

COVID COLLECTIVE KEY ISSUE GUIDE:

# Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on decision-making, accountability and empowerment





# Summary

'Post-pandemic transformation ... means embracing uncertainty and fostering often unruly, diverse alternatives that allow economic, social and political systems to transform towards more equitable and sustainable development pathways. It means rejecting the illusions of 'control', whether via technology, the market or state intervention, and enabling a more caring, inclusive, convivial approach to development ...' (Leach *et al.* 2021: 9)

The unpredictable, fast-moving and high-risk decision-making environment during the Covid-19 pandemic challenged policymakers around the globe. The shortcomings of global and national collective action and accountability mechanisms have been exposed. Covid-19 responses have provided new opportunities for corruption, fuelled waves of disinformation, and fed into pre-existing authoritarian trends. Top-down approaches during the pandemic have ignored people's lived realities and agency, and exacerbated social and economic inequalities. Risks of prolonged securitisation of the Covid-19 response and shrinking civil space are heightened in fragile and conflict-affected settings. At the same time, from the start of the pandemic, local mutual solidarity and community-led groups and actors have stepped in to meet people's needs, including in places with widespread poverty and vulnerability.

Decision-making and accountability mechanisms that are fit-for-purpose in today's turbulent world require more effective coordination across governance levels and sectors, and international borders. Unpredictable crises call for policymakers to adopt a collaborative learning and adaptive approach. Inclusive, open policy processes can help rebuild relationships of trust and counter the effects of disinformation. Ensuring these processes include the most marginalised – who tend to face heightened risks during crises – is essential. Support and funding are needed to empower activists and groups that are embedded in local communities (McGee 2022), with investment in state-society partnerships that enable effective democratic scrutiny in practice.

## Key Issues

### An uncertain, unruly world

The Covid-19 pandemic 'tested the capacity of decisionmakers and policy systems to adapt to unpredictable, high-risk scenarios (Grogan 2022). Forced to act quickly with unclear evidence, global and national governance mechanisms struggled to coordinate collective action (Das *et al.* 2021; Luckham and Carter 2022). Covid-19 responses often defaulted to top-down, control-oriented actions, exacerbating pre-existing social and economic inequalities, and ignoring people's lived experiences and agency (Leach *et al.* 2021).

The imperative of strengthening governance systems and capacities to cope with 'radical volatility and uncertainty' continues today (International IDEA 2022: iv). National governments and global institutions face the persistent impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside complex shifts and crises in health, economic and food systems and geopolitical relations (Nelson 2022). The repercussions of these fall unequally across and within countries, with disproportionate risks for lower income countries and marginalised population groups (Luckham and Carter 2022).

### The normalisation of authoritarianism

**'For low-income residents in African cities, the Covid-19 pandemic has often been experienced less as a health crisis and more in terms of the devastating socioeconomic, political and violent impacts arising from lockdown measures and other responses.'** (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022b)

Many governments responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by curtailing civic freedoms for public health reasons and allocating scarce resources quickly with little debate (McGee 2022). The 'use (and abuse) of emergency powers' impacted on democratic rights and scrutiny, across richer and poorer, democratic and less democratic, countries (Herbert and Marquette 2021: 50; Luckham and Carter 2022). In fragile settings restricted civil liberties faced further limits: research in Mozambique, Nigeria and Pakistan found 'suppression of dissent, extension and centralization of executive powers, curtailment of press freedoms, and tightened regulation of civic space, including online space' (McGee 2022: 1).

There has been concern instances of pandemic-fuelled 'everyday' authoritarianism would aggravate global trends threatening democracy (Herbert and Marquette 2021: 35-36). In some countries emergency measures persist, 'threatening to lock civil society into living with pandemic-era restrictions' (McGee 2022: 1). In other countries, Covid-19 restrictions 'have been rolled back with modest improvements in civil liberties (Freedom House 2023). This reminds us that beneath bleak headline democratic backsliding trends, 'changes to civic space are not universal nor uniform', while local civil society actors are responding to 'new threat and opportunities' in a variety of ways (Sharp *et al.* 2023).

