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Urgence . Réhabilitation . Développement

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LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO A GLOBAL PANDEMIC:
THE WAY OF THE FUTURE?

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AFD

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RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
MINISTÈRE
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CENTRE DE CRISE ET DE SOUTIEN
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PREAMBLE

As it has done regularly in the past, in connection with complex, multi-factor and potentially long-lasting crises, the Groupe URD has begun to:

- Share lessons from previous major health crises (see: https://www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200408_Crises-sanitaires_EN_FINAL.pdf)
- Establish a 'real-time evaluation observatory' in order to produce synthesis reports, analysis and recommendations about the crisis. (https://www.urd.org/en/project/covid-19-observatory/).

In this framework, the team of the COVID-19 Observatory has produced a series of briefing notes on specific subjects:

- Health;
- Food, agricultural and economic security;
- Social cohesion and social tensions;
- Migration and mobility;
- Education;
- Conflicts;
- The Emergency-Development Nexus.

This is the eleventh note of the Groupe URD's COVID-19 Observatory, which focuses on local initiatives and solutions, which have flourished in civil society, as opposed to the traditional public aid actors (government response, local collectives, public agencies, etc.) as well as aid provided by the international aid sector.
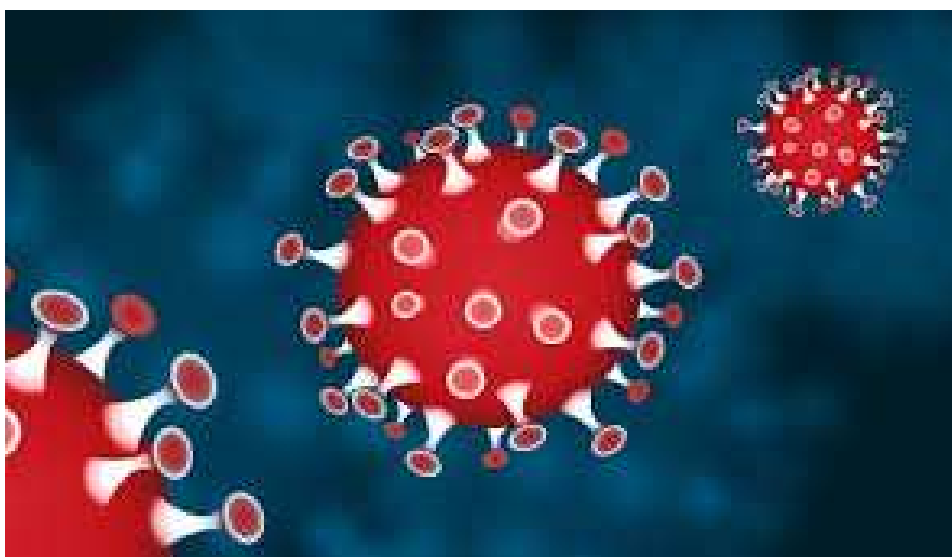
RÉSUMÉ

In the current crisis linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society organizations and citizen-led initiatives have once again demonstrated the irreplaceable value of their concrete, reactive and adaptable actions, which are on occasion "hyper-localized" to best respond to the circumstances they face.

Indeed, all over the world, countless initiatives have emerged in this unprecedented context of pandemic accompanied by mobility restrictions. These initiatives have brought into the spotlight the role of civil society and localized solidarity networks. New forms of engagement, often combining activism and solidarity, as well as new tactics of action and influence have emerged.

The added value of these local solutions seems to be closely linked to the trust that they have built up with the populations, and the resilience they help to strengthen. However, while the current crisis highlights the structural inequalities of the world's societies, the very real potential for social and political transformation that these initiatives can bring about remains a central issue. Finally, highlighting these local solutions also raises questions about the modes of action employed by conventional international aid actors (donors, multilateral agencies, NGOs, etc.) which have been - and will possibly be in the future - severely constrained in their intervention modalities.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. DEFINITIONS

What do we mean by "local solutions"?

For the purposes of this note, "local solutions" will be understood as initiatives that attempt to address the current pandemic, i.e., to limit or absorb its health impacts and the pandemic's myriad of associated side effects. The initiatives of interest here are:

- ✓ Generally, locally based and grassroots in nature, stemming from individuals directly affected by the crisis or a combination of its associated external shocks;
- ✓ Sometimes driven by pre-existing civil society organisations, i.e. associations, movements or coalitions of actors aiming to preserve rights or of a charitable nature;
- ✓ Formal or informal, i.e. carried out within established organisations or, on the contrary, based on a spontaneous form of organisation, between committed individuals.

