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BUILDING A BETTER WORLD: THE CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY OF COVID-19

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Notes on Contributors	iii
Introduction – Building Back a Better World: The Crisis and Opportunity of Covid-19 Peter Taylor and Mary McCarthy	1
Local Covid-19 Syndemics and the Need for an Integrated Response Megan Schmidt-Sane, Melissa Leach, Hayley MacGregor, Jessica Meeker and Annie Wilkinson	19
Building Forward Better: Inclusive Livelihood Support in Nairobi’s Informal Settlements Joseph Kimani, Rosie Steege, Jack Makau, Kilion Nyambuga, Jane Wairutu and Rachel Tolhurst	37
Social Protection, Covid-19, and Building Back Better Jeremy Lind, Keetie Roelen and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler	45
Community Leaders and Decentralised Governance: Tales from the SEWA Field Paromita Sen and Aiman Haque	65
Food Systems After Covid-19 Ayako Ebata, Nicholas Nisbett and Stuart Gillespie	73
Covid-19 Response and Protracted Exclusion of Informal Settlement Residents in Freetown, Sierra Leone Abu Conteh, Mary Sirah Kamara, Samuel Saidu and Joseph Mustapha Macarthy	95
Building Back Better, Gender Equality, and Feminist Dilemmas Sohela Nazneen and Susana Araujo	105
Beyond the Crisis: Irish Aid’s Approach to Nutrition in Tanzania during the Covid-19 Pandemic Kim Mwamelo, Peter Nyella and Adrian Fitzgerald	127
Religious Marginality, Covid-19, and Redress of Targeting and Inequalities Mariz Tadros, Maryam Kanwer and Jaffer Abbas Mirza	133
Tackling Covid-19 and Building Back Better: The Case of Ethiopia Hiwot Mebrate	153
Governance for Building Back Better Shandana Khan Mohmand with contributions from Colin Anderson, Max Gallien, Tom Harrison, Anuradha Joshi, Miguel Loureiro, Giulia Mascagni, Giovanni Occhiali and Vanessa van den Boogaard	163
Glossary	181

Introduction – Building Back a Better World: The Crisis and Opportunity of Covid-19^{*†}

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Abstract The current global pandemic of Covid-19 is a health and broader crisis of overwhelming proportions, threatening livelihoods, economies, and societies, particularly those already experiencing the greatest vulnerabilities. In putting the lives of millions of people at risk, creating uncertainties, heightening existing fragilities, and exacerbating inequalities, it has become a truly global challenge. Crisis also brings opportunity, however, and in addition to short- and mid-term responses, this is a time to explore and work towards a genuine transformation of ideas, policies, programmes, and practices. This may all be encapsulated in the overall notion of 'building back a better world'. Against this backdrop, this article introduces this *IDS Bulletin* issue which asks, fundamentally, how we can collectively and equitably shape – and even transform – our shared future, in the light of experience of Covid-19, and what steps are necessary for us to do so. It draws upon strategic approaches guiding the efforts of two highly engaged organisations: Irish Aid, Ireland; and the Institute of Development Studies, UK. This editorial introduction explores lessons learned from the impact of Covid-19 by highlighting some key viewpoints and evidence provided in the articles³ that follow. It then offers a number of priority areas for action looking forward, as well as several principles that may help to guide those future actions in efforts to build back a better world.

Keywords health, governance, social protection, freedom of religion or belief, food and nutrition, Covid-19, building back better.

1 A crisis of overwhelming proportions

The current global pandemic of Covid-19 is a health crisis of massive proportions that has also accelerated a series of other crises – economic, social, and political. Now approaching 42 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and, at the time of



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writing, surpassing 1.1 million deaths⁴ related to the disease, it is an unprecedented crisis for development. As well as generating significant uncertainties through its spread and impact, it is both affecting and requiring responses from all countries, albeit in different ways, and to different challenges. As Schmidt-Sane *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) point out, the pandemic, and many of the responses to it, are threatening livelihoods, economies, and societies. Reactions are exposing, and potentially deepening, foundational cracks in society, heightening fragilities and vulnerabilities in systems of all kinds, leading many citizens to feel a loss of direction and even purpose. The impact is, in short, playing out at local, national, and global scales, via an interconnected world where a virus knows no boundaries.

