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Scott Guggenheim

COVID-19 and Community Responses

In the fight against COVID-19, governments must harness an underutilized but highly effective tool—traditional community solidarity and volunteerism.

Governments around the world are stretched to their limits trying to cope with not just the health risks of the COVID-19 virus, but also the economic fallout as people lose their jobs and entire sections of the economy close down. The most advanced health systems, whether public or private, have been overwhelmed several-fold by the crisis. Medical experts have stipulated time and again that pharmaceutical interventions will not be enough to tackle this crisis.¹

In a crisis of this scale, no single intervention will be enough. Countries need to mobilize every tool at their disposal. In many contexts, the most valuable resources are traditions of community solidarity, voluntarism, and civil society activism. In fact, in many countries, these traditions are strongest where government is weakest.

This problem is not unrecognized. The World Health Organization has repeatedly stressed that for anti-virus strategies to succeed, they must be built around **“a strong community education and engagement approach that needs to be built from the communities up.”**² And yet, while there are many promising initiatives and inspiring anecdotes, very few countries or development agencies have anything like a strategic approach to engaging communities, civil society, or traditional leadership. This is a mistake.

Governments must include communities in the response to this crisis. As Raghuran Rajan, the former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, recently wrote in his book [The Third Way](#), communities are the oft-neglected third leg of the development tripod that includes public policy and private markets. Bringing government together with communities can multiply the effectiveness of a society’s efforts to deal with the crisis.

¹ Dahab et al, “COVID-19 control in low-income settings and displaced populations: what can realistically be done?” London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 20 March 2020

² Dr Michael Ryan, Executive Director, WHO Health Emergencies Programme, 30 March 2020

Many countries, both developing and developed, suffer from deficits of trust in both government institutions and national leaders. At times, this distrust has led to open resistance to health workers or to government health messages. Programs that enlist communities in the response can change that equation. People understand things that are made real in their daily lives. Community leaders and facilitators can explain in more personal language what the problem is and what measures must be taken, not just TV announcements from faraway capitals. When this is properly done, community members will have work to do and ways to contribute, despite the physical isolation. Making people feel that they are part of the solution is surely better than leaving them isolated and frightened. Furthermore, lessons from past crises show that if a government can deliver tangible support that builds credibility, communities are more likely to follow rules about seeking care, engaging in self-isolation, and avoiding public gatherings.

What can be done to enlist communities in the coronavirus response? Examples already exist. The United States's \$2 trillion dollar stimulus package includes \$5 billion in community block grants that can be spent on virus-relevant activities that other programs have missed. As a recent paper by Tara Moayed points out, in point of fact developed countries such as the EU, Australia, and the United States manage large community development support programs that directly provide funds for community investments.

Internationally, the World Bank alone finances over 160 such community development projects, several with nation-wide coverage in otherwise hard to reach, virus-vulnerable countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Morocco, Myanmar, Nigeria, and the Philippines. In India, for example, community-led women's self-help groups are running helplines, disseminating COVID-19 advisories on health, hygiene, and essential services, and using social media among their networks to prepare the citizens. Kerala's statewide women's network, *Kudumbashree*, is showing a systematic approach to social outreach and social preparation by spearheading the state's "Break the Chain" campaign among its 4.4 million member families. Indonesia's Village Law COVID-19 response is expected to cover 10 million poor and often isolated families with income support, information, and remote area monitoring. In Myanmar, the National Community Driven Development Project is being harnessed to communicate prevention messages to remote communities, while the Afghan Citizen's Charter is providing food support, health information, and virus monitoring in more than 15,000 hard-to-reach villages, nearly 40% of the total. These are not small numbers.

Programs such as these can help over-stretched governments because they are already up and running, they already have representative committees that can plan and carry out activities, and because their mix of social and formal controls

provides a proven (if not always perfect) system of accountability against corruption. In response to COVID-19, they will have to adapt to allow for social-distancing, and any physical works should focus on critical activities (drinking water, farming, access roads, etc). Additional activities should also be tailored to specifically reach women, who are often especially vulnerable because of income loss, but also are often able to work safely from within household compounds.

Adaptations are underway to enlist community development programs to help with virus monitoring, mobilizing people for testing, and even enforcing physical isolation when necessary. Community-run surveys can help identify the most vulnerable groups, which now must include the newly poor, who run high risks of not being recognized for safety net support. Community volunteers can help health workers and local leaders convey accurate information to people who live without other forms of access. Several programs are going further, by including limited amounts of labor-intensive public works to help overcome limits to first responders' access to patients and at-risk communities, or to help support input purchases so that farmers who no longer receive remittances or off-season employment can still plant crops. However, much more can be done, particularly in Africa, fragile and conflict-affected states, and the Pacific Islands, where community life is strong and the need for speed is great.

There are a number of ways that the international community can help developing countries use community partnerships to deal with the crisis. Many developing countries are already experimenting with similar ideas, so to some extent this is pushing on an open door, or at least a door that is starting to open. However, such efforts can move more quickly. Ensuring that community partnerships get integrated into national coping and response strategies, streamlining procedures, and using real-time field information to modify or build new community programs will go a long way towards speeding up effective action. Creating a rapid-response funding line to scale these programs up further will be even more important as unemployed populations return to villages, and as the resources for farmers to plant, such as overseas and urban remittances and off-farm labor, begin to dry up.

Community programs are not a magic bullet. No one program is. Nor is a rapid scale-up without its risks. But by the same token, a global pandemic is far from a normal environment. Community programs offer a proven way to reach very large numbers of very poor people quickly. They have strong monitoring and anti-corruption mechanisms on the use of funds. Perhaps even more fundamentally, they offer people a sense of control and agency—something the pandemic has taken away from all of us.

In all of these ways, using community programs centrally in the response rather than relying only on top down programs through line ministries (although these of course still have their place) may ironically be the best way to restore confidence between citizens and the state.

**Center on International
Cooperation**

726 Broadway, Suite 543
New York, NY 10003

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