1.2. ACTORS

In analysing the emergence of local solutions to the COVID-19 crisis, the focus will be on actors, mostly local, who have taken on one or more of the following roles:

- ✓ Front-line workers providing basic services;
- ✓ Human rights advocates and guardians of government accountability;
- ✓ Activists or "opinion-makers" advocating for societal change and addressing the structural causes of contemporary challenges (climate change and environmental degradation, socio-economic inequalities, violence and conflict, etc.).

Usually, these types of actors can operate on different geographical scales (local/national/regional/global) to reflect and advocate for their communities and their opinions. However, as a result of the current crisis, spheres of influence have de facto become "hyper-localized" due to the restriction of mobility (setting up confinements and curfews), even if it is still possible to connect through virtual channels (the burgeoning networks and coalitions of actors acting on a global scale have demonstrated this).

In this regard, it should be noted that the Human Rights Fund[1] has identified and provided information on a number of local initiatives during the current crisis.

1.3. CONTEXT

While the pre-COVID period was marked by an unprecedented wave of mass mobilization, demonstrations, rallies and various protests abruptly ceased in many parts of the world (India, Lebanon, Chile, Hong Kong, Iraq, Algeria, United States…) due to the pandemic. This comes at a time when the health crisis and its many side effects have revealed structural failures and inequalities of all kinds, for though the crisis affects all social and economic strata, it does so in an uneven, disproportionate way.

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[1] https://globalhumanrights.org/stories-from-the-frontlines-of-covid-19/

In fragile or particularly precarious contexts, the effects of the health crisis and the measures taken to contain it can lead to humanitarian and social crisis situations. The global pandemic situation has thus given rise to a consolidation of state control and surveillance strategies (to varying degrees), which in certain countries has restricted civil liberties, aggravated the lack of respect for human rights, and removed the space for civil society to express itself.

In many areas, the authorities have even been seen instrumentalizing the pandemic to increase surveillance and control, to the detriment of human rights and civil society, and rumors surrounding this occurrence have in turn increased mistrust between populations and governments[2]. This trend is clearly evident in authoritarian and populist regimes (Hungary, Philippines, Zimbabwe, Tunisia, China)[3], but similar fears have also been expressed in democracies (Germany, France[4], United Kingdom). Thus, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Fight against Terrorism, speaks of "a parallel epidemic of authoritarian and repressive measures".

Nevertheless, despite this potentially restrictive context, new forms of activism and citizen mobilization have flourished to inspire change or express solidarity. To illustrate this, more than a hundred methods of non-violent activism that have emerged worldwide have since been listed by a group of political science researchers[5] in April, and this number has been growing ever since.

2. OBSERVED TRENDS

2.1. THE PUSH FOR LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

An emergence of mutual aid initiatives

A host of informal citizen initiatives have sprung up through spontaneous forms of mutual aid between people affected by the crisis, with the aim of limiting the spread of the virus as well as its associated side effects. There have been countless examples of fundraising, provision of essential goods and services, disinfection of public places, collection and distribution of medical and protective equipment, socio-economic assistance, etc. These services have been provided in a variety of ways: by replacing or filling the gaps left by governments, in collaboration with relevant authorities or in partnership with economic actors.

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[2]   https://issblog.nl/2020/04/24/covid-19-increased-surveillance-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-reveals-the-emergence-of-a-newarchitecture-of-global-power-by-jacqueline-gaybor-and-henry-chavez/
[3]   http://www.slate.fr/story/189468/coronavirus-pandemie-regimes-autoritaires-hongrie-orban-philippines-duterte-israel-netanyahouchine-jinping
[4] https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/03/26/peut-on-penser-le-post-coronalisme
[5]   https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/20/the-global-pandemic-has-spawned-new-forms-of-activism-and-theyre-flourishing

Examples of services provided**:**

- ✓ Creation and donation of medical equipment for medical caregivers (masks, gloves, gowns, glasses, disinfectants...) and at-risk segments of the population,
- ✓ Public kitchens and emergency food banks (India),
- ✓ Solidarity funds, economic assistance and social guidance for those who have lost their means of subsistence overnight as a result of confinement measures (India),
- ✓ Online access to free medical consultations (Philippines)
- ✓ Fighting against misinformation:

In some countries, the fight against misinformation is all the more necessary as it is exacerbated by political leaders (Brazil, Poland, among others). The aim of these actions is to raise public awareness in order to combat the spread of the virus and to avoid the stigmatization of patients. Initiatives of this kind have been carried out by womens' micro-enterprise organizations and savings and loan groups (in India, Uganda, Ethiopia...).