At the same time, dominant development models, which may be problematic for a number of reasons (top down, linear, narrowly focused on economic value, and not taking resilience, sustainability, and equity seriously enough) are being undone (Leach *et al.* 2020). Undoing them may create some disarray for governments and donors, but less for citizens. Most importantly, the undoing of these models creates new spaces and opportunities to engage with complexity, promotes efforts to make connections and break down silos, and allows for different development thinking and action to emerge through engagement with actors whose voices are less commonly heard.

This is a crisis that has demanded responses, from governments, citizens, the private sector, and a range of societal actors. We are reminded constantly in public messaging that Covid-19 is a challenge that affects everyone, everywhere. The world's under-preparedness has also been continuously exposed, even though there had been predictions of a crisis like this for some time. Immediately following the SARS epidemic of two decades ago, in a report of deliberations convened by the Institute of Medicine (US) Forum on Microbial Threats, Monaghan (2004) made a number of predictions for a further SARS-like outbreak. The report noted that whilst globalisation presented opportunities for improving and sharing technology and communication needed to help combat emerging diseases, it also increased the likelihood of global pandemics occurring as pathogens continued to evolve and exploit weak links in human defences, and to spread amidst high human mobility.

This likelihood would be exacerbated by continued environmental degradation and interactions between people and nature that make the spillover of disease more likely, such as encroachment on animal habitats and sales of wild animals. Monaghan (2004) also described a range of implications for society more generally, including likely challenges around quarantine in high-density populated urban areas; the potential for repressive regimes to take advantage of a pandemic to close down civic space; threats to employment and trade; the likelihood of a disease

being more transmissible and lethal in countries with weak health-care systems and vulnerable populations; and the difficulties in achieving coordinated and effective political action and decision-making to respond to a pandemic successfully.

Readers of this *IDS Bulletin* may feel a sense of *déjà vu* when reflecting on the experience of SARS in relation to the current pandemic. There are of course important differences between the two experiences. The SARS outbreak, albeit leading to tragic loss of life, was controlled relatively quickly following an extremely rapid response in the contexts where it spread initially. This was likely due partially to social and political factors, with responses facilitated by relatively tight regulatory frameworks in several key Southeast Asian countries, and a correspondingly strong adaptation in social behaviour. There were also distinct factors relating to the nature of the virus itself, particularly with significant numbers of Covid-19-infected individuals being asymptomatic and inadvertently spreading the disease more widely. There is no doubt, however, that the truly global phenomenon of Covid-19 has demonstrated the need for a global response. Evidence and data from a range of sources and disciplines are now absolutely necessary to deal with the current crisis; and also to prepare for a world where our collective ability to change the underlying conditions that support the emergence of such diseases is transformed significantly.

A collective response to the pandemic has been influenced by many factors. Humanity has many shared preoccupations with other major global challenges, disruptions, and shocks: conflict and disaster and their human fallout, climate justice, migration, inequalities. The list is long. Amongst these challenges, the arrival of Covid-19 on the global scene was initially stealthy. A year later, it is probably the world's greatest single preoccupation, and one which we will be facing for the foreseeable future. It is also a crisis that has challenged how development, fragility, and resilience are understood, and how pathways for change are formulated. The transformative changes needed to make progress against this global backdrop, as laid out in the catalysing vision and framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), will only happen through a deeper collective recognition that this is a universal agenda, and that the challenges faced are interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. Achieving more equitable and sustainable futures (IDS 2020) will not be achieved without fulfilling commitments to working politically, internationally, and hopefully. As the contributions in this *IDS Bulletin* highlight, lasting solutions will not be found by attempting to retrofit pre-Covid-19 priorities and ways of working to the current, unprecedented situation.

Whilst the world's leaders and nations seek to try to contain the negative impacts of the pandemic, we are reminded that crisis brings opportunity. In addition to identifying the most urgent

strategies and generating approaches to address short- and mid-term needs and challenges, this is also a time to explore and lay the groundwork for genuine transformation of ideas, policies, programmes, practices, and systems. Seeds of hope are emerging for radical transformation of development itself, in the context of the current crisis where basic norms and principles that support key freedoms and enable sustainable development are under threat, and where systems emerge that embrace democracy, transparency, the independent rule of law, and fundamental equalities, including gender equality. There is a sense of collective urgency in fostering collaborative and comparative learning across the experience of different countries and localities; and in finding ways to avoid returning (via recovery) to conditions that fail to foster peace and sustainability – locally, nationally, globally. Responding differently, and radically, to the current reality requires an acknowledgement of what we do not yet know or understand.

