

Social justice snapshots: governance adaptations, innovations and practitioner learning in a time of COVID-19

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In early 2020, COVID-19 swept across the globe, prompting widespread government responses with far-reaching implications for civic space and actors working to strengthen transparency, accountability, participation and inclusion in governance at all levels. For many graduates of the [Coady International Institute](#) — over 7,000 development leaders and practitioners working with social movements, advocacy groups, networks and alliances, civil society organizations, community and civic associations in over 130 countries — the pandemic and the measures put in place in response have led to adaptive and innovative ways to continue their work in solidarity with citizens and communities.

Since 2015, the Institute has worked to support over 22 graduates in 14 countries to document [case studies](#) based on their advocacy, governance, and citizen participation work as part of the [Participedia](#) project, a global knowledge mobilization effort aimed at cataloging and better understanding participatory political processes.

In April 2020, a small group among these graduates came together virtually to share their experiences as practitioners, advocates, and activists working for inclusive and accountable governance through the pandemic. What follows is a snapshot of what their organizations, networks, and communities have been doing in the first few months to sustain or adapt their work aimed at building transparency, participation, accountability and/or inclusion in decisions affecting communities.

This virtual dialogue and writing exercise provided these authors with an opportunity to reflect on their own practice and learning as they navigate the realities and opportunities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article summarizes how each author's organisation/work has adapted to new realities, including emergent themes, lessons, and reflections from the authors.

¹ Parts of this article were published elsewhere.

Adaptation and innovation: a few snapshots of governance practice

Advocacy through Nepal's land rights movement

In Nepal, the [Community Self-Reliance Centre](#) (CSRC) has been supporting the national land rights movement and advocating on land and agrarian issues alongside landless and smallholder peasants since 1994. [Jagat Basnet describes](#) how Land Rights Forums (LRFs) have played a key role in making the government more accountable for the COVID-19 response. [Land Rights Forums](#) are people's organizations that generate grassroots participation for policy influence, just governance, and accountability. During the pandemic, CSRC and LRFs have leveraged their relationships with communities to provide the government with real-time data and accurate information from the field on COVID-19. They have supported a more adequate local response by coordinating advocacy from civil society groups to the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development in support of landless and smallholder peasants, while facilitating connections between local governments and communities.

Citizen feedback data in Nepal

In the same country, as mentioned above, a new media organization called [Sharecast Initiative Nepal is formed to](#) promote [citizen participation through media and local radio](#) launched a nationwide survey to understand citizens' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding COVID-19. As Bhumiraj Chapagain [writes](#), one week after the lockdown measures were imposed, Sharecast trained enumerators to remotely survey 1,110 respondents across Nepal. Sharecast then provided the government with key data on people's awareness and attitudes regarding the virus, as well as opinions and feedback on their responses. The research was acknowledged by the Prime Minister and helped multiple stakeholders understand the baseline regarding the COVID-19 response, allowing them to better address needs.

New channels for children's and youth's voice in Kenya

In Kenya, the [Mombasa County Child Rights Network](#) (MCCRN), a network of child rights advocates, are focusing their efforts on child protection as a major governance issue in the advent of COVID-19. Peggy Saka from the [Kenya Alliance for Advancement of Children outlines](#) the disproportionate impacts the pandemic is having on children, and how the network is adapting to enable children to participate and speak out on COVID-19. Through online meetings and live media broadcasts with elected officials and leaders of community and national organizations, children and youth are able to express themselves and share their fears and anxieties about the pandemic

Engagement and mutual aid among Ethiopia's marginalized communities

Aklilu Gebremicheal [explains](#) how [Love in Action Ethiopia](#) (LIAE) is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by engaging community structures and systems in regions of the country where predominantly underserved and marginalized communities were already facing economic hardships and poor service delivery prior to the spread of the coronavirus. LIAE has balanced a shift to home-based operations with ongoing community engagement aimed at raising awareness, supporting mutual aid, providing emergency supplies and addressing the immediate needs of communities most at risk. As in much of LIAE's [work](#), citizen participation has been key to this effort. Through newly established community-based COVID-19 task forces, LIAE is mobilizing 1,200 volunteers as community resource persons to collaborate with local and regional government offices.

