

Emergent Agency in a Time of Covid-19

Key takeaways for donors,
INGOs, and the wider sector

Atlantic Fellows

FOR SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC EQUITY



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event in the modern era. Governments, organizations and businesses struggled to adapt to challenging events and shifting restrictions. Travel restrictions and lockdowns impacted the ability of most aid organizations to deliver planned work, and caused major shifts in priorities, strategies, and ways of working. It cast into doubt the role of aid in both the short and long terms, whether for programming or advocacy.

From March 2020, the 'Emergent Agency in a Time of Covid-19' research project convened a global conversation between activists, development practitioners, and researchers to better understand the phenomena that were taking place in response to the pandemic. It aimed to understand the relevant and potentially positive side effects of the pandemic: the response it triggers among low-income and excluded communities around the world. Over 200 case studies were collated and a variety of conversations in thematic clusters were held to uncover what they could teach us.

This brief summarizes key points from the research that we believe are important for those working in international and national NGOs, and donor agencies. Many speak to themes that have long been discussed within international development but have not yet shifted how it works. Covid-19 is not just a global health crisis but could be a critical juncture allowing a positive systemic shift for those who value and wish to support civil society. It will require donors and INGOs to stand back from their established ways of working and protocols.

Key takeaways

- 1 Local actors provide faster and more relevant responses**
- 2 Local actors do far more than only meet survival needs**
- 3 Covid has rewritten relationships between citizens, civil society, and public authority**
- 4 Civil society is exhausted**
- 5 Going digital is a double-edged sword**
- 6 The pandemic forced disruptive innovation**
- 7 Trust became the social glue of action**

Local actors provide faster and more relevant responses

1

The research highlighted that aid institutions and mechanisms are inflexible, slow and unable to adapt to the fast-moving context of Covid-19 (C-19). Systems based on lengthy approvals, complicated bureaucracy, and international or centralised capacity were unable to provide fast and targeted responses. This tested the ability of the aid sector to step up to the challenges of the pandemic and their rhetoric on localization. With domestic travel curtailed by national lockdowns, the value of proximity and the burden of bureaucracy included many national NGOs based in capital cities.

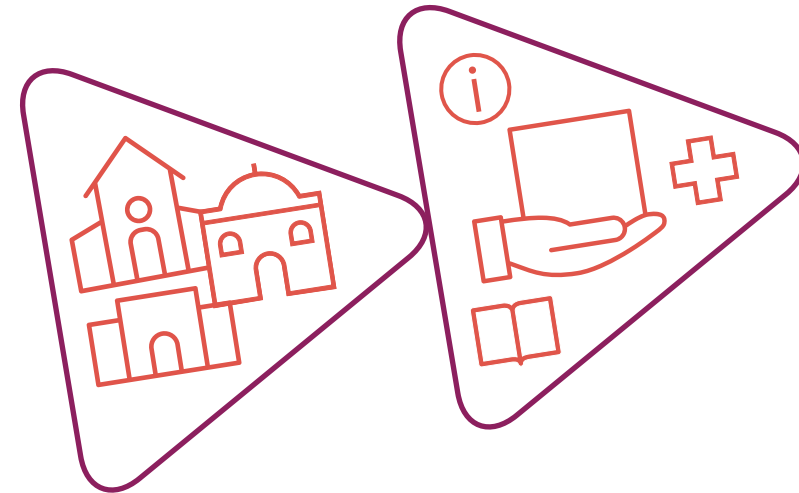
Communities increasingly turned to community leaders or other individuals, faith organisations, CBOs, neighbourhood associations and customary structures to provide an immediate response. Local actors were essential for the C-19 response as they were able to overcome many of the challenges faced by larger organisations. They developed new strategies for service delivery, helping reduce the impact of lockdowns and other disruptions on vulnerable communities. Local actors were successful thanks to agile and flexible structures, physical proximity and granular knowledge of the community, and, in many cases, trust of the community.

What this tells us

As Covid hit, the international aid system and much of formal civil society proved to not be fit for purpose. We were not agile or present enough to respond to demands. The pandemic has forced a re-valuing of social assets that community organisations often have: existing trust, physical presence, local knowledge, and an ability to navigate continually shifting roles, multiple actors and community priorities.

