

**In der Corona-Krise: Eine Stimme aus der Zivilgesellschaft /  
In the Corona crisis: a voice from civil society**

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It is now time to take a humble stance and address the power gap between international organizations and local civil society organizations in the Global South.

A Column by Goda Milasiute

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**Covid-19 in the humanitarian settings: a multiple challenge**

Covid-19 is spreading over the globe, from Venezuela to South Sudan, from Syria to Bangladesh, in countries where healthcare infrastructure is almost non-existent, and the access to hygiene and sanitation is very limited. The virus is not only a threat in itself: where poverty is prevailing, lockdown measures can be deadly, too. While even

rich countries in the Global North are struggling to deal with Covid-19, its consequences in crisis settings – both short- and long-term – could be devastating. At the same time, humanitarian organizations, including civil society organizations in Germany, face unprecedented challenges in providing aid in the times of Covid-19.

### **Multiple problems and lacking resources**

How can Covid-19 be dealt with in **resource-poor settings**, where healthcare systems were weak even before the current pandemic? To illustrate the seriousness of the situation, in his **recent interview** with the World Economic Forum, David Miliband, CEO of the humanitarian NGO International Rescue Committee (IRC) was straightforward: “I really want to call out to people what it means to lack a health infrastructure. One ventilator in Sierra Leone; six, I believe, in Burkina Faso; 13 in the Democratic Republic of Congo.”

Although, for instance, some African countries are much more experienced in managing infectious diseases than the rest of the world, many contexts in the Global South are dealing with long-lasting, structural, and manifold healthcare problems that make them extremely vulnerable to Covid-19. To make things worse, the key challenge for the Global South is the **multiplicity of crises** that many countries are facing, with Covid-19 pandemic being one of them. As Andrea Böhm argues in her **article in Zeit Online**, many African countries are managing at least three crises at the same time. These include recurring droughts and locust plague, hunger, poverty, and conflict, as well as other epidemics, such as malaria, tuberculosis, or HIV/AIDS.

What does it mean in the context of Covid-19? That in some regions dealing with this virus means having to neglect other basic needs, such as **measles vaccinations** or **access to education**. That there are contexts – especially slums or refugee camps – where the policies associated with stopping Covid-19 from spreading, like social distancing, are much more difficult to implement. And that in some places, such as Eastern Ukraine, West Africa, or Colombia, lockdowns are

forcing millions of people into poverty and hunger, as those working in the informal sector lose their income and livelihoods. Given that **more than 60 percent** of the world's employed population is estimated to work informally, the situation is very worrying. In some contexts, the proportion is even higher: for instance, **80 percent** of the Venezuelan refugees in Bogotá are in the informal economy. The Covid-19 crisis is going to exacerbate the already existing **inequalities** based on gender, ethnicity and race, or socioeconomic status. The virus, being one of the many challenges, is a catalyst for serious additional problems.

### **Humanitarian multitasking**

To this multiplicity of problems, another one could be added: accessing aid. Humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies face local and global restrictions on movement, which translate into a reduced availability of national and international staff to provide aid where it is especially needed – for instance, **in Bangladesh, in Iraq, or in the DRC**. Because of these restrictions, some NGOs are even forced to **suspend their activities** altogether.

The multiplicity of crises means that, in the context of Covid-19, humanitarian organizations have to engage into **“moral multitasking”, as Hugo Slim named it**. This means that organizations need to simultaneously consider a variety of issues, including meeting the immediate healthcare needs and the long-term socio-economic needs. They need to prioritize some countries, districts, cities, and even people at the expense of others. They need to align their short-term and long-term strategies regarding upholding humanitarian principles and getting access. They need to secure and maintain trust even and especially if they are no longer operational on the ground. While some communities perceive Covid-19 as **“the illness of the white and rich”** brought by the foreigners, international NGOs also face the challenge of countering these **anti-foreigner and anti-aid worker sentiments** in order to be able to keep working. Dealing with **misinformation** regarding the virus and the NGO work itself is yet another issue that needs to be addressed.

On top of these difficulties, NGOs are losing a significant part of their funding due to the forced closures of charity shops, event cancellations, and no face-to-face fundraising. Private donations could decrease as Global Northerners might be willing to donate more for domestic purposes. Crises “at home” also lead to changes in donor behaviour. For instance, the largest international donor for health, the United States, is banning NGOs from using its funds to buy key items of personal protective equipment (PPE) or ventilators, including the more likely purchases outside of the US.

On 19th of April, 2020, the heads of all the United Nations’ most important agencies issued an urgent coronavirus appeal of \$2bn to fund the global emergency supply system to fight Covid-19. However, the UN system is often lacking the speed and flexibility that Covid-19 response requires, as argued by Christina Bennett, CEO of Start Network, an international network of humanitarian NGOs. According to Bennett, NGOs, particularly the local ones, need immediate funding, since they have frontline access, expertise, and the agility to act as opposed to the often-slow international aid machinery.

### **Covid-19 as a litmus test**

The current context makes it even clearer that some things in the humanitarian system – starting with funding and recognition of local NGOs – need to change. The Covid-19 crisis has shown how fragile the operational capacities on the ground by the international actors can be. The current situation is therefore the right time to rethink power relations in the humanitarian world. These include rejecting colonial, missionary, and unethical humanitarian lenses and building trust, as Covid-19 has debunked the essentialist myths of only the Global South being the place where a devastating crisis can start, and Europe not being a place where humanitarian aid is required.

While recognising and dealing with the multiple vulnerabilities and exacerbated inequalities that some countries are exposed to, maybe at least one inequality can be reduced – the one concerning power relations. Adopting a humble stance and addressing power disbalances between international organizations and local civil society organizations would be a good place to a start. While organizations from the Global North are struggling to efficiently provide aid, it can no longer simply be said that localization agenda is too difficult or too risky to implement. If after all Covid-19 could lead to a less hierarchical and more localized humanitarian system, it would have at least one positive outcome in the long run.

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