Alternate pandemic responses in Cameroon

In Cameroon, youth and democracy advocate Patience Agwenjang [observes](#) how the COVID-19 pandemic represents one of a number of crises, particularly in English-speaking regions. Response to the pandemic has been marred by pre-existing political tensions and questions around the relationship between the President and citizens, and a lack of transparency around the management of the COVID-19 Fund. The public's distrust of government has meant that citizens have been participating in alternate pandemic response programs set up by civil society groups, rather than engaging in the government scheme. Meanwhile, the crisis has created opportunities for skills development, technological advancement, and for businesses and civil society organizations to produce, distribute, and sell emergency supplies.

Rights awareness through virtual and media engagement in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Barbara Maigari of [Partners West Africa – Nigeria](#) (PWAN) [describes](#) how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their advocacy visits and awareness campaigns related to human rights and sexual and gender-based violence. Lockdown measures have resulted in exclusive reliance on remote engagement through the PWAN website, social media, and call-in radio and television programs. Not only has this adaptation altered the interactions between PWAN and citizen groups, it has also brought certain rights issues and violations to the fore. For instance, PWAN is addressing increased community concern over the right to freedom of movement (especially for journalists), freedom of expression. Awareness-raising efforts now include COVID-19 safeguards for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and other pandemic-related rights and responsibilities.

Leveraging advocacy networks for women's rights in Ghana

In Ghana, a largely informal economy, the predominance of self-employment, communal living conditions, and the nature of its markets have resulted in the government's COVID-19 related measures having disproportionate effects on women. Patricia Blankson Akakpo [explains](#) how, NETRIGHT, a national women's rights network, has adapted its [usual work](#) to ensure women's voices and interests are taken into account during the pandemic response. NETRIGHT has mobilized funds among women's groups to support the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in its outreach efforts to vulnerable and homeless women and children. As part of their COVID-19 response, NETRIGHT'S members have distributed relief supplies to communities while also encouraging women and girls to report cases of sexual and gender-based violence.

Bridging diverse experiences: common grounds on shifting sands?

Based on the small yet diverse set of responses to the COVID-19 crisis described above, a few observations and lessons emerge. Some actions focus on the basic, immediate needs that an emergency response requires. LIAE's public sensitization and citizen engagement for proper handwashing in Ethiopia, CSRC's food provision in Nepal, PWAN's quick response to provide communities with accurate information on COVID-19, and NETRIGHT members' fundraising and resource mobilization for women and vulnerable groups, all contribute to immediate, far-reaching, and lifesaving impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, these immediate responses foster more informed grassroots participation and support community mobilization, solidarity, and mutual aid among groups and stakeholders who may not have previously worked together towards common solutions.

Parallel to these shifting dynamics at grassroots, many responses hint at gradual shifts in the complex systems that affect people's lives, livelihoods, quality essential services, and effective public decision-making and governance. Below, we outline these trends and discuss related lessons based on the authors' accounts and reflections on their own experience as social justice practitioners and advocates working both in solidarity with citizens and communities, and in the civic space and political processes shaping how the pandemic response is governed.

Information, transparency and trust: national challenges and local solutions

The pandemic has had far-reaching implications for national-level institutions, governance, and politics such as disruptions to the Ethiopia's electoral processes and the post-electoral politics playing out in Cameroon's response. On top of political systems struggling with cultures of opacity and corruption, this crisis highlights the importance of transparency as a bedrock of trust and

accountability between citizens and governments. This lack of trust has manifested through alternate and parallel governance and service delivery in Cameroon's response (despite increased transparency through social media) and through questions around the use of COVID-19 funds in Kenya.

In Nepal, Sharecast's work reminds us that understanding the nature of citizen [trust](#) and satisfaction (or discontent), through accurate information and timely data, is key to an effective response. Where trust and transparency are lacking, advocates often contend with challenges around misinformation and misconceptions related to the virus, as is the case in Nepal and Kenya where people turn to alternate sources of information and to traditional and religious practices for guidance.

In the midst of these national challenges, much of the immediate response has been at local government level. Through community-based COVID-19 Task Forces and by mobilizing volunteers, LIAE has facilitated community-driven responses that are not only building the capacity of local governments, but also strengthening collaboration across civil society and government at the local level.

Collaboration, relationship-building and shifting social contracts

Collaboration has been and will continue to be indispensable through this moment. None of the stories shared speak to the success of any individual or organization acting unilaterally in responding to this pandemic. On the contrary, the strategies that work are based on collaborative efforts — often across sectors and linked to parallel mutual aid processes in communities. Whether these are new relationships or built upon existing ones, networks, alliances and partnerships have extended the reach of solidarity around the pandemic response, and have served as a key asset as advocates adapt to new realities. In Nigeria, for instance, PWAN's prior advocacy among law enforcement agencies and community leaders was critical in forging new relationships, allowing them to pivot their advocacy to a focus on COVID-19.