This *IDS Bulletin* therefore asks some fundamental questions about the kinds of challenges now manifesting due to the pandemic around health, food equity, social protection, gender equality, governance, and freedom of religion or belief. It explores, through a range of analyses and focused case studies, what vulnerabilities are being experienced in specific contexts, but also assesses the value of different responses to these vulnerabilities. Looking towards the future, it considers what types of investments and systemic changes may be needed to bring about long-term transformations, via multi-pronged approaches to these complex, and often interrelated challenges. This *IDS Bulletin* is a concerted effort to bridge gaps in understanding, and to put forward new solutions and steps in order to respond differently. This may all be encapsulated in the overall notion of a systemic transformation, and is framed here as 'building back a better world'; a world that, in the future, will be different to the one that is experienced – in so many different, and unequal ways – today.

2 Why this *IDS Bulletin* issue

This *IDS Bulletin* reflects, fundamentally, on how a shared future can be collectively and equitably shaped – and even transformed – in the light of experience of Covid-19. This is a question directly relevant to us, as Co-Editors of this issue, as we hope it will be to any reader. In our professional roles we are associated with organisations and institutions that seek to make a positive difference in the world; but we are also citizens, we belong to communities, we have personal stakes in a better future for all. Do we then – whether we are citizens, communities, governments, non-state actors – have sufficient understanding of what has brought us to this point, and do we have a vision of where we hope to go from here? Do we have the knowledge, skills, and tools to interpret our responses and to act differently in the future, based on this understanding? Do we have the commitment, patience, and political will to really engage with complexity and undertake these actions?

We know that many are asking similar questions. Several of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* are based on work that has emerged through a close collaboration between Irish Aid and the Institute of Development Studies.⁵ Some of the articles have evolved from Positioning Papers that were developed as part of that collaboration – with clear indications how issues, reflections, and analyses have developed over the course of 2020 – whilst others are newly prepared. Over several years, both organisations have been exploring the potential of alternative development pathways, particularly relating to social protection, and food and nutrition security, but also in relation to other connected areas such as youth, gender, livelihoods, and integrated approaches to development.

A Better World, Ireland's policy for international development, was launched in February 2019 (Government of Ireland 2019). Building on Ireland's track record in delivering for the poorest and most vulnerable, it seeks to realise the transformational pledge of the SDGs – reaching and delivering for those furthest behind first. The policy's publication took place against a backdrop of increasing global volatility, with unprecedented levels of humanitarian crises and vulnerability. In spite of this context, and new threats that were emerging to peace and security, the unprecedented fallout from a global pandemic that has left no country unaffected, was not foreseen. However, the key areas of intervention outlined in *A Better World* – centred on **Food, Protection, and People** – have been brought even more sharply into focus since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis and the immense impact on the lives of so many, especially those already most marginalised and vulnerable.

Food (including agriculture and nutrition). All 17 of the SDGs rely, to some degree, on healthier, more sustainable, and equitable food systems – making them absolutely central to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The development of a sustainable food systems approach builds on one of Ireland's flagship foreign policies, to combat hunger and poverty. The importance of coordinating and strengthening global, regional, and national initiatives to successfully adopt an integrated approach to food, nutrition, and health security, and ensure positive outcomes for nutrition, health, and climate, is paramount.

Protection (addressing issues in fragile contexts, effective humanitarian and peace-building interventions, and upholding human rights). Protecting civic space, the right to participation, media freedom, and resilient core institutions is essential, particularly in times of crisis, where humanitarian interventions must prioritise those furthest behind. Focusing on the most marginalised and vulnerable, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states, demands engagement with the local contexts and institutions that determine how development happens and how decisions are made.

People (including health, education, and social protection). Investments in core systems and social sectors that build the capacities and resilience of people and communities are an essential way to maintain progress on multiple SDG targets, at a time when many of these are off-track. Strong social foundations increase preparedness and the capacity to withstand shocks, and must be inclusive of the most vulnerable such as women and girls, minorities, and people living with disabilities.

