Australia Awards
Women's Leadership Initiative

Humanitarian Leadership in the Age of COVID-19: Pacific and Australian Perspectives
Summary Paper

'Image provided by Pamela Toliman'

Introduction

In May 2020, the Australia Awards *Women's Leadership Initiative* (WLI) and Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) hosted a virtual Learning and Networking Event, Humanitarian Leadership in the Age of COVID-19: Pacific and Australian Perspectives. Convened by HAG Director Kate Sutton, the event's discussion panel consisted of three Pacific women leaders actively involved in the COVID-19 response and other humanitarian efforts in their respective fields:

- Pamela Toliman, WLI alumna, Senior Scientist, Papua New Guinea (PNG) Institute of Medical Research
- Adi Vasiti Radinivuna Soko, WLI alumna, Director, Fiji National Disaster Management Office

- Emeline Siale Ilolahia, Executive Director, Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations

The interactive panel discussion examined what 'good' humanitarian leadership looks like in the age of COVID-19 as well as experiences, lessons learned and opportunities arising for women –and men – from the COVID-19 and other health/ humanitarian responses. Small group break-out sessions allowed audience members, including Australia Awards scholars, WLI mentors, DFAT staff, and other members of the Pacific and Australian development communities, to share their own insights and experiences as well.

Key findings and recommendations arising from this event are documented below.

The panel discussion reinforced 'good' humanitarian leadership must:

- Apply a strengths-based approach to take immediate action.
- Give adequate time to consultation recognising not everyone has the same needs.
- Look at communication as an asset and simplify knowledge for public consumption.
- Coordinate plans that prioritise health and wellbeing from all angles and touchpoints.
- Overhaul broken systems to put people first and minimise widening inequality gaps.
- Empower people to be part of solutions rather than restrict agency with punitive measures.
- Ensure accountability and transparency and measure the effectiveness of funded methods.
- Educate decision-makers on the need to continue funding existing services.

How women are leading differently during crises

"We don't get to operationalise everything … thinking everybody has the same needs … bringing in that understanding as part of the planning makes a lot of difference for those who receive that much-needed assistance"

– Emeline Siale Ilolahia

The discussion highlighted that women leading and supporting crisis responses tend to:

- Consider what's needed to ensure organisational as well as community health and wellbeing
- Consider and listen to communities' most vulnerable groups in all aspects and phases; from planning to coordination, communication and evaluation
- Already be well-networked, resulting in faster action and more effective communication
- Seek to empower communities with knowledge needed to keep themselves safe

- Avoid punitive compliance methods that risk further entrenching inequalities and over-burdening health and justice systems

Consider how emergency plans can exacerbate inequalities

"Some countries have responded with stimulus packages, but the effectiveness of these measures is limited by the number of people involved in the decisions that led to them"

– Emeline Siale Ilolahia

- Governments and agencies can divert vital funding away from existing essential programs – like education, maternal health, vaccination plans – to fund COVID-19 responses
- Cuts to employment force the lowest paid – mostly women – back to unpaid work and poorly-resourced locations; further entrenching inequalities and reducing access to essential resources like clean water and sanitation
- Designing stimulus packages to be facilitated by financial institutions means financial support can be withheld to settle individual debts, rather than supporting people in need as intended

Working together: coordination and simple communication

"Communication became an asset, where we had to communicate to those outside the lockdown zone area, to execute a plan that they have not seen nor have they commented on"

– Adi Vasiti Radinivuna Soko

- Mandatory lockdowns, restrictions on travel, and reduced capacity to action emergency response plans place increased importance on effective communication and coordination between government, agencies and the public

- Social distancing puts increased pressure on traditional thinking and values system, and is likely not realistic for large families living together
- Likewise, one-size-fits-all public health messages that presume people have access to the same resources become ineffective
- When everyone wants to help and is 'at the table', wading through good-will and getting everyone on board with the next right thing can be extremely challenging
- Coordination is rarely well funded, relying on community service organisations, local communities, and volunteers (mostly women) to respond first and maintain the heavy lifting

Transparency and accountability

- Ensure due diligence and good governance are in place to protect democracy
- Measure the effectiveness of chosen methods of spending, such as comparing scientists' salaries against number of tests being done, or the number of people to have heard the entirety of a public health message.

Solutions and interventions

- Educate decision makers to understand COVID-19 as more than just a 'health issue'; it's challenging food security, civic spaces, education, business, and the distribution of funding and services
- Create collective solutions by allowing adequate time for consultation at all levels, from planning to communication, coordination and evaluation
- Ensure groups most at risk of an emergency's impact – people on the front line, women, children, older people, people with disability or living in poverty – are heard
- Continue to create spaces to protect and exercise democracy, and educate the community to be part of that process
- Adequately fund coordination efforts by local actors and communities
- Ensure crisis communications are funded to be available in indigenous languages

- Quickly utilise existing networks and try to connect people together around you
- Consolidate and share reports – on what your organisation or cluster needs, does, and the future direction you could go in – with governments and planners so they can be led to partners and donors. Share that knowledge with wider communities
- Build community trust and defend local expertise with evidence to get everyone on the same page. Harness the new-found trust in science
- Beware of 'disaster opportunists' looking to profit by all means necessary, including through misinformation at the risk of public health and safety
- Convert knowledge into simple messages that are digestible and accessible to all communities, and take into account the resources they do or don't have access to

"You won't be able to find medicine, but you can find Coke … show people how they can use the bottle cap, and the gradient on the bottle to mix their own [disinfectant] solution"

– Pamela Toliman

Opportunities for systemic and social change

Overhaul broken systems to put people first

State of emergency environments expose ineffective systems and the need to re-design with people at their centre. COVID-19 also highlighted that many countries' priorities had shifted away from community wellness and social protection and to economic development. A reset is needed.

Increase public health awareness

Effective health communication should always be a priority. It shouldn't take a pandemic to encourage governments to explain that hand washing and using disinfectant will prevent disease and unnecessary mortality.

Empower communities to be part of solutions

Provide communities and local responders with appropriate information needed to keep themselves safe, be part of emergency planning and solutions, and protect democracy.

Distribute power to local responders

Civil organisations and local responders are tasked with visiting and extracting information on what's happening on the ground. But they need more formal powers to effect change where they see need.

Manage negative political influence

Leverage donors and other agencies to provide specific support for community service organisations independent of government and political systems.

Conclusion

As noted above, this paper summarises key discussion points from the WLI and HAG Learning and Networking Event, Humanitarian Leadership in the Age of COVID-19: Pacific and Australian Perspectives. It captures key points, including the opportunities and lessons learned, arising from the panel discussion, for sharing with event participants and interested members of wider Pacific and Australian humanitarian and development communities.

While the experiences and observations documented in this paper relate primarily to the Pacific context, they may also have broader relevance and application, when considering effective actions and responses to take during a health or other humanitarian crisis.

Interested? Want to know more?

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