- ✓ Protection of marginalized groups:

Without State support, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) distributed masks and hygiene products in refugee camps in Burma, but also translated essential information on prevention and protection against COVID-19 into the Karen language. As front-line responders, the provision of direct services has enabled KWO to make recommendations that meet the needs of the Karen people.

- ✓ Partnerships with public and economic actors:

In Iran, a coalition of volunteers and entrepreneurs managed to import more than half a million masks and manufacture 77,000 respirators despite embargo sanctions against the country.

In India, mutual aid groups produced about 20 million masks in a few weeks[1]. Not only does this decentralized production model mean delivery to hospitals and local customers required less logistical capacity and time at the start of the pandemic, it will also be vital in times of economic recovery and reconstruction. This demonstrates the leadership of rural women micro-entrepreneurs, able to produce and distribute millions of masks in a very short period of time and in a context of confinement and restricted movement.

To cope with the pandemic, new production and business models have also emerged, such as RUDI, a distribution company owned and managed by rural women (India[6]). Beyond solidarity and mutual help, these

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[6] *Idem.*

models demonstrate the potential of a decentralized and self-sufficient basic economy which supports the weaker sections of society, making it more resilient in the event of new crises.

Highlighting socio-economic inequalities

Beyond addressing communities' immediate needs, local responses to the pandemic can take on a broader political mission and contribute to the resilience of their communities by supporting socio-political or economic change. This type of mobilization reinforces the vitality of civil society in general and can serve to highlight the socio-economic issues revealed or exacerbated by the pandemic.

Examples of mobilizations:

- ✓ Feminist emergency plan launched in Chile to combine coordination of health care and peer support to face off against gender-based violence (GBV);
- ✓ Rental strike during confinement (Spain);
- ✓ Campaign calling for vacant housing to be provided to the homeless during confinement (United States);
- ✓ Around the world, women's support groups have self-organized to help those confined with abusive partners.

Thus, through their representativeness and their outreach in communities, local responses have highlighted the plight of vulnerable groups while calling for specific protections as part of a progressive agenda. This is the case of the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) in Uganda, which highlighted several points aimed at strengthening the public health system, including adequate funding and continued access for non-COVID-19 patients[7]. ISER has also helped to ensure that the needs of the entire population are represented in the development of public health policies.

Defending fundamental rights

Civil society organizations and citizens' movements have also mobilized to defend civil rights and fundamental freedoms. This constitutes a challenge in contexts that are sometimes restrictive and liberticidal (as previously mentioned).

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[7] https://iser-uganda.org/news-events/notable-developments/421-maintaining-human-dignity-andrespect-for-social-and-economicrights-during-the-covid-19-pandemic

> **Examples of actions to defend rights and freedoms:**
>
> ✓ Lawsuit against the government demanding reimbursement of compulsory quarantine fees (Muslims for Human Rights, Kenya),
>
> ✓ Monitoring of government actions and documentation of violence committed by state agents (Spaces for Change, Nigeria),
>
> ✓ Withdrawal of a law sentencing to prison those accused of spreading false information in several countries.

Other civic actors have called for an increased accountability of governments and denounced the incompetence of authorities (Egypt, Thailand[8]) or the excessively slow nature of responses, for example by hammering pans together (Brazil, Chile[9]).

2.2. POTENTIAL AND ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN LOCALIZED RESPONSE

The irreplaceable value of local solutions

Once again, the ongoing pandemic demonstrates the value of local solutions - concrete, accessible to all and adapted to the daily lived experiences of those impacted – in all domains which this crisis touches, be they in health, economic, educational, or personal security, and beyond. Seeing as how the effectiveness of a response is strongly linked to the trust of populations, local actors - institutions, associations, influential people or committed citizens - are often best placed to disseminate public health and prevention information, to set up monitoring and tracking programs, to identify and quickly provide vital support to those who need to be protected.

