

Global disaster – local response?

An experimental learning collaboration between Civil Society Organisations focused on recovery from COVID-19: April 2021.

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The scale of the global disaster that has engulfed us is greater than many have experienced in their lifetimes. Immediate response has cost over ten trillion dollars globally, according to one estimate¹. As with other disasters at national scale, many governments are geared up for disaster response, often invoking emergency legislation and using powers and resources not normally at their disposal. Those who work in disaster preparedness, response and disaster risk reduction know that much more than response is needed. Response alone doesn't address the conditions which allow the disaster to occur. Understanding and addressing the root causes of risk is vital if the risk of future disasters is to be reduced.

The need for a long-term, proactive focus is recognised by many, for example the theme of the forthcoming UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development is *"Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development"*².

Those working at local level to help communities reduce the impact of disaster know that translating these aims into action requires understanding at much smaller, local scales, because the social and economic impact of disasters affects disparate localities very differently. For example Indonesian Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) collaborated with their government in reaching out to the most vulnerable to ensure fair vaccine distribution. They facilitated meetings between the government administration and agencies for people with disabilities, older people, and transgender people. They found many were not properly registered and might be excluded from vaccinations. They gathered data to identify these people and ensure they gained vaccine access. Many more examples of local expertise shaping specific local action are provided in the full report³.

These points stimulated a series of online discussions (December 2020-March 2021), facilitated by Inventing Futures, between a group of people connected with national and local CSOs. They shared their experiences of response to COVID-19 in different local contexts and discussed their insights and views concerning not only effective response, but also how to reduce the risk of future disasters of the same type. Over four months of discussions, 18 participants provided examples and experiences and commented on what they heard from each other, developing a picture of a range of challenges experienced in localities across Asia and Africa. The participants also met with a wider group in a webinar organised in collaboration with the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network to

¹ Glassman, A. Smitham, E. March 8, 2021. "Financing for Global Health Security and Pandemic Preparedness: Taking Stock and What's Next" Centre for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/financing-global-health-security-and-pandemic-preparedness-taking-stock-whats-next> Accessed 13 April 2021

² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2021>

³ <http://inventing-futures.org/covid-civil-society-organisations/>

share and discuss their findings and recommendations. These will be circulated further through networks, news media and blogs.

Findings from the discussions

- **Disasters within the disaster.** In some cases responses to the pandemic have led to state-driven repression and suffering, specifically for the vulnerable (particularly reported in Togo, Senegal and the Philippines). This has resulted in further human-induced disasters following the biological hazard in these contexts, including loss of livelihoods, injury and even death.
- **Trade-offs between health and economics.** Governments are often challenged by the trade-off between health and economic considerations, walking a political tightrope. (this was reported particularly in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Senegal and Nepal)
- **Increased reliance on local capacities** as government and agency capacities were limited by the scale of need. Governments often depend on CSOs for service delivery, particularly in disaster contexts such as this (this was reported particularly India, Kenya and Nepal). In some cases spontaneous and informal leadership has emerged to compensate for failures in formal supply chains, with communities and CSOs collaborating to identify vulnerable community members and distribute food, medication, personal protective equipment and vaccines appropriately
- **Necessity for increased rather than decreased local funding** to support local capacities. Despite the increased demands on CSOs now and into the future, it's just when they are diving deepest that they are being starved of oxygen as funding sources are cut locally, nationally and globally (Particular examples were seen in Cameroon, India and Nepal).
- **Partnership building mechanisms to strengthen coordinated responses.** CSOs have rich understanding of ways in which the response of government and others could be improved through partnerships, coordination and understanding of local contexts (this was seen particularly in Cambodia, Kenya, the Philippines, India, Cameroon, Indonesia and Nepal)
- **A necessity to develop a proactive Disaster Risk Reduction perspective** rather than focusing on reactive short-term response. The short-term focus of governments in response to the disaster, perceiving it primarily as a health challenge, has restricted response to livelihood issues, increasing impoverishment of the poorest. This approach contrasts with the principles of Disaster Risk Reduction which seeks to 'build back better' through transformational recovery, emphasising sustainable development and resilient pathways (this concern was expressed particularly in the Philippines, Kenya, Cameroon and Nepal).

The participants in the discussion drew together their findings and, based on these, formulated recommendations addressing both short-term response and longer term risk reduction.

Recommendations for Action

- **Resources:** As the calls on CSOs increase, their resources decrease. Providing core funding (as opposed to projectized, tied funds) is critical to sustaining and strengthening their role.

INGOs and other funding agencies should support partner agencies in this way and agencies should create funds which can be accessed by local CSOs to support core costs **Action:** *Donors, governments, INGOs, Foundations, National development agencies, Networks and Platforms should support CSOs by providing financial and technical resources to reduce vulnerabilities to COVID-19*

- **Policies:** CSOs have a stable long term presence and are at the same time more flexible and adaptive than political decision makers, who have short-term mandates. While decision-making should be left in the hands of governments, CSOs and the communities they work with should be recognised as change makers and involved in sharing local knowledge and priorities, in policy making and implementation, strengthening capacity building and empowerment of local leadership. **Action:** *CSO Networks and Platforms pressing for recognition of CSOs at local and national level*
- **Building partnerships:** Local CSOs are bridgebuilders, forging partnerships which strengthen flows of knowledge and resources and enable governments and other actors to respond more effectively. Existing partnerships should be strengthened and new ones forged as an investment in long term effective and targeted recovery, avoiding duplication of effort between government and civil society. **Action:** *Partnership building by CSOs, Networks, Platforms, Local and national government, and facilitating agencies such as UN agencies.*
- **Advocate for Transformational Disaster Risk Reduction:** Sustainable futures depend on much more than the short term ‘magic bullet’ of vaccines. Many CSOs recognise the importance of Disaster Risk Reduction (allied to Climate Change Adaptation and Sustainable Development) in ensuring long term protection of lives and livelihoods. Unless these principles are foregrounded and adopted, we will lurch from crisis to crisis. CSOs, agencies and networks can partner to advocate for this shift in mindset, particularly at this time of disruption. **Action:** *Formulate specific calls to action which CSOs – in partnership with networks and relevant agencies such as UNDR – can use to advocate and lobby at government and international level*

A strong message underlying these recommendations was that local capacities and experience are often undervalued and unheard. When local actors are given a greater voice and influence over policy and action the result is that community level resilience can be strengthened more effectively. Even faced with a global level disaster, local actors have an important part to play.

Footnote: The power of learning

An important footnote to these action-oriented recommendations is that participants also recognised the value of the ‘action learning’ process. Without learning from experience there is a tendency to simply reproduce failure. This short experimental process demonstrated the willingness and ability of local organisations to collaborate in learning from each other, producing unique insights. Many of those who took part valued the way the process informed their own work, encouraged them in their actions and gave them a sense of mutual solidarity and support. Particular benefits identified by participants included:

1. Learning from other colleagues’ practices and being able to apply that learning in their own work

2. Getting reinforcement for their work through discovering that others were dealing with similar challenges and adopting similar methods
3. Sharing information in the form of findings and recommendations which they could apply in their own advocacy activities, strengthening collaboration with government.
4. Valuing investing time in collaborative research and learning as a process
5. Valuing membership of this informal 'community of practice' in situations where they were often particularly isolated.

Action: Strengthen support for collaboration and learning between CSOs, for example through networks, platforms and easily accessible online tools

Resources

Background material including the full draft report and the webinar recording are available at <http://inventing-futures.org/covid-civil-society-organisations/> which also provides a link to a multi-language forum where you can provide further contributions to the discussion.