Adapting Humanitarian & Development Operations for COVID-19 Response in the Philippines

Seven early-stage handles and potential pivots for the humanitarian and development sectors

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Note: This was informed by context conditions in the Philippines and similar lessons from Myanmar. All opinions are the authors’ own and do not represent the institutions they may work with.

COVID-19 represents a challenge for the humanitarian and development sectors that was not in anyone’s work and financial plans. While some agencies are more geared than others towards so-called ‘adaptive programming’ and ‘thinking and working politically’ and have already deployed on the ground, the declaration of a National State of Calamity and the establishment of ‘enhanced community quarantine’ restrictions across Metro Manila, Luzon, and selected pockets across Visayas and Mindanao on 17 March 2020 poses a new set of restrictions that are likely to continue for the rest of the year until the global pandemic is curbed.

While the health sector should take the lead in COVID-19 response, “flattening the curve”—keeping the infection growth rate down—and keeping the hospitals as the last line of defense entails a complex set of efforts across multiple sectors. It will involve community level initiatives such as social protection, water and sanitation, transportation and logistics, food security, manufacturing and supply chain innovation, data analytics, peace and security, and the fiscal and macroeconomic calibrations to maintain all of these operations in the midst of a global recession.

More than anything else, COVID-19 magnifies existing weaknesses in our service delivery structures and amplifies humanitarian and development challenges that existed before the pandemic.
Adjusting operating procedures to COVID-19 social distancing and mobility restrictions at global and local levels means that ‘parachuting’ in from donor capitals or extensive domestic air or land travel will no longer be possible.

Now that that mobility even for essential services is now largely limited at the level of the barangay and city, service deployment is now more area-based, and will entail hyperlocal investments and partnerships. Social distancing requires limiting large public gatherings such as workshops and distribution meetings. Even as meetings now pivot to Zoom and other online platforms, many of the communities that need most support have limited access to internet, mobile phone signal, or traditional radio or TV coverage. This will be doubly challenging for communities with large internally displaced populations such as Lanao del Sur and Sulu in the BARMM, which have existing conflict-related checkpoints and lockdown restriction policies.

As such, creativity and innovation in engaging and strengthening hyper-local expertise, assets, and relationship/supply chains will be a challenge, not least being able to do so in support of national and regional-level action plans led by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID).

The following suggests seven key strategies for the humanitarian and development community, including multilateral and bilateral donors, members of the Humanitarian Country Team and the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and INGOs and NGOs for the next few weeks of adjustments:

1. **Adapt and reframe project goals of existing grant envelopes.**

   - Pivoting operations to respond to COVID-19 means reviewing what ongoing projects and platforms can realistically change, adapt, or reformulate their goals, target outputs, and activities. Aid calendars for multiple countries have been pushed back as a result of the lockdowns. But even so, these pivots within existing portfolios must be done immediately, with the appropriate evidence-based review.

   - For this to be useful, bilateral and multilateral donors will have to allow current and future implementing partners to revise Standard Operating Procedures regarding field work, which may in turn affect the pace and frequency of activities. Such revisions might include channeling of support to smaller subgrantee institutions and individuals with clear deliverables and more relaxed financial reporting requirements.
2. Focus on redesigning interventions for supporting the most vulnerable.

- Although COVID-19 does not discriminate amongst those it infects, the severity and adverse effects of the virus and the various social measures taken to contain it disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable communities. This specifically refers to the homeless, urban poor and informal settler families, the internally-displaced, daily wage earners, and other populations that are often uncounted in government databases and have limited access to water, sanitation, and basic health services. As we have discussed elsewhere, protecting these vulnerable communities means protecting everyone else. Governments all over the world are now deploying social amelioration/protection packages of emergency cash transfers, rent freezes, among others. In support of these efforts, bilateral and multilateral donors should encourage their implementing partners and subgrantees to prioritise and provide safety nets to target the most vulnerable communities and populations, complementing the government’s response.

- This also means that time and effort should be redirected in sharpening available data for targeting and decision-making, at the most localized spatial scales possible. A blanket approach in undertaking this crisis has proven to be ineffective and can be used to further widen the gap between those who can and cannot protect themselves from this crisis.

3. Journey with national and local governments.

- The humanitarian and development community should work to complement the national, regional, and local governance and delivery structures put in place. In the Philippines, this means supporting the IATF-EID and the National Action Plan, filling in gaps, helping establish SOPs and coordination mechanisms across levels and workstreams, and supporting governments to do better. These tasks—which includes helping with analysis and process guidelines for targeting, delivery, coordination, and monitoring and evaluation—are traditional strengths of the development and humanitarian sectors.