Past epidemics have taught us that government efforts are most effective when they rely on community engagement to decentralize responses and control the spread of disease (A. de Wall[10], Sorcha O'Callaghan[11]). The value of strong, locally based organizations during a health emergency is thus one of the main lessons learned in the response to Ebola epidemics in West Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This approach is also at the core of the appeal launched by the World Health 2030 Institute[12] in France, which calls for an effective and appropriate response which must include civil society actors. More broadly, faced with the possibility of future systemic crises (which may or may not resemble the COVID-19 pandemic), the added value of local solutions has also been demonstrated in the field of adaptation to climate change[13].

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[8] https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1878380/doctors-issue-stage-3-warning
[9] https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/quarantined-chileans-keeping-protest-movement-alive-200414122141809.html
[10] https://africanarguments.org/2020/03/19/can-there-be-a-democratic-public-health-from-hiv-aids-to-covid-19/
[11] https://www.odi.org/blogs/16779-covid-19-five-lessons-ebola
[12] Institut Santé Mondiale 2030, "L'inclusion et la participation de toute la société à la réponse au Covid-19 - Éléments de réflexion", Avril 2020 – Note numéro 10.
[13] Mfitumukiza, D., A. S. Roy, B. Simane, A. Hammill, M. F. Rahman, S. Huq (2020), Scaling local and community-based adaptation. Global Commission on Adaptation Background Paper. Rotterdam and Washington, DC.

The enormous potential for the mobilization of citizens and social spheres

In the current pandemic, civil society organizations and movements have demonstrated their enormous potential for collective mobilization and civic/activist participation. This is in part thanks to the ability of grassroots organizations and community structures to take advantage of their contacts within local communities and to quickly organize widespread action, despite the constraints and the restrictions in place.

An intermediary between populations and governments

Grassroots organizations and community members have played a key role in identifying vulnerable people to support during this sanitary crisis.

In Rwanda, for example, members of neighbourhood committees (*umudugudu*, the smallest administrative unit in the country) drew up lists of families in need, so that they could benefit from the government's food programme[14]. In India, a coalition of 30 NGOs (Rural Community Response to COVID-19) relied on a network of more than 10,000 women's self-help groups to identify the most vulnerable segments of their communities, such as migrant workers, and worked with local governments to immediately provide them with shelter, food and medical assistance, as well as state allowances.

Even governments considered to be unresponsive have begun to collaborate with these local and citizen initiatives to manage the pandemic and reach out to people. In India for example, the government has developed a digital platform to link volunteers from various social organizations with civil society representatives and local government[15].

This link between local solidarity movements and the exercise of local democracy is at the heart of reflections emerging from proponents of decentralised cooperation. These actors have convincingly pointed out that the effectiveness of crisis management depends very much on the capacity of local authorities to take charge of local action (health awareness/education, setting up mutual aid systems, continuity of public services, combating violence, respect for confinement, detection and isolation...). Local and regional government representatives insist in particular on innovative practices based on technology and alliances with civil society as a driving force for solidarity and building future resilience in the territories[16].

This is also the reason why members of Cités Unies France (CUF) launched a solidarity fund in April, quickly supported by local authorities, which aims to support African local authorities. In June, pledges from this initiative amounted to 200,000 Euros. During the launch of this program[17], CUF also called for the creation of a global fund supported by the European Union, nations around the world, private donors and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Network.

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[14] https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/04/10/coronavirus-au-rwanda-felix-organise-la-solidarite-officielle-de-quartier_6036269_3212.html

[15] https://www.firstpost.com/health/coronavirus-outbreak-narendra-modi-announces-covid-warriors-website-to-link-social-civil-society-organisations-with-local-authorities-8301531.html

[16] « La démocratie locale au lendemain de la pandémie du COVID-19 », webinaire organisé par Cités et Gouvernements Locaux Unis (CGLU), ONU-Habitat et Metropolis, 18 juin 2020.