Historically, we have valued structures, financial scrutiny, ability to scale and language over social assets. Donors and (I)NGOs must understand the importance of trust, and build relationships with a broader variety of actors in preparation for crisis. This could be achieved by **investing in long-term flexible funding** to a wider diversity of local organisations, allowing them to pivot in times of emergencies such as Covid-19.

We need to improve our ability to **be adaptable** and urgently address lengthy and slow systems by which we transfer resources. This might mean letting go of some control and **learning to share power** with local networks, granting more trust to our partners and adjusting our contracting processes to reflect this.



Local actors do far more than only meet survival needs

2

Early in the pandemic, meeting immediate survival needs was the priority. With the loss of normal sources of income, food, healthcare, education and transport, local actors sought alternative service delivery forms and routes. A secondary category of needs emerged as the pandemic progressed - providing emotional, mental health and safety support. These needs became overwhelming but were often not prioritised by governments and other authorities. They were either not met, or met by civil society groups.

A less recognised role was the need to counter misinformation and provide accurate, reliable information about the virus and reducing transmission. Some groups made this part of their response, by setting up campaigns and classes. For others, it was a more ad hoc responsibility - correcting and responding when they heard misinformation spreading around them.

In locations where government responses to Covid-19 were used as a pretext to restrict civic space, many civil society actors found themselves either intensifying an existing advocacy role or beginning to include

protest and advocacy in their work. They advocated for structural responses to meet practical needs, such as policy change to improve digital access in low-income settlements or to deal with the increase in domestic violence.

What this tells us

Broadening the scope of what is supported requires being attuned to and partnering with more diverse actors. It means actively spotting new initiatives and supporting with agility to responses. This can only work if we **trust local knowledge and local capabilities** to adapt with different actors emerging and taking up different roles. It also suggests the value of **creating space** for the voices of less formal or community-led actors **at the table of international conversations**.

These findings raise questions for funding. Do we have quick and efficient funding mechanisms that apply to responses that are not only about saving lives? Are we prioritising funding for meeting needs where outcomes are preventative or less tangible? Considering the global nature of these needs, are there opportunities to scale up and coordinate with technical support?



Covid has rewritten relationships

between citizens, civil society, and public authority

3

The pandemic affected relationships between civil society and authorities. It unearthed new actors, amplified the role of existing actors, and altered power dynamics. These shifts can mean long term changes in how the state, civil society, and people interact.

Where governments were unable to respond to citizen needs, civil society collecting data and provided direct support. Particularly in conflict-affected locations where governments were less present, C-19 triggered expansion of existing support services that civil society was already playing. In other locations, some groups changed roles, with advocacy actors becoming first responders, taking on an additional service delivery role. The scale of C-19 response also led to multiple cases of new alliances – on advocacy or service delivery – between groups who had previously operated separately.

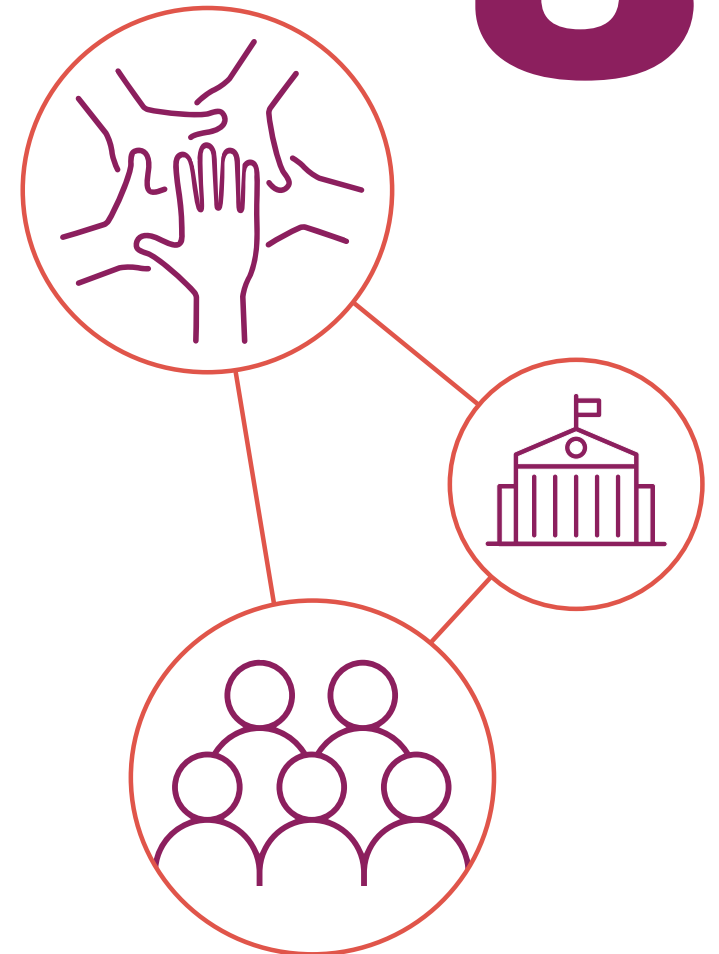
New leaders stepped up, particularly women and youth, often with little prior leadership experience. C-19 required digital skills that opened doors for youth leadership. New leaders followed the massive surge in activism by informal groups and networks, including women's organisations. The pandemic gave local actors, at least temporarily, a degree of additional informal power and authority.