Previously ineffective relationships are now working to address this collective challenge. In the Ethiopian case “government leadership, faith-based organizations and community actors are working hand in hand unlike previous times.” The collaborations being forged by NETRIGHT in Ghana and the children's organizations in Kenya are other cases in point. In the Nigerian case, “effective leadership needs collaborative engagement with the people and listening to the greater demand of the populace.”

The shifting nature of collaboration and relationship building are connected to the roles, rights and responsibilities of states and citizens. The crisis impacts how social contracts are evolving. For instance, the work in Nepal illustrates the key intermediary role that civil society organizations, member-based organizations, and national movements play in facilitating relationships – and claiming rights – during emergencies. This kind of collaboration was recognized for its positive results, following unilateral attempts by the state that were much less effective.

Also in Nepal, Sharecast's work shows that citizens are willing to cede some rights and freedoms (at least temporarily) to curtail the spread of the virus. There are, of course, [longer-term risks](#) related to these [emergency measures](#). In Ghana, the measures and legal instruments put in place have had the effect of closing civic space and further marginalizing some citizen groups and community organizations' efforts to engage them. In Cameroon, the pandemic has on the one hand revealed that the executive is willing to take steps (even if they are perhaps merely symbolic) towards improving governance and safeguarding the rights of citizens. On the other hand, the pandemic compounds existing crises facing the country, where "the COVID-19 curfews do not represent a new phenomenon for [...] residents," who for the last three years spend about a hundred days in lockdown annually.

Digital technology, governance, and advocacy

The global crisis has accelerated an ongoing trend towards [digital governance](#), with an increasing reliance on online communication and engagement, and an enhanced role for traditional and social media. Even though some pandemic-related directives hinder effective social mobilization and participation in governance processes, some strategies adopted through media and digital channels are supporting innovative forms of virtual engagement.

The stories shared here demonstrate adaptability, creativity and innovation in the use of technology to improve access, provide information, support mutual aid and grassroots responses, make and maintain connections, deliver services, enable participation and feedback, foster transparency and accountability, and spur further innovation. The telephone has been leveraged in Nepal and Nigeria, enabling Sharecast to conduct a nationwide survey in a novel way, and PWAN to connect with communities through home-based rights awareness campaigns.

Sharecast's work also shows how technology-enabled data generation and accurate community-level perceptions and public opinion serve as a foundation to design appropriate, targeted messages for public awareness and safety, as well as for advocacy. PWAN's work reminds us that a shift to technology-mediated engagement, while perhaps expanding the breadth of participation, comes with less depth in engagement. In Mombasa County, where technology provides a virtual space for children's voices at decision-making tables, the media becomes an intermediary in governance and accountability relationships, bringing with it implications around power, responsibility, and the ability to limit or enable participation.

A shift to mediated engagement has also meant that many authors' advocacy and activism has also adapted to a new reality. On the one hand, public awareness raising and mobilization now relies much more heavily on local and mass media to ensure citizens know both their rights and their responsibilities as they face the pandemic. Similarly, the kinds of advocacy tactics commonly used to apply pressure on policymakers are also being adapted, as CSRC's collective lobbying

efforts in Nepal and NETRIGHT's public advocacy statements in Ghana demonstrate.

On a smaller and more personal scale, individual practitioners and organizations have embraced digital channels and technologies such as Zoom and Facebook Live, and have developed increased resourcefulness and confidence in using the digital environment to pursue their accountability and engagement work. Sharecast's efforts in Nepal have led to a commitment to do a follow-up digital/telephone survey. This said, there are ongoing challenges as virtual (and home-based) work comes with the increased potential for [digital surveillance](#), a [digital divide](#), other family obligations and gender-related risks.

Gender dimensions and intersectional vulnerabilities

These stories have all explicitly or implicitly revealed that — as is [widely acknowledged](#) — the pandemic has a [gendered impact](#) that amplifies existing gender disparities. This is in line with suggestions that the economic and social toll will be largely borne by women and girls, and further compounded by other intersecting dimensions of disparity and vulnerability.

There is a clear gender dimension to care. In [Ghana](#), “women constitute the majority of primary caregivers for family members, as well as in professional capacities as health and social workers. At the same time, they face [the] increased burden to provide for their [families], particularly if family members fall ill or lose jobs due to the economic hardship linked to the pandemic.” In [Kenya](#), the scaling down of some child protection services and the school closures has left many parents unable to carry out their roles as duty bearers — in providing “proper nutrition, safety, healthcare and education for their children.” This hits women particularly hard because much of the responsibility for childcare continues to fall on them.