[17] https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/04/23/covid-19-nous-elus-locaux-de-france-sommes-particulierement-inquiets-pour-le-continent-africain_6037567_3212.html

3. WHAT DEVELOPMENTS FOR THE FUTURE?

3.1. NEW FORMS OF ACTIVISM AND PEER SUPPORT

During the pandemic, even as the usual methods of mobilization were restricted (whether due to confinement, prohibition of social gatherings, social distancing, etc.), activists found other ways to organize themselves and their followings. From the launch of virtual interactive campaigns to other creative campaign strategies, there has been a reinvention of forms of activism and solidarity. For example, young climate activists have organized weekly online demonstrations, launched "tweet-storms" and the concept of "teach-ins" (occupying public places to raise awareness and protest), developed policy documents and websites on climate change to stimulate civic action, to grow their movement, and to build mutual aid mechanisms (as seen in the United Kingdom).

> **Examples of alternative forms of mobilization:**
>
> ✓ Protests against the harsh treatment of irregular migrants (United States),
> ✓ Banging pots and pans from balconies and windows (*cacerolazo*) in various countries,
> ✓ Placement of red rags in windows (Colombia).

Some protest movements that were abruptly interrupted have also invested in localized mutual aid actions to maintain their momentum and visibility, such as Hirak in Algeria[18]. For its part, the Extinction Rebellion (ER) movement has introduced a new axis - that of social justice - into its fight against climate change.

In the wake of the ongoing crisis, the civic space has therefore been redesigned and has met communities' needs, a trend which could herald a new way for them to influence the political sphere. According to some analysts, these new forms and tactics, combining activism and solidarity, could improve their capacity for influence and social transformation in the coming (post-COVID) era: "Far from condemning social movements to obsolescence, the pandemic - and governments' responses to it - are generating new tools, strategies and motivations to push for change" (*The Guardian*, *op. cit*.).

In the Philippines, for example, Active Vista works on the reappropriation of universal values of commitment (human rights, solidarity, etc.) and national civic values as concrete solutions to everyday concerns (economic, security, health). Against the excesses of President Duterte's government (i.e. its militarization of the COVID response) and state violence (attacks on freedom of expression/on human rights defenders), mutual aid mechanisms have appeared to nearly become a political act of protest. Thus, according to Leni Velasco-Bicol (Director of Active Vista), "social solidarity is the last line of defence".

Finally, this mobilization has in many cases been carried out with other allies outside the human rights sphere, relying on artists, scientists, public health workers and youth activists. This is the case, for example, of the Senegalese movement Y'en a Marre, which has reoriented its social protest actions to instead spread songs about social distancing and ways of protecting against the virus.

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[18]

3.2. WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL FOR PROGRESS OR SOCIAL CHANGE AFTER THE PANDEMIC?

Due to the current crisis' role as a revelator and exacerbator of inequalities and injustices across societies, but also as citizens' initiatives have gained legitimacy because of their important role in providing essential services, civil society may see its role as a force for mobilization revalued and reinvested in by the general public.

Yet questions remain about the capacity of these movements to maintain momentum as channels for aid, collective mobilization and political advocacy, transitioning towards their agendas of social and political transformation (social protection, public health, social equity, responsible governance). Will the potential of this myriad of self-help and advocacy initiatives be transferable to the political sphere? It remains to be seen, as the pandemic has also had the effect of widening social cleavages; as other segments of the society have opposed the local solutions highlighted here (citizens in the United States or local politicians in Brazil hostile to confinement and precautionary measures which these local groups have advocated for); or even as groups have supported solidarity actions while pushing forward a non-progressive agenda (local movements stigmatizing part of the population, criminal gangs, etc.).

To successfully transition towards meaningful progressive change, the multiple, sometimes highly localized initiatives will likely need to connect to broader coalitions, at the national or transnational level, and consider new alliances. It is in this spirit that the proposal for a Latin American Ecosocial Pact[19] was born at the beginning of June 2020, with the support of more than 450 organizations. One of the key points of this platform is the articulation of redistributive justice with environmental, ethnic and gender justice.

3.3. THE NECESSARY ADJUSTMENTS TO THE CONVENTIONAL AID SECTOR

Supporting and strengthening local capacity/solutions

Many civil society organizations have had to reorient their activities towards public health or humanitarian assistance (distributions, awareness raising) to address the immediate effects of the crisis. While such a reorientation may have seemed natural for organizations traditionally oriented towards development or emergency assistance, they have sometimes revised their beneficiaries, forged new partnerships or had to fill gaps in government responses.

This reorientation of activities has been less obvious for human and civil rights actors, or even for economic actors. For example, human rights or democratic monitoring organizations have focused their action on denouncing false information (Brazil) or distributing masks and food (Kenya).