IDS launched its new strategy in April 2020, with the title of *Transforming Knowledge, Transforming Lives* (IDS 2020) and a vision of a more equitable and sustainable world, where people everywhere can live their lives free from poverty and injustice. It is interesting to observe that the strategy was created in 2019 before the outbreak of Covid-19, and had already stated IDS' intention to respond 'to the shocks and disruptions of our era' (*ibid.*: 5). Several key shocks were identified, namely those relating to health, environment, economies, politics, society, and technologies. The strategy proved both prescient and relevant considering what has happened since its launch, particularly regarding its analysis of the interrelatedness of these shocks, disruptions, and challenges. As the strategy observes:

We are entering the decade of delivery for the United Nations Global Goals for Sustainable Development (Global Goals). The transformative change needed to make progress against this ambitious framework will only happen through a deeper collective recognition that this is a universal agenda, and that the challenges we face are interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. By recognising this, a politics of hope can emerge around what is possible in terms of more equitable and sustainable futures (*ibid.*: 7).

The IDS strategy includes four key commitments: upholding climate and environmental justice; reducing extreme inequities; fostering healthy and fulfilling lives; and nurturing inclusive, democratic, and accountable societies. Critical though each of those commitments are, they are also deeply interrelated, and require joined-up approaches. Regarding healthy and fulfilling lives, the strategy observes that:

Health is a fundamental right and a prerequisite for individuals, families, communities and societies to thrive. Good health goes well beyond narrow metrics and categories of disease or its absence, to encompass broader physical, mental and social wellbeing. Despite major investments in universal health coverage, health inequities are worsening in many countries, intensified by environmental change, conflict and violence, and social inequalities. Longstanding health problems are being compounded by new ones linked to epidemics, poor diets and nutrition, and social exclusion and stress (*ibid.*: 13).

As both Irish Aid and IDS have observed, the Covid-19 crisis is a stark reminder of the interconnectedness of all our lives. It highlights in the starkest terms that we are global citizens, facing a universal challenge. As with the climate crisis, we are all affected by Covid-19; in all countries, vulnerability to both the disease and the effects of the response have been felt differentially, according to intersecting inequalities around age, race, gender, place, and poverty. Negative impacts are disproportionately felt by those least able to withstand shocks, however. Those living in low- and middle-income countries are particularly at risk. Many of them already have weak health and social protection systems, and even prior to this crisis faced high debt burdens. Many of these countries also bear the brunt of risks such as climate change and political instability. Countries already experiencing humanitarian crises and fragility, hosting large numbers of refugees, struggling with inequalities – and also Small Island Developing States – will be hugely impacted by the health pandemic that is Covid-19, and the economic pandemic that is only now starting to truly reveal itself.

In a recent Knowledge for Development (K4D) report on *Social Impacts and Responses Related to Covid-19 in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*, Rohwerder (2020) observes that health needs are connected to social, economic, and environmental wellbeing, and there is a 'strong environmental sustainability and gender equality imperative to build back better' (UN 2020: 1, 38, cited in Rohwerder 2020). This report highlights several major areas of impact: (a) poor and near-poor people are at greatest risk of extreme poverty; (b) marginalised groups are most affected, and their voices are often not heard due to closing civic space; (c) no, or inadequate, social protection; (d) women and girls are most affected; and (e) a lack of disaggregated data that serves to further exacerbate exclusion. The report's main conclusion is that long-term, universal social protection and protection of health, economic, and social rights are the best defence against global pandemics and their fallout.

The impact of the pandemic on education provides a salutary example going beyond health, and an illustration of the shifting terrain of vulnerability. As individuals, communities, and societies, we have found ourselves moving in and out of different stages of vulnerability, triggered by the pandemic itself or by the responses to it, and by vastly different capacities to withstand shocks. For example, Covid-19 has disrupted learning across the globe, with 91 per cent of students worldwide impacted (Miks and McIlwaine 2020). At one point, schools in 194 countries were closed affecting over 1 billion learners, albeit in multiple different ways.

Experience has shown that children who were marginalised before Covid-19 are at higher risk of loss of learning, permanent drop-out, and increased vulnerabilities. This is especially the case for girls. Girls face particular challenges to continuing their education at home due to increased domestic and caring responsibilities and

the necessity to engage in income-generating activities. School closures increase girls' vulnerability to gender-based violence, risky sexual behaviours, and transactional sex. There is also increased risk of early marriage and early pregnancy jeopardising a return to education. With school closures, girls may also lose other essential services such as food, psychosocial support, health advice, and comprehensive sexuality education. While Covid-19-related disruption to education has presented many challenges, it also provides an opportunity to reimagine education systems so that they are more inclusive, resilient, and gender responsive, and to galvanise the potential of distance-learning technologies to reach vulnerable and out-of-school children.