Meanwhile, groups with multiple vulnerabilities are not being given the requisite support. In [Ethiopia](#), high-risk groups “have been disproportionately affected by the virus” including “street children, commercial sex workers, people living with HIV/AIDS, children and girls living in high risk areas.” The Kenyan case also references an increase in teenage pregnancies and “the sexual abuse of both boys and girls.”

The need for physical distancing has curtailed one of [PWAN's advocacy roles in Nigeria](#) for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, as the organization is unable to “conduct confidential interviews and represent them in courts” during this period. This has effectively silenced the voices and delayed justice for these survivors, who are largely women and girls. In Nepal, people in remote villages have suffered from delayed communication and misinformation, which “affects illiterate people from remote areas in particular and [has] increased health-related tensions in the country.” Generally, as information from remote villages is also slow in reaching those who govern, the responsiveness, effectiveness, and quality of services provided to communities suffers.

[NETRIGHT reminds us](#) that while the Ghanaian government has been proactive in engaging different groups in its pandemic response, “this engagement has not been sufficiently broad or inclusive to ensure the voice and concerns of a majority of people — such as women and other vulnerable populations.” Further, stay-at-home orders exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities of domestic abuse survivors — largely women and girls — who are stuck at home with perpetrators and have little recourse, support, or access to provisions to hold abusers accountable.

The [virus is not gender-blind](#) and governance around this issue cannot be either. Any strategy to address the impact of the pandemic must take into account its intersectional and gender dimensions. Alongside the impacts on women and girls, some of the authors also raise the adverse consequences the crisis has had on boys and men. The Kenyan and Ethiopian cases mention the sexual exploitation of boys. In Ethiopia, young men have been deprived of their livelihoods, with some turning to crime for survival. It thus behooves policymakers, community organizers, civil society groups, and social movements to be alert to these realities while determining entry points and designing strategies for more inclusive, accountable, and equitable remedies.

The many faces of effective and adaptive leadership

Collectively, these reflections confirm what we know: the complex, multi-layered, multi-pronged and intangible nature of COVID-19 impacts every part of society, every nation, and every sector. In terms of leadership, such a complex problem has and will continue to require a dynamic and adaptive approach.

One particular approach — [situational leadership](#)— seems to resonate with the authors’ emerging reflections on effective leadership through the crisis: it is anticipatory, anchored at both the macro and micro levels, and responsive to the specific nature of the situation at hand. Key to situational leadership is adaptability. Leaders navigate among leadership styles to meet the changing or varying needs of communities and citizens, and have the insight and flexibility to understand when to adapt their leadership strategy to fit emerging and competing circumstances.

In the [case of Nepal](#), we have learnt that in responding to the crisis “local and volunteer leadership” had been more imperative than the leadership and presence of “paid and government staff.” The call is made for the deliberate development of local leadership in each community to support change. Beyond this, endogenous leadership capability would certainly enhance governance and local development beyond the immediate COVID-19 crisis, and in anticipation of future ones.

In the [experience of the MCCRN](#), “true leaders have to offer direction and be firm in the implementation of the same,” and further, the value of communities and other stakeholders “rallying behind” such leaders and implementing solutions in the best interest of citizens is necessary for good governance. In

contrast, shared leadership was also seen as an effective approach in responding to the pandemic, as well as being an avenue to advancing citizen participation in democratic governance.

What is clear is that no one form of leadership works everywhere and in all situations. In emergency situations, leaders often need to be directive, as there is little or no time for engagement and dialogue. Yet in response to COVID-19, alongside this kind of directive leadership leaders have also had to be collaborative, inclusive, compassionate, and participatory. As one practitioner puts it “success comes from thinking for and with the people,” both being critical steps in the process and practice of advocacy and movement building.

The value of reflection in social justice work

Reflection is one of the most powerful tools that leaders have at their disposal. Often it is through reflection that transformative learning happens, leading to deep and sustainable change in perspectives, behaviors, and outcomes.

Through this reflective writing exercise that some of the authors reported enhanced their understanding of themselves in the unfolding crisis, leading to changes in their behavior. This included learning to be measured in their communication style and recognizing personal biases, preferences, and tendencies.