In the context of a global pandemic, local actors were also better placed to access and address populations than aid actors who were subject to strong constraints (restrictions on movement, mistrust of populations, bureaucratic and generally not very agile systems, etc.). Nonetheless, despite the recognized need to support local actors, particularly through flexible funding mechanisms, only a minority of international donors are meeting their commitments (Grand Bargain, May 2016). For example, the UN Humanitarian Response Plan[20] recognizes the

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[19] https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/social-ecological-economic-intercultural-pact-latin-america/
[20] https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHRP-COVID19_JulyUpdate_Abridged_FR.pdf

importance of local leadership in response (first version published on 25 March 2020) but it seems that only a tiny fraction of funding has reached frontline organizations to date. Indeed, according to the FTS financial data[21], by mid-June, of the nearly $2.5 billion of aid allocated by major donors, $1.8 billion (74%) went to the U.N. NGOs, in comparison, received only $73 million (3%) of this funding, and only $1.7 million (0.07% of the total funding) went to dedicated national and local organizations[22].

Questioning roles, reinventing functions

Will the COVID-19 crisis be an opportunity to rethink the role of conventional aid actors?

Among other things, the travel bans still in effect mean that international aid workers will continue to be unable to be physically present in the field. In order to move forward on the Grand Bargain localization agenda, the dichotomies between international and local actors should therefore give way to more balanced partnerships based on complementarity and comparative advantage.

While the presence of international civil society organizations will remain essential to support their local counterparts, the current dominant relationship of contracting out operational services should evolve towards a supportive, facilitative and empowering role. In the view of some analysts[23], the role of international actors must thus inevitably evolve from delivery agents to facilitators, monitors and advocates.

Amplifying local voices and initiatives

Is a shift from a professionalized aid sector to supporting informal and localized forms of activism conceivable in the future?

Some authors argue for increased transnational support for local organisations and initiatives (including civic groups). According to them[24], major actors in international aid should allow local actors to adapt their responses, form alliances and launch new experiments: "The time has come to overcome old habits of project-based assistance, heavy administrative requirements and limited time frames".

Reinforcing national systems and inclusive responses

Among the avenues envisaged for changing the modalities of international aid, it would be desirable for actors to become more involved in supporting national governments. However, this approach blurs the current lines between humanitarian aid and development and makes humanitarian actors fear that their principles will be undermined.

In the future humanitarians could nevertheless have an increasing role in strengthening national systems (health and social protection systems) and advocating for the equitable distribution of resources and access based solely on need, especially when a vaccine becomes available.

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[21] FTS: Financial Tracking System (UNOCHA).
[22] https://www.cgdev.org/blog/humanitarian-financing-failing-covid-19-frontlines#.XuxNv040GEM.twitter
[23] https://www.cgdev.org/blog/faced-covid-19-humanitarian-system-should-rethink-its-business-model
[24] https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/21/civil-society-and-coronavirus-dynamism-despite-disruption-pub-81592

A similar approach should also be applied to address the socio-economic impact of the crisis. Already, humanitarian actors are considering how to expand cash and voucher programmes as governments around the world develop social protection responses to the crisis. Humanitarians could support this process and advocate for the inclusion of particularly vulnerable groups, rather than creating new parallel cash transfer systems.

CONCLUSION

In facing off against the COVID-19 crisis, social and mutual-help movements have adapted and reorganized, sometimes strengthening their support base, their messages and their strategies for action. While it has become clear that the initiative and creativity to respond to this crisis has chiefly come from civil society and grassroots organizations, the impact of these could be broadened if they were additionally supported by government systems and structures.

It is for this reason that the need for flexible and long-term financial support by donors and the international community for local solutions - be they for advocates, activists or community-based social movements - becomes urgent as actions still do not reflect the commitments made to increase the localization of aid since the Istanbul World Summit (WHS, May 2016).

In the same vein, the emergence of the "local solutions" that have come to light in this global crisis should inspire conventional aid organizations to rethink their roles and ways of doing things. A critical reflection and a rethinking of existing models that would allow the "heavyweights" of international aid to maintain their credibility and legitimacy, by potentiating and amplifying the impact of local solutions. This subject will be at the heart of the debates of the next [Autumn Humanitarian Universities](#) organized by Groupe URD on September 23-25th, 2020, in Plaisians (Drôme).

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