

Doing Development Differently: Seven Lessons for Community-Led Development from the Pandemic Gunjan Veda and Nelly Mecklenburg¹

In November 2020, civil society organizations from India, Liberia, Malawi, Mexico, Uganda, and Zambia among others spent ninety minutes speaking with the World Health Organization and COVAX representatives about equitably accessing vaccines against the COVID-19 virus and ensuring their uptake in their communities. This kind of dialogue with grassroots organizations without consistently stable internet connections let alone budgets to travel internationally would have been unimaginable a year earlier.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been - and remains - a devastating crisis globally. Its physical, economic, and mental toll has hit everyone. It has also been a reckoning for people, organizations, and institutions. It has forced us to reorient priorities, come up with adaptive strategies, and recognize the gaps and limits of our capacities and efforts. It has exposed -- in who could access personal protective equipment (PPE) or stay safely home, to who has had access to a vaccine -- not just how much remains to be done to ensure a just, equitable and sustainable world but how this needs to be done differently. Our current development paradigm is not producing sustainable and equitable outcomes in its goal to protect and advance the wellbeing of all.

As the facilitators of the [Adapting CLD Programming to COVID-19 series](#), a collaborative global platform for Community-Led Development practitioners launched by the [Movement for Community Led Development \(MCLD\)](#)² in April 2020 to address challenges arising from the pandemic - and participants ourselves in multiple spaces confronting how we work through this pandemic - we have heard from partners over the past 14 months adaptations which we believe can help us build forward better. Here we share some of these:

It's time to democratize collaboration and expertise. For many people working in national or global office settings, Zoom fatigue was quick to follow the lockdowns. We longed for in-person meetings, as well as (with some surprise) conferences and roundtable discussions. When we launched the monthly CLD and COVID-19 calls in April last year, we were apprehensive. Would this become just another calendar invite to juggle, we wondered. However, we quickly realized there was in fact a deep appetite from smaller, grassroots and national organizations for the online collaboration and exchange opportunities that shutdowns spurred. Under 'normal' circumstances, pre-Covid, in-person convenings were often inaccessible for many because of visas, travel, not to mention costs. This meant that a huge amount of expertise on topics - not only community-led development, but perhaps especially so - was being left behind. There remain significant challenges around connectivity, but these online spaces have meant that practitioners and experts in more remote areas or from smaller, less funded organizations can actually have a place at the table - something our field has been trying to do for years. Moreover, the last few months have led to the rapid development of communications infrastructure - from improving coverage in Malawi through advocacy with telecom companies to setting up Whatsapp groups to reach adolescents in Zambia³. As vaccinations make in-person meetings a reality again, let's find creative ways

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² MCLD is a global consortium of 1500+ local civil society organizations and 72 international NGOs committed to ensuring that every person has a right to voice in decisions that affect their life

³ Amos Youth Centre, Zambia

to ensure that local voices are not once again excluded. For example, can we make the meetings hybrid - part in-person and part online - to remove the resource constraint barrier?

Community-led development can be more, well, community-led. Community-led development aims to put communities at the center of decision-making on the development that impacts their lives. However, the restrictions and risks that came with the pandemic revealed how much of the process still relies on external inputs. When outside facilitators, trainers, M&E specialists - not to mention materials and supplies - couldn't travel, CLD organizations had to rethink how to deliver to both communities and to their own funders. This revealed how many more functions need to be devolved to communities. Further, as shutdowns limited the ability to travel, communities mobilized. They organized to reduce the number of trips to the market needed, came together to make their own PPE (personal protective equipment), sought to build awareness on prevention techniques to name a few. Their role as those best positioned to, most invested in, and most efficient at addressing their own needs was made very visible. This highlighted for donors, NGOs and even governments the potential of empowering communities with tools and resources needed to lead their own development - including more flexibility with grants and reporting, access to mobile connections and skills to conduct essential monitoring and evaluation. It demonstrated the need and opportunity to 'shift the power' in development. There is now a need to ensure that instead of reclaiming the driver's seat in the development processes, NGOs and donors continue to support communities to own these functions, be they M&E or facilitation. Part of this will include building an evidence base around the outcomes and impacts of these innovations, so we don't simply revert to the pre-pandemic model of trying to parachute in development.

