Grand Bargain localisation workstream	Five years of research and case studies on localisation (as one of the 10 workstreams) http://media.ifrc.org/grand_bargain_localisation/	Surveys underway to underpin the framework of the next Grand Bargain
Asia Foundation	Range of country-based studies on governance and civil society and COVID-19	https://devpolicy.org/adapting-and-responding-to-the-pandemic-civic-spaces-in-southeast-asia-20200928/
Humanitarian Advisory Group	Ongoing research through Humanitarian Horizons program	

Australian Red Cross	Research and case studies in Asia and Pacific on how both the Red Cross Movement and broader sector are responding to localisation in emergency settings (Fiji, Vanuatu, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Myanmar)	

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