### Corruption, disinformation and fraying trust

The pandemic created 'a perfect storm for increased opportunities for corruption' (Herbert and Marquette 2021: v). Huge new Covid-19 governmental expenditures 'ignored or overruled' emergency procurement procedures and accountability mechanisms across countries of differing income levels and state capacity (Herbert and Marquette 2021: 53). Meanwhile social protection programmes – rolled out by many governments to help poor and vulnerable people during the pandemic – commonly did not have strong measures in place to respond to grievances (Roelen and Carter 2022). Disinformation has also played a central role in the pandemic, fostering polarisation and threatening the right to democratic participation (Luckham and Carter 2022; Colomina *et al.* 2021). Many governments have used secrecy and security to hide failings in their Covid-19 responses and curb critics (*ibid.*).

These trends have affected state-society relationships: trust (or lack of it) has emerged as one of the key issues of the pandemic identified in Covid Collective research (Nelson 2022). Corruption erodes trust in public institutions, and can fuel perceptions of political manipulation (BRAC Institute of Governance and Development & Accountability Research Center 2021). Meanwhile, political actors' growing use of fake news and propaganda, spread online and through social media, is blurring the distinction between truth and lies, jeopardising the right to information, and undermining social contracts (Reporters without Borders 2023).

### Spontaneous community action and state-society collaborations

In the early days of the pandemic, across the world grassroots groups and local actors stepped up to fill governmental gaps, meeting community needs rapidly and equitably, and upholding human rights (Price 2022a). Characterised by volunteerism and resource-sharing, women and youth played key roles in many community-led initiatives, deploying traditional and innovative methods and knowledge, and empowered by pre-existing relationships of trust (Price 2022a; Nelson 2022). Contrary to inaccurate stereotypes of 'passive' vulnerable slum dwellers, instances of urban grassroots resilience and neighbourhood support networks flourished (for example in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Yemen) (Collyer *et al.* 2021; Sverdlik *et al.* 2022a, 2022b). In some places, the pandemic response inspired collaboration among a divided civil society (for example in the rebel-held governance of Idlib in Syria) (Allouche and te Lintelo 2022). There were also some innovative state and non-state collaborations: in Kenya community mapping by an urban social movement enabled more inclusive Covid-19 government policy and programming (Collyer *et al.* 2021).

However, 'as much as these local solidarities are praised, they also speak to the failures of states and international humanitarian actors to provide needed assistance' (Allouche and te Lintelo 2022: 7). These civil society efforts commonly faced challenges of 'scope, scale, and sustainability' (Price 2022a: 3). In practice '(o)fficial state responses frequently impeded – rather than enabled – local responses' (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022b). Today, with dwindling attention paid to Covid-19 and growing economic hardship faced by many communities, these community innovations and practices risk fading away (Price 2022a).

## Emerging Lessons

### Embrace uncertainty and complexity (Leach *et al.* 2021)

The Covid-19 response exposed the need for greater crisis preparedness and collaboration across governance levels and sectors, and international borders (Grant and Hrynck 2023; Luckham and Carter 2022; OECD 2022; Price 2023). This does not mean 'sacrificing effectiveness or accountability' (Herbert and Marquette 2021: v). 'Flat, fast, flexible' mechanisms can support effective collective action, through mutual accountability and 'clearly defined roles and responsibilities' (Andrews 2020).

These approaches require an understanding of the 'intersecting precarities' that affect people's lives (MacGregor *et al.* 2022) and local people's lived experiences (such as generated by the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network during the Covid-19 pandemic) (Das *et al.* 2021). In today's turbulent, uncertain world, systems-thinking can help understand root causes, risks and opportunities, guiding collaborative working in adaptive, learning-oriented ways (Woodhill and Millican 2023).