3 What lessons are we learning from the impact of Covid-19?

Working from the understanding articulated by the World Health Organization's (WHO) Health Emergencies Programme head Michael Ryan that 'no one is safe until we are all safe' (cited in Gataveckaitė 2020, unpaginated), reaching and protecting those who are most vulnerable is essential if we are to deal effectively with the pandemic. To respond effectively to the challenge of reaching those furthest behind first requires an understanding of the complex, intersecting, and dynamic factors that create disadvantage and marginalisation. It requires changes and deliberate choices to comprehensively address the fluid and multidimensional aspects of poverty, inequality, and injustice. Barriers to participation and development must be identified, acknowledged, and tackled, and flexible, adaptive approaches adopted in order to address structural and societal norms. Striking a balance between the immediate health, socioeconomic, and humanitarian response, while protecting longer-term development prospects, is critical in working our way through the coming challenging months and years in containing the pandemic. Efforts will be needed in building the resilience of those communities and countries affected by conflict and chronic poverty, whilst also building preparedness and resilience to deal with future shocks, which may include further epidemics.

If this crisis has taught us anything, it is about the importance of not simply reacting to events that have materialised, but also in anticipating and predicting likely future shocks and building in capacity to deal with sudden surges. Many of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* draw on conceptual and theoretical framings that help us understand better where we have come from and where we may be heading; and offer practical examples of community resilience, experimentation, innovation, and collective action, demonstrating that it is genuinely possible to build forward differently.

Health is clearly our global focus during the pandemic, but as Schmidt-Sane *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) point out, 'the Covid-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis... [It] has exposed fault lines in our societies, and amplified existing inequalities'.

Monaghan (2004) had also pointed out that following SARS, there is clearly still room to strengthen our health systems, since this leads to greater resilience and makes possible a more robust response to external shocks, buying crucial time so that domestic health systems are not overwhelmed. Schmidt-Sane *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) highlight that a strong health system is also better equipped to maintain essential health services during a crisis such as Covid-19, protecting the health of the population and reducing the risk of a backslide on gains made over previous years. But they also note that we need to go further:

Future global challenges may be equally complex, and we should strengthen our ability to innovate and adapt through tailored solutions that reflect local realities... Such rethinking of public health/development might have core principles such as equity, social justice, resilience, and inclusion at its heart. Further, by demonstrating a commitment to the vulnerable in society, it is possible to build a better post-Covid world that takes care of all. Through these approaches, there is a potential to deliver a more effective and synergised public health and development response... (Schmidt-Sane *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*).

Social protection is a key focus in this pandemic. Governments around the world have put in place mechanisms to cushion social and economic shocks and protect livelihoods amidst disruption, but community and neighbourhood groups have also filled significant gaps. Learning from these adaptations and innovations will be a key plank in efforts to build back a better world in which those most vulnerable and left behind are prioritised. As Lind, Roelen and Sabates-Wheeler (this *IDS Bulletin*) point out:

Building back better is about getting back to basics, but also getting the basics right to begin with. This includes operating systems that promote transparency and accountability to citizens, firming up the fiscal base to ensure the sustainability of systems, and inclusion and sensitivity as the bedrock of social protection provision.

Their article makes clear that there is no single one-size-fits-all mechanism, and highlights the need for a continuum of social protection responses that are embedded in the needs and realities of specific contexts, and which are tailored to ensure that existing inequalities and inequities are not further entrenched.

Linked closely to health, but also interconnected with so many other dimensions of human and planetary existence, efforts will be needed to address the many inequities experienced in food systems that have been further exacerbated by Covid-19. In their article on 'Food Systems After Covid-19' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Ebata, Nisbett, and Gillespie describe how measures to slow down the spread of Covid-19 have had profound effects on food and nutrition security for those furthest behind. Through these

measures, pre-existing food system inequities – which were already profound – have frequently been intensified. Highlighting a theme that runs through many of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, the authors observe that the measures currently being adopted in response to Covid-19 frequently affect poor and marginalised people more severely than those who are privileged, with serious consequences on long-term food and nutrition security and livelihoods. They recommend the need to strengthen the resilience and equity of food systems by promoting diversified consumption, trade, and production of food, strengthening local innovation systems and institutions to create a market environment that benefits domestic (small and medium) enterprises and agri-food supply chain workers, and by generating policy responses based on the fair representation of the voices of vulnerable people.