As social justice practitioners, it is important - to become aware of oneself, to divest oneself of unproductive biases, preferences and tendencies, and to one's creativity. As advocates we often invite the communities we serve and work with to shift their perspectives and change their behaviors. Authentic leadership requires that practitioners model the behaviors that they are inviting others to embrace and practice. Understanding how this works can be key to supporting and enabling others to experience their own change. In a time of crisis and uncertainty it may be more difficult, yet no less important, for social justice practitioners to model this type of behavior and leadership.

In a similar vein, the exercise of collaborative writing and reflection (among a group of social justice scholars, educators, and practitioners from Nepal, Ethiopia, Kenya, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica and Canada) has not only been a platform for collaborative learning, mutual support, and solidarity, but has also modeled the kind of collaboration and reflective practice sought in this moment of crisis.

Learning is happening at the individual, organizational, and national levels

In sharing their own stories and learning, this group of practitioners has also shared the learning that is taking place around them at organizational, collective or community, and societal levels:

“As a practitioner, I am learning that I can be more creative and adaptive if I want to. It is important to be flexible when engaging with people. [...] As an organization, we are learning to adapt to suit the community.” (Nigeria)

“Issues such as flexible working hours, workplace childcare facilities, our capacity to respond to emergency situations and meeting the needs of the communities we work with, while adhering to protocols to curb the pandemic are concerns that we are still thinking through as a leading network advancing the rights of women.” (Ghana)

“Cameroonians are keen on reading, responding and spreading the Minister of Public Health’s daily updates using various social media platforms. This increases public consciousness and engagement in hygienic practices and protection from health-related problems.” (Cameroon)

This learning is not only essential to enabling redress for the pandemic, but is being applied to other areas of governance, enabling participation and citizen engagement and thereby ownership of responses now and for the future. By sharing their stories, the authors are also influencing learning outside of their national jurisdictions.

Balancing acts and new possibilities

The pandemic has left governments, civil society organisations, movement actors and communities with multiple points of tension. A form of polemic paralysis can set in as they try to balance competing socio-political imperatives and the complexity of satisfying the needs and demands of constituents while [upholding the rights of the people](#).

These tensions are apparent in various authors’ accounts and efforts, expressed in this reflective piece. At the fore is a difficult balancing act of governance: saving lives, keeping people healthy, and keeping the economy buoyant while providing transparent, evidence-based and timely information, ensuring meaningful participation and inclusion of diverse communities, and remaining accountable throughout the response.

As is the case [globally](#), the authors’ experiences show that this process has had both intended and unintended consequences. Many of these are positive and dynamic developments, offering new and adapted channels for governance and mobilization: innovations in remote working and virtual engagement; expansion in the use of new and existing technologies to generate data; greater attention to health-related public awareness and practice; enhanced collaboration between the state, the private sector, communities, and civil society actors; virtual governance and nimble advocacy tactics.

Yet these stories also show that the disease itself and the need for an urgent response have had negative impacts on individuals and communities

everywhere. Shielding children from contracting the virus by closing schools has, for example, exposed many of them to increased levels of violence and neglect, setbacks in development due to lack of necessary play, as well as a withdrawal of social protection services and nutrition support received through institutions such as the school system. Similarly, lockdown measures requiring families to stay home has exposed many to loss of employment, hunger, and violence, among other ills.

These measures and the expansion of executive power in general have also [accelerated](#) a closing space for civil society in many countries, as citizens (willingly or unwillingly) cede their rights in favor of health protection, and as some state actors overstep their authority. States of emergency and quarantine orders have negatively impacted youth unemployment and led to increases in crime. Already marginalized segments of the population, such as migrants, have become more impoverished. Many women and girls are increasingly subject to violence behind closed doors.

The need for new forms of social action, advocacy, and governance arrangements continues to evolve, increasingly requiring meaningful connection to the solidarity efforts and mutual aid initiatives emerging in many communities, greater trust across sectors, adaptations to existing accountability mechanisms, and the creation of new ones. Central to this is the ability of civil society actors to build on their (often novel) concerted efforts with state and private actors, to work more collaboratively together, and to continue expanding their networks and alliances as the pandemic waves ebb and flow into a ‘new normal.’ Communities in their diverse forms will need to build on these emerging strategies and novel methods to foster greater self-reliance and resilience. The extent to which this is possible will depend on the kinds of efforts documented in these stories, contributing to transparency, citizen voice, critical collaboration, and accountable governance throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

As social justice advocates, as development leaders, and as citizens, we must continue to remain curious, interrogating our own motives, our work and our next steps. And in our curiosity, we are invited to sit with the question of what is possible today that was not possible prior to this pandemic.

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