Governments and civil society *can* change the way they work together. Despite many positive and productive collaborations, by choice or by necessity, there remains in many places a sense of mistrust and territorialism between government and civil society. Yet COVID-19 pushed both governments *and* civil society to reach across the table and work together. With the need for trust, for deep reach into communities, and for supplies and accurate information at massive scale, governments and civil society needed each other, in a more immediate way than many had experienced before. In Benin, the government adopted the posters and information kits created by the MCLD national chapter. In Zambia, the Chapter was invited to join the government Task Force on COVID-19 response. And when the Malawi National Chapter of MCLD launched a call-in radio show for people to voice their concerns around COVID-19 vaccines, the government mobilized experts to address these concerns. This collaboration needs to not just happen during crises but in a more systematic manner so that we are better equipped to support communities in realizing their priorities.

Mental health matters for ALL of us. Mental health has long been a marginalized topic. It makes up less than two percent of health budgets in most countries. Yet as the months of lockdown, illness, loss, anxiety and economic crisis wore on, the impact on mental health became impossible to ignore. There was also a recognition that the pandemic in many ways was aggravating mental health issues that had been there all along. Mental health is foundational to our work - to any work. In CLD, that means both within our organizations and amongst our community partners. We are learning to recognize that we are all humans operating under tremendous stress from responsibilities and worries at home, to the general disruption and uncertainty, and, in many cases, from increased workloads. How can we be better equipped to recognize and address this moving forward? Many organizations have in the last few months set up systems to help their staff cope with the stresses and pressures unleashed by the pandemic. These support systems can and should continue post-pandemic. The [Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Reference Group on Mental Health](#) has created some fabulous resources in dozens of languages and dialects for communities and for us - let us remember to use these now and later.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is finally being recognized as a global pandemic in its own right. Thanks to decades of advocacy, GBV already had significant attention at the global level. Yet, in this pandemic, for perhaps the first time, the increase in GBV was flagged and the call to act on it issued almost as soon as the lockdowns began. This marks a huge step forward - as we resume our operations and work we need to not lose sight of this pandemic that has raged on in communities for centuries.

Agility should be a core value. As one speaker noted, COVID-19 has pushed us to “mainstream uncertainty as the new normal.” The pandemic pushed organizations to make major adjustments - and to make them quickly. But while the scale and universality of this disaster has not been seen in decades, crises is not new to our world. And it won’t disappear after COVID-19. Partners have been noting the need to be better prepared to respond to changing conditions. This needs work on many fronts. Organizational strategies and action plans need to build in “response budgets”, like we saw Spark MicroGrants experimenting with, as well as strengthen local communications infrastructure and supply chains. Funders need to build in flexibility in reporting and funding requirements to allow organizations to pivot quickly. The pandemic saw many funders adapt their procedures and guidelines to allow for rapid response - this could however be built in more systematically into RFAs and contracts so that the next time a crisis hits, we do not lose precious months waiting for approvals.

Climate consciousness begins with us. Constantly being on the move has been a hallmark of the international development sector. Flying to meetings and conferences, flying to the field, flying to be seen. And yet, the last year has forced most of us to find ways of working that don’t leave heavy carbon footprints. Yes, travel is important and sometimes there is no alternative to being in the field. Face to face meetings build connection and trust and understanding. Yet, are all our trips necessary? The lockdowns have forced many organizations to examine the way we work and the toll our professional lifestyles take on the planet and on our own teams. Surely, a lot of what we do can be done from where we are. Indeed, shouldn’t *community-led* development involve less long-distance travel?

The other opportunity lies in telework, as the European Commission discovered⁴ - this not just cuts building emissions but also traffic, travel and fuel usage. Currently transport accounts for 23% of global carbon emissions⁵. Yet, to ensure that telework does not increase inequity, organizations will need to ensure that all their staff has the means to work from home if they so choose - this means possibly paying for Internet connectivity and office equipment.

This pandemic has spotlighted just how vulnerable and ill-prepared our systems were. Yet, it has also surfaced innovation and adaptability that could serve our sector long term. The responsibility to continue this momentum for inclusive, resilient change lies with us.

What do you think we can take away from this crisis to strengthen our practice? Let us know!

⁴ Recently, the European Commission announced that it will shut down half of its office buildings in Brussels by 2030 in an attempt to be “more green”
<https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-to-close-half-of-its-buildings-as-teleworking-becomes-the-new-norm/>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200326-covid-19-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-the-environment>