Covid-19 also has major implications for gender equality. The pandemic has affected men and women differently, exacerbating existing gender inequalities across a range of areas including health, education, and livelihoods, food security and nutrition, and amidst a backdrop of increased levels of gender-based violence. In their article 'Building Back Better, Gender Equality, and Feminist Dilemmas' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Nazneen and Araujo highlight that without radical action, the progress made to date on women's empowerment and gender equality will be lost. They also explore the question as to whether gender power hierarchies in our economies, politics, and society can be renegotiated, asking: 'What does building back better look like if gender equality was at its core? What kinds of feminist dilemmas arise with respect to how we frame women's voice and agency as we advocate for transformative systemic change?' They propose a series of recommendations on the kinds of interventions, investments, and partnerships that will ensure that the Covid-19 response in the immediate, medium, and long term is gender transformative, in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights; women's economic empowerment; girls' education; gender-based violence; and women, peace, and security.

As highlighted already in this introduction, those most vulnerable and marginalised are those most likely to be left behind. Religious belief is a significant factor that can contribute to marginalisation, and often oppression. In their article on 'Religious Marginality, Covid-19, and Redress of Targeting and Inequalities', Tadros, Kanwer and Mirza (this *IDS Bulletin*) interrogate the question of whether we should also consider 'religious marginality' as a qualifier, in a way similar to the explorations of gender, ethnicity, and class inequalities when examining Covid-19-related vulnerabilities. The article examines the accentuation of vulnerabilities with differential drivers and outcomes in Pakistan as different religious minorities experience the impact of the interplay of class, caste, ethnicity, and religious marginality in distinct ways. Drawing on the case study of Pakistan as well as evidence from other countries such as India, Uganda, and Iraq, the authors

argue that where religious minorities exist in contexts where the broader political and societal policy is one of religious 'othering' and where religious marginality intersects with socioeconomic exclusion, they experience particular forms of vulnerability that are acute and dire in their consequences, not only for members of the religiously marginalised group but for society at large.

A key lesson from this analysis is that building back better necessitates new forms of accountability, starting with the political economy analysis of inclusion/exclusion in society. The authors suggest that addressing hardships of socioeconomically excluded religious minorities will require more than a compartmentalised approach. Religious equality will need to be recognised as both a means to a socially cohesive society and as an end in itself for the rights of the members of these groups.

As an overlay to all the dimensions discussed above, there is a danger that the Covid-19 outbreak may be used as a pretext for unreasonable restrictions of civil society and further limiting of democratic space in certain countries. Strengthening governance matters fundamentally to a country's capability to self-sufficiently and sustainably eradicate poverty, support inclusive economic growth, and manage shocks over the long term. In their article on 'Governance for Building Back Better', Khan Mohmand *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe the pandemic as a crisis of governance. They highlight ways in which Covid-19 has created a set of unique challenges that underscore the need for governments to collect revenue more efficiently and equitably; and to spend it more inclusively, transparently, and accountably, especially on the most vulnerable and marginalised populations. The article suggests a set of governance interventions to help create conditions for building effective and inclusive institutions that can support efforts to build back better, in the shorter and in the longer term.

The above, interconnected, issues are all critical for our collective future, globally; but we are also reminded constantly as the pandemic unfolds that context matters. One-size solutions really do not fit all. In order to understand how each of these dimensions described above plays out in reality, and how the intersections between them manifest in peoples' lives, it is essential to listen, learn, and respond to the lived experiences of those who are directly affected. This *IDS Bulletin* offers an opportunity to learn from lessons on the ground in five countries. Sen and Haque (this *IDS Bulletin*) write from India about the expanding role of grass-roots leaders during Covid-19 to support the state in reaching the most marginalised citizens, thus building a case for a decentralised model of equitable power-sharing between state and community. Conteh *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) explore the Covid-19 response and protracted exclusion of informal residents in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Kimani *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe how supporting Nairobi's informal settlements with temporary basic income is helping to build back better.