Despite still being in flux, some of these relationships changes may well persist. If civil society is playing a more prominent role in meeting immediate needs, people's views and expectations of the government may change and affect the existing social contract. Governments could, therefore, find themselves in the roles of overseeing and coordinating, rather than delivering services.

What this tells us

A shake up of the institutional landscape, power dynamics and new leadership will require us to re-investigate our assumptions and understandings of which relationships matter in specific contexts and on specific issues. We need to learn how to better **engage with and support emergent actors and leaders, not just established ones**, including around supporting new leaders. Finally, it requires us to change how we see the role of and support existing partners and government actors.

A change in how governments or other public authorities view their own role and responsibilities is an opportunity for social accountability, campaigns or other efforts that holds public authorities to account.



Civil society is exhausted

4

Romanticizing the everyday heroes who gave time and energy to feed, comfort, and care for those around them, belies the deep exhaustion and emotional stress that many experienced. The length of the Covid pandemic and scale of need has financially exhausted civil society, NGOs, national donors and communities' own financial abilities to support each other. Stress of local leaders includes financial worries due to increased need, concern for their own livelihoods, and the emotional strain of leadership responsibilities.

Civil society has also been forced to navigate new ways of working, new relationships and, in many cases, new expectations from their communities. This required time to strategize and develop creative solutions. As digital continues to be key to how everyone works, and with people stepping up to new and different roles, different skills will be widely needed.

In many contexts, the Covid crisis compounded the needs and stress from other crises, such as conflicts, coups and natural disasters. Individuals, groups or leaders were spending more time in their role of first responders voluntarily, reducing their own ability to provide for themselves and their families.

What this tells us

Financial and mental exhaustion will continue to be a significant factor in the resilience of civil society – and of leaders – when faced with the inevitable next crisis. This is particularly important if communities are turning to civil society for service delivery. Acknowledging that the aid system relies on actors who have depleted their reserves is critical in how partnerships are forged. This can easily be forgotten in the speed of an emergency response, especially as we shift towards being increasingly locally led.

We need to learn how to acknowledge this reality and support those dealing with overlapping crises and exhaustion. Options include **investing in core funding of organisational needs, psycho-social support, and digital and physical security**, as well as providing **core funding to community-based actors**, encouraging and paying for time for actors to recuperate, upskill, strategize or share and learn about how others have addressed issues across contexts.



Going digital is a double-edged sword

5

The pandemic accelerated the uptake of digital means and online services. It created many opportunities for greater inclusion, connectivity, speed, and scale. Civil society and the aid sector were able to draw on new practices made possible by the new digital spaces.

The acceleration of digital uptake and innovation has led to new and sometimes more relevant spaces for action, amplifying opportunities for those able to engage. People in rural areas, and those with care responsibilities or disabilities, suddenly had much more scope to get involved, allowing those in the most vulnerable situations to be included in the planning and rollout of programmes and solutions.

But the shift to digital had its downsides. It increased the need for digital literacy and access to the internet and technology, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. The digital divide is intersectional, with gender, income, age, race, ability and geography determining who has access and literacy. It is not purely physical access: cultural norms and values favour access of some groups and limit others.