### Inclusive, transparent decision-making fosters trust

There are calls to reinvigorate democratic institutions and state-society contracts, in light of the public dissatisfaction with governmental responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and other socio-economic crises (International IDEA 2022). Open and transparent decision-making processes can strengthen trust and build confidence in government action (Grogan 2022). Including the most marginalised, often amongst the most affected during a crisis, is important and will require deliberate action to overcome barriers and ensure meaningful participation (Rohwerder 2023). Moreover the destabilising role of disinformation calls for effective frameworks for democratic control to hold big tech corporations and governments to account (Luckham and Carter 2022).

### 'Whole-of-society' approaches to strengthen accountability

The pandemic response highlighted that crisis preparedness should prioritise strengthening accountability mechanisms, including by 'generating mechanisms that enable marginalised groups to hold duty bearers to account' (Nelson 2022). The Covid Collective brief on Pandemic Preparedness highlights the importance of 'whole-of-society' approaches (Grant and Hrynck 2023). Advocated for by the World Health Organization and others, such approaches strengthen civil society capacities and involve the private sector to enable 'robust scrutiny' of public health measures (Herbert and Marquette 2021: iv). There are also calls for 'a fresh look' at the effectiveness of social protection accountability measures (Seferis and Harvey 2022: 2). There is relevant learning from the monitoring of Covid-19 cash transfer programmes by local, national, and international NGOs (Roelen and Carter 2022).

### Support is needed for empowered civic action

The 'inspired and progressive innovations in organic civic activities' during the Covid-19 crisis require support and funding if they are 'to survive and flourish' (McGee 2022: 1; Price 2022a). Investment in collaborative initiatives between state and non-state actors that go beyond emergency response, such as contributing to stronger health systems or 'countering police brutality', may build pathways to 'more lasting, equitable change' (Sverdlik *et al.* 2022a: 1). Additionally, investing in understanding 'how civic activism adapts, responds to, and navigates the many challenges it faces and what the effects of this are' would help inform context-specific democratic reform efforts (Sharp *et al.* 2023).



## COVID COLLECTIVE PROJECTS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

### Political economy of Covid-19 governance in Bangladesh

- Bangladesh
- BRAC Institute for Governance and Development (BIGD)

This research analysed how the government in Bangladesh responded to the Covid-19 crisis. It identified gaps in critical governance areas including healthcare, social protection, stimulus packages, and lockdown management, exploring these issues from a political economy angle. In light of the findings this work was further developed with a focus on gaps in critical governance areas (including health care, social protection, stimulus packages and lockdown management).

### African cities and Covid-19 – Learning and building knowledge: Developmental coalitions in informal settlements

- Kenya, Somalia, Uganda
- University of Manchester Global Development Institute (GDI)

Action research by three local teams in Nairobi, Kampala, and Mogadishu found often highly inequitable burdens of national restrictions and devastating socioeconomic, political and violent impacts of Covid-19. Non-state actors (community health volunteers, private firms, youth, women's, faith-based and refugee-led organisations) provided critical support but additional government support and recognition would have helped.

### Poverty monitoring in the context of Covid-19

- Cambodia, Ethiopia, India, Malawi, Philippines, Zambia, Zimbabwe
- Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN)

The Chronic Poverty Advisory Network expanded its poverty monitoring activities into seven new countries to provide near real time qualitative data on how the pandemic, and the response to it, intersect with wider efforts to address poverty and inequality. The aim has been to increase the representation of poor and vulnerable groups' interests in programme and policy responses including stimulus packages, adapted social protection, health, education, and economic interventions.

### Understanding conflict-sensitive regional responses to Covid-19

- Global
- University of Edinburgh, The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep)

This project mapped and analysed the responses of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) in Latin America, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East to the Covid-19 pandemic. It provides a comparative lens to illuminate the similar but at times unique challenges regions have faced during the pandemic and the collective action taken to mitigate the crisis.

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This brief aims to provide rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. It was written by Becky Carter, Researcher at the Institute of Development Studies, and commissioned through the Covid Collective.

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