Mwamelo, Nyella and Fitzgerald (this *IDS Bulletin*) explain Irish Aid's approach to nutrition in Tanzania during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the central importance of building flexibility and adaptability into a multilayered response, combined with local-level engagement and remote monitoring. Finally, Mebrate (this *IDS Bulletin*) describes Irish Aid's experiences on the ground in Ethiopia, working with different development actors on a diverse set of challenges relating to Covid-19. These examples provide several lessons. First, that citizens and communities are often at the forefront of innovations and adaptations that are making a practical difference on the ground, and which provide important learning, evidence, and data for policy and decision-making. Second, that flexible approaches which are grounded in the local context are crucial, given the diverse range of impacts of Covid-19. Third, that intentional efforts are needed to understand exclusion, disempowerment, and marginalisation that may be taking place either indirectly or directly because of the pandemic, and that explicit measures will likely be needed to ensure that those most at risk of being left behind are included in generating knowledge and shaping solutions themselves.

4 Why build back a better world?

The notion of 'building back better' is often traced back to efforts to ensure that infrastructure destroyed by earthquakes or hurricanes is rebuilt in such a way that it will be much more resilient to future shocks. The expression gained currency following the 2004 Asian Tsunami, and whilst first associated mainly with land use, spatial planning, and construction standards through the recovery process, the concept has expanded to include building greater resilience in recovery by systematically addressing the root causes of vulnerability (Hallegatte, Rentschler and Walsh 2018). It is not surprising then that the expression has continued to hold traction within the current pandemic situation (whilst, it should be noted, also gaining political currency around certain ideological stances on nation-building).

Although the expression itself is still evolving, to incorporate ideas about building forward, and differently, there is a clear central message implied: crisis disrupts the status quo, and potentially opens spaces to do things differently. Of course, these opening spaces may close again quickly, as they did after the 2008 financial crisis when similar arguments were made. There is also no single view about what is 'better', and powerful actors may use crises to their advantage, to progress authoritarian or restrictive agendas, or to generate financial profit at the expense of others. Much depends on how, and through whom, power relations are able to be reconfigured. This *IDS Bulletin*, however, takes a particular, normative view on what building back a better world entails: taking coordinated action that will save lives and protect livelihoods now; ensuring that the eventual economic recovery is inclusive and sustainable; taking into account the needs, wishes, experience, and aspiration of all citizens, especially

those most vulnerable; and linking these efforts to building greater resilience to future hazards, particularly at community level.

This *IDS Bulletin* highlights ways in which we may imagine building back a better world, therefore, but emphasises also the need for much deeper structural transformations, which allow the possibility to build differently. For example, our efforts must also address the climate and biodiversity crisis. We are beginning to understand how threats to biodiversity can cause threats to human health, and we understand that communities already weakened by the pandemic are especially vulnerable to climate shocks. This is an opportunity to imagine a greener, more climate-resilient future, but this requires much deeper, systemic transformations, and has significant implications for political will.

As mentioned earlier in this introduction, there are many ways in which the Covid-19 crisis has exposed the fault lines in social, economic, and political systems, and where it presents opportunities for alternative approaches. Drawing on the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, we see some strands emerging that indicate not only why it is worth building back a better world, but how:

- Those who are marginalised and vulnerable need to be involved in the efforts to address the challenges they are facing. It is crucial to listen to those whose lives are most affected. They have experience, knowledge, hopes, and aspirations that need to be heard, engaged with, and acted upon, involving them in planning, decision-making, and implementation of actions if outcomes are to be truly sustainable. Many examples are shared in this *IDS Bulletin* of engagement with citizens and communities, and the benefits that accrue to all by promoting and facilitating participatory and inclusive development processes.
- People's basic needs must be met in ways that are inclusive. This may require shoring up existing interventions and programmes; for example, social protection, health, and food systems that are severely under strain and may struggle to survive the economic fallout of the pandemic. But it may also require experimenting with new forms of support; for instance, expanding social protection programmes and targeting support to women and girls.
- Those most at risk and vulnerable – for example, people persecuted for their religious beliefs, women and girls at risk of domestic violence, youth, and those working in the informal sector – may need specific, targeted responses that are human rights based. Several articles in this *IDS Bulletin* provide examples of how this can be achieved.
- Institutions that play lead roles in maintaining societal norms and structures through an array of governance mechanisms

need to strengthen how they work, their accountability to those they serve, and the ways in which they access and use evidence, data, and research to inform policies, decision-making, and implementation. Building a strong governance response to the pandemic requires better systems of coordination, data collection and maintenance, and decentralised planning. This will support efforts by governments to collect revenue progressively and efficiently; and to spend it effectively, inclusively, and accountably where it is most needed. As Khan Mohmand *et al.* indicate in their article (this *IDS Bulletin*), actions to support these efforts may involve expanding the capacity of national and local governments through having access to sufficient resources, data, and information. This will then support their efforts to prioritise vulnerable population groups through interventions that are based on good evidence, are inclusively designed, and which respond to their most important needs.