- Support should be directed towards strengthening community-based responses. Donors can also consider supporting existing local government structures whose administrative capacity will be stretched to the limit while implementing various expanded social
programs of the national government. They might allocate certain funds to augment local staff or procure technologies (e.g. testing kits, hospital mechanical ventilators, aerosol boxes, open-source designs for PPE) to enhance the efficiency of delivery systems. Facilitating access and mobility for implementing partners and subgrantees will also be needed as restrictions are put in place.

4. Diversify partners portfolio – celebrate local and private initiatives.

- The last two weeks have seen how small-scale, local, and private initiatives or loose collectives and coalitions, private individuals, and small organizations can mobilize quickly and effectively. From providing a platform for donations, amassing private sector support, to mapping of vulnerabilities, these small interventions have so far proved to be the most successful, given the ongoing context of lockdown, immobility, and access restrictions. With the burden of service delivery with municipal and city-level local governments, we have seen the rise of local leaders being able to innovate by delivering food to marginalized populations, instituting spacing queues, deploying rolling stores, and encouraging non-motorized transport such as bikes and scooters to complement government-established bus shuttle routes for frontliners. The most effective governance platforms have also been able to collaborate with the private sector for fundraising, emergency food pack and PPE donations, and encouraging manufacturers, clothing designers, and 3D printing fablabs to pivot and address urgent needs.

- To support this, bilateral and multilateral donors should widen their partnership portfolios and consider directly supporting local and private sector actors who have provided tangible results for the most in need. Arguably, with the paralysis of many larger development and humanitarian actors, supporting smaller organizations can cut through several layers of bureaucracy and inject assistance to where it is much needed. In order to partner with these organizations, relaxing selected procurement rules may be considered. This is also to ease the accelerated onset of private sector donor fatigue, as sustained cross-sectoral collaboration will be needed in the coming months.

5. Institute workforce adaptation and adjust operational modalities.

- Portfolio decisions and streamlining for COVID-19 readiness means that the workforces of implementing actors and subgrantees must also adapt accordingly. As these administrative and human resources (HR) related changes are happening, there is a
need for flexibility and creativity in figuring out the best courses of action, whilst not leaving dependent populations (particularly in humanitarian response operations) without any lifeline. Such measures would include adopting remote management practices, mapping and engaging private sector service providers who have access to move to deliver basic social services (i.e. delivery of food kits through third-party freight companies instead of implementing partners’ logistics teams). In terms of HR support and lifeline, supporting implementing actors and their subgrantees by expanding their health coverage, specifically for potential COVID-19 exposure, would provide a certain level of security to the frontliners.

6. Repurpose budgets and monitoring, evaluation, and learning mechanisms - ensure grant flexibility.

- In many cases, approved budgets submitted by implementing partners and subgrantees will require revision to address the COVID-19 response. Though actors will strive to do what they can, bilateral and multilateral donors’ support in handling these revisions with the utmost flexibility will be necessary. Additional top-up support in parallel to government financing may also be considered, if existing programs already target the vulnerable communities and current appropriations are not enough. These can be adjusted periodically based on available local and global evidence and good practice.

- A good existing practice that can be applied in these times of emergency is the Fixed Obligation Grant (FOGs), where implementing partners can have more output oriented financial reporting with less stringent requirements.

7. Acknowledge that adjustable project durations are necessary because a quick return to “Business as Usual” is unlikely.

- Following portfolio-level reviews, adjusting project durations for implementing partners and subgrantees may also be required, including possible extensions. Extensions and adjustments should be based on supporting the most vulnerable populations. It should be acknowledged that some current developmental and humanitarian programming (for example, any activity that requires large physical gatherings of people such as trainings, community distributions, conferences) are not necessarily relevant and could pose more harm to communities if sustained.
Existing global evidence shows that it will take months to address this global crisis. Returning to ‘business as usual’ will be impossible. Donors and field actors alike will need to quickly pivot programming to those that would address emergency needs as well as future gaps and repercussions. Global changes in programming will likely require significant layoffs, changes, and suspension of other types of support, which should be properly and clearly communicated to both implementing partners and communities. The tolls of rapid organizational shifts notwithstanding, a massive sea change in how humanitarian and development institutions operate and collaborate is unavoidable.

The Need to #CovidPivot:

COVID-19 has brought the world to its knees, causing significant losses of life, disruption of social norms, and unprecedented shocks to the global economy.

It also poses a direct challenge to all institutions and individuals working in the development and humanitarian sectors. It is clear that usual modalities of delivering aid and social services through the current system are no longer viable. This is particularly true in responding to the specific needs of the most vulnerable populations. The time to pivot and revolutionize the way we think, innovate, and serve, during this time is long past. We are playing catch up. And while many are constrained by working from home, many smaller, more localized initiatives led by local governments, the business sector, and citizen-led efforts are proving that with the right approach can still be impactful even during these challenging times. We ask the international development and humanitarian aid community to consider these seven key messages, and open up platforms for engagement, localisation, and quick action.

Pivoting in times of COVID19 is not optional.