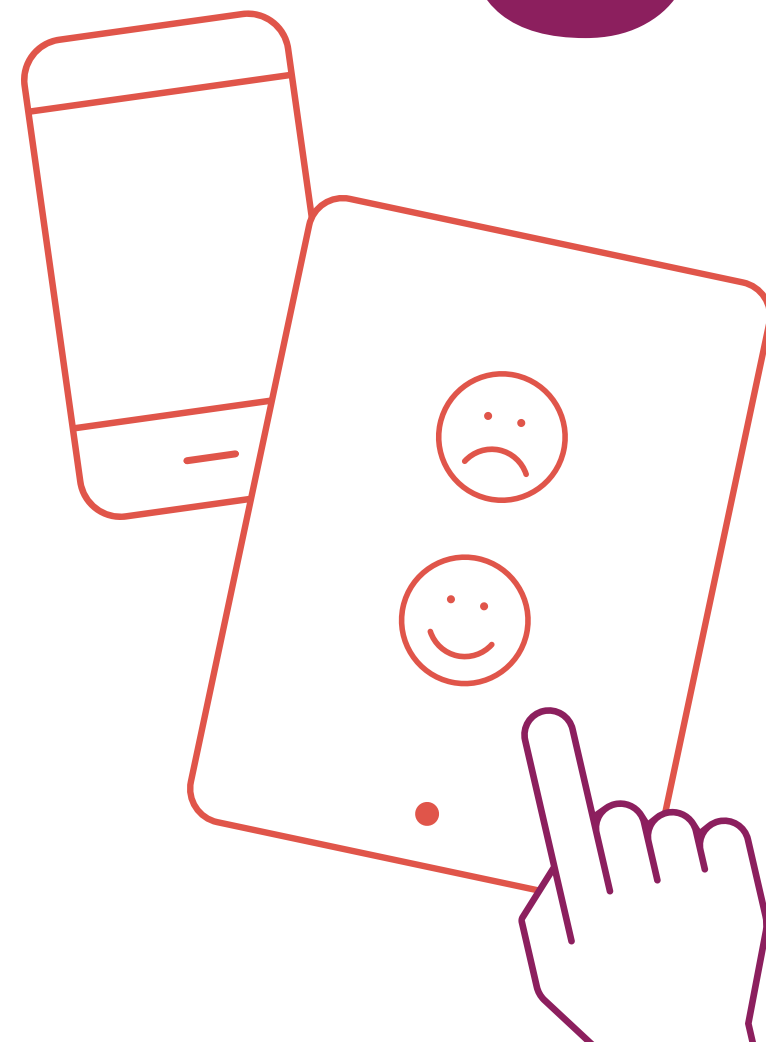
The shift to digital enhanced the importance of information and the dangers of misinformation. Many civil society responses sought to ensure their communities had access to accurate and timely

information and essential health advice. This was made more difficult and relevant with the speed and ease of spreading misinformation that digital platforms enabled.

What this tells us

The pandemic greatly accelerated the shift to a digital society, making digital access a basic need in order to claim rights. Not only has digital become a means for advocacy, but digital access has also become an advocacy focus in itself. **Equality of access** for the most vulnerable populations is the first of the many long-term implications, so everyone can benefit from the new opportunities that digital presents. We also need to be alert to risks of **elite capture in knowledge sharing**, advocacy and resource allocation. Digital acceleration adds a new element to monitor (and counter) around power disparities.

Finally, the protection of **data rights, digital security** and confidentiality, the **governance** of technological innovation, and the role of **misinformation** require everyone's attention. If our work depends on digital technology, what does this require in terms of complementary work on misinformation, online democratic freedoms and digital security? These areas are no longer niche considerations – they are integral to any aspect to our work.



The pandemic forced disruptive innovation

6

The pandemic marked a change in the normal ways of doing things. It acted as a catalyst for speedy, decentralised innovation that emerged to respond to new and quickly evolving needs. Some of these solutions had been hoped for and demanded since before the pandemic, for example home delivery of antiretroviral drugs that became necessary and removed the intermediary role of health centres.

The pandemic encouraged new entrepreneurship, with unique new solutions imagined and implemented in historically short timelines, for example around food or personal protective equipment. One common attribute was the decentralised nature – there was a sense that things that previously would have ‘waited for permission’, or would have taken months or years of slow advocacy, were taking form and being implemented immediately.