Looking forward, we hope to find opportunity within this unprecedented crisis to build a better, different, world; accelerate our efforts towards meeting the SDGs; and reach those furthest behind. The debates, evidence, and experiences shared in this *IDS Bulletin* suggest the following key principles will be crucial:

- Prioritise those furthest behind first, wherever possible through inclusive, deliberative planning processes;
- Lay the groundwork for transformative approaches in the immediate response;
- Localise, respond to diverse contexts, and collaborate;
- Coordinate with key actors and across sectors, integrating perspectives, methods, and disciplines as needed;
- Pursue and promote flexible, adaptive approaches that respond to uncertainty and complexity; and
- Establish firm foundations for comprehensive social protection, strengthen health systems, and build the resilience of food systems.

By following principles such as these, we believe that more will be learned on how best to tackle interconnected global challenges (e.g. health, climate change and biodiversity, poverty and inequalities, food and nutrition security, social protection, freedom of religion or belief, gender equality) in socially just ways. These principles will also help us to seek and develop prospects for new solidarities and strengthened relationships in building back a better world, that use alternative ways of thinking and acting intentionally. They will help us in drawing out, and using, lessons about resilience at various levels, including new learning on factors that have helped determine more or less effective responses;

for example, openness and trust in public authorities; recognition and empowerment of local authority and collectives; listening and learning from citizens and communities on their experiences as well as their innovations and creativity; and learning about how social, political, and economic context shapes what works well, why, and for whom. They will also enable us to better identify and support processes of rights-claiming, as citizens are finding ways to gain new rights; establishing new citizen–state relations, including new entitlements for social protection programmes, and greater transparency and accountability. Taken together, such achievements might actually enable us to do even more than ‘building back a better world’. Perhaps we will see true transformations that enable us to build forward, differently.

These principles will help to guide our efforts; but research, evidence, analysis, and data will also be crucial to collective efforts to seize these opportunities. To help meet the evidence needs associated with this response, a wide array of research is already being carried out in response by researchers across the world – as indicated by the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*. Much of this is looking closely at the deeper dimensions of power and politics that often determine what responses are chosen, and how these will play out in practice. Further work is still needed, however, particularly engaging researchers from the social sciences and arts and humanities, working collectively and collaboratively. There is an urgent need to identify, support, and learn from innovative, creative work, the findings of which are rapidly and effectively synthesised, summarised, and made available for prompt access by policymakers and practitioners. Effective communication will also be crucial so that they reach a maximum targeted audience, whilst minimising the risk of dispersion and atomisation of findings and analyses.

5 Conclusion

In an article in the *Financial Times* during the early days of the pandemic, the writer Arundhati Roy (2020) made a passionate case for why a genuine transformation – a different, better world – is needed. She described how:

Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to ‘normality’, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

The enormity of the Covid-19 crisis and its response requires a heavy dose of realism, but is also a rallying call for higher-income countries to remain faithful to their global commitments to the SDGs, to ensure there is some prospect of meeting the targets. The Irish concept of community solidarity – *meitheal* – captures the urgent need for committed and collective action by members

of the global community to co-create a better future. This means resisting polarisation and silos, and seeking commonality through a multilateral system that is currently under threat. This was true before the pandemic but will be even more significant in a forthcoming period of rupture and recovery from the virus. Business as usual will not get us to where we need to be in 2030; creativity and collaboration offer a more hopeful and fruitful pathway forward.

Notes

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- 1 Peter Taylor, Director of Research, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 Mary McCarthy, Nutrition Lead, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), Ireland.
- 3 Several articles in this *IDS Bulletin* are based upon previously published Positioning Papers prepared through the IDS and Irish Aid collaboration, highlighted in the relevant texts. These articles each include an Afterword noting updates since the earlier paper was published.
- 4 **COVID-19 Dashboard, Center for Systems Science and Engineering, Johns Hopkins University** (accessed 30 September 2020).
- 5 **Irish Aid and IDS Partnership: Building Back Better.**

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