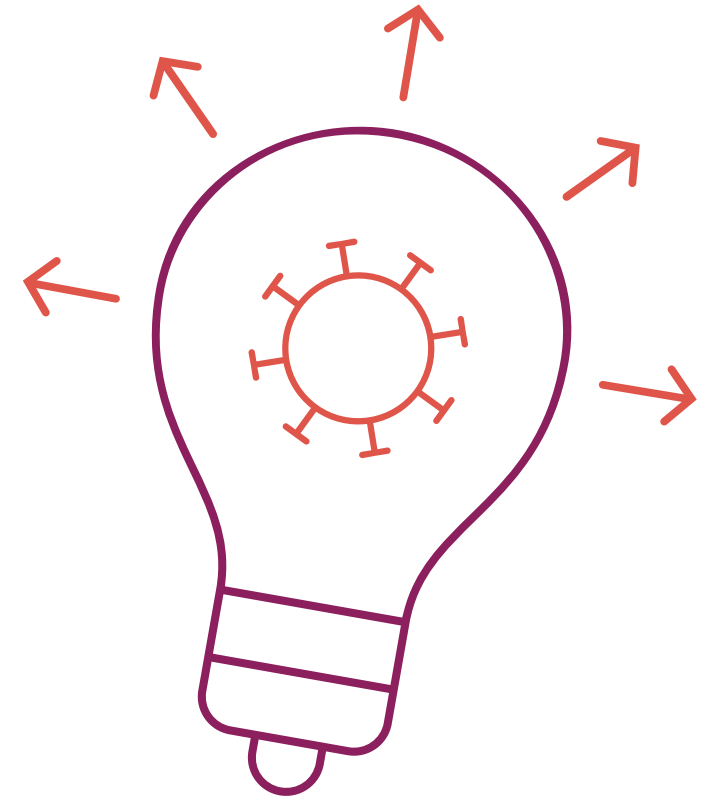
Although the needs that emerged from the pandemic were largely universal, responses became highly local and unique. Innovations that emerged were driven by local actors meeting local needs, in a way that was appropriate to their restrictions and focus.

Other groups innovated to ensure ongoing work despite government-imposed restrictions. Activism and protests for long running issues, such as victims of domestic violence or the climate crisis, found new ways to continue their activism despite regulations preventing people from gathering.

What this tells us

Accelerated change challenges the status quo and its core systems. What ways of working or solutions are outdated and need replacing? How can we avoid returning to old processes as the Covid crisis subsides? The pandemic has been a stark reminder of the need to listen deeply to local actors and be driven by local preferences, rather than prioritising ‘tried and tested’ technical approaches.

INGOs and donors have the option to **embrace the opportunities** and **innovative solutions** presented by a wide range of actors. We can support these changes, by **funding small initiatives** or **providing seed funding for innovation**.



Trust became the social glue of action

7

Trust became the currency of response. With the normal flow of funds and relationships interrupted, whether by physical isolation, state repression, or sudden poverty, people fell back on the reciprocity and security of their trusted networks – family, friends, neighbours and allies – to get things done amid adversity. Therefore, Covid acted as a wedge, making existing relationships of trust more important in some settings and enabling the use of misinformation and distrust in institutions for political gain.

New relations of trust enabled, and were strengthened, through the new networks and coalitions that became part of civic response. Broader social trust gave public legitimacy to leaders and institutions and their ability to influence in their communities, for examples related to C-19 prevention or mobilising for help. Civil society organizations differed in the degree of legitimacy and connection with those seeking support – with trust being the difference in legitimacy.

But trust is not simply inherited or static. The responses to C-19 and other political events constantly created, destroyed, and redistributed trust across society. New links of trust were created through new

collaboration, potentially building political and social capital for more opportunities for change. For example, trust built through service delivery can lay the basis for opportunities for advocacy and changing systems.

What this tells us

While the role and importance of trust is gaining more airtime with development actors, it has not historically been a key consideration. The pandemic has highlighted the **value of trust**, and the importance of **understanding where trust lies** in communities and between groups. Trust is a prerequisite for effectively providing support, engaging with communities, and enabling behaviour change in times of crisis. As restrictions ease and the world reverts to some pre-pandemic ways, it may appear that the importance of trust is dissipating. However, it is likely to remain an underlying 'social glue' in times of crisis.

How do we think about trust more intentionally?
How do we build trust into our programmes, assess it, and value communities' trust as an asset in partners selection? How can trust help us rethink our partnerships and bureaucratic processes?



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