

Covid-19: What we know at three months and how we can build back better

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The Covid-19 outbreak and its evolution into the current global-scale pandemic shows the importance of effective prevention, preparedness and response plans to address the risk of disasters. It highlights how risk permeates all aspects of society and how it connects together different levels (from local to global) and different sectors (from health systems to agriculture, to tourism and more). Our response to Covid-19 cannot be one that sets us back to normal, because “normal” is not good anymore to effectively prepare for and prevent crises like this. We live in a world where risk is systemic, and therefore we need to build back better for governments and communities to address a risk of this nature.

This paper outlines the main challenges that Covid-19 brought to the surface and provides a series of recommendations that support governments in building back better and preventing crises like this to happen again in the future.

Lack of commitment towards understanding and addressing risk

Governments are not committing to reducing the risk of disasters enough.

The impact of the virus highlights the fact that governments are not committing to preventing disasters enough. If they did, the Covid-19 epidemic would have not become a pandemic.¹ Moreover, we have seen a lack of preparedness from many governments who appeared to not have adequate measures in place to counter the spread of the virus.

Five years ago, national governments agreed on a roadmap for reducing the risk of disasters and building resilience: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR). The SFDRR acts as guidance on what systems countries should have in place to effectively manage hazards, whether they are natural, manmade or biological (such as the new SARS-CoV-2 virus, responsible for causing Covid-19).

¹ A study by Johns Hopkins University warned about the risk of a pandemic in September 2019, and outlined a series of recommendations to prepared for it and lessen its impacts:
https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/thematic_papers/tr-6.pdf

Since the adoption of SFDRR in 2015, implementation of the framework and its seven targets is far from being on track². People at the frontline of disasters do not feel that their risk has reduced in the past five to ten years: the data collected by GNDR's *Views from the Frontline* 2019 programme³ shows that there is a general sense that disaster losses have either increased or remained the same for communities around the world. This goes to show how SFDRR targets aimed at reducing losses (targets A to D) have yet to yield results at the local level.

In reviewing the first five years of implementation of the Sendai Framework, UNDRR acknowledges efforts by many countries but sees that achievements so far are far from satisfactory. Target E especially, which calls for national and local DRR strategies to be adopted in each country by 2020, is lagging behind. So is the reporting process: "many countries are yet to start reporting on any target, and the majority of reporting countries are far from completing their coverage of all 38 indicators".⁴ Lack of data and funding for resilience building activities were identified as some of the main challenges.

Disaster risk considerations are not integrated across development sectors.

Once the epidemic started growing in scale and became a global pandemic, the systemic nature of risk started emerging, as did the recognition that our systems at national and global scale are deeply intertwined. A threat to one sector poses threats to others, and cascading effects of the global health crisis caused by this pandemic are to be felt in many other sectors.

The World Bank predicts a global recession much worse than the Great Recession, given the concurrent declines in production, investment, employment and trade.⁵ The World Food Program estimates that by the end of the year an additional 130 million lives and livelihoods will be put at risk as a result of Covid-19, hence doubling the number of people suffering from acute hunger⁶. School closures around the world have impacted 70% of the world's student population, with impacts on pupils' learning, on childcare, on nutrition and more⁷. Cascading effects are to be felt on many other sectors, ranging from tourism (where a predicted fall of 60-80% of tourism could mean millions of jobs are at risk⁸), to international cooperation and

² See [GNDR's blog](#) on recommitting to the Sendai Framework.

³ GNDR's View from the Frontline 2019 data available [here](#) compile risk perceptions from almost 100,000 local actors around the world.

⁴ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13753-020-00261-2>

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<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/statement/2020/04/17/world-bank-group-president-malpass-remarks-to-the-development-committee>

⁶ <https://insight.wfp.org/covid-19-will-almost-double-people-in-acute-hunger-by-end-of-2020-59df0c4a8072>

⁷ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>

⁸ <https://www.unwto.org/news/covid-19-international-tourist-numbers-could-fall-60-80-in-2020>

development assistance⁹, with many development and aid organisations are pausing their activities or completely withdrawing from various countries¹⁰.

Risk penetrates every aspect of our society, and therefore a risk-informed approach to how each sector develops is needed to not only prevent disasters, but also to avoid their cascading effects.

Covid-19 impacts are felt disproportionately.

The measures taken by governments to respond to Covid-19 highlight another recurring aspect of many disasters: their disproportionate effect on poor and most at-risk people.

People living in poor conditions will not be able to afford the health care needed to survive Covid-19. People living in slums and surviving on daily wages will not be able to stay at home, nor they will have the possibility to repeatedly wash their hands and social distance from each other. Informal settlers, displaced populations and people on the move might fall beyond the government census and will not be able to receive government aid and food packages.

Examples of disproportionate impact can be seen across the world. Migrant workers and nomadic communities are identified as the most at-risk groups to support during the Covid-19 responses by local CSOs in the Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh (India).

Washing hands becomes a luxury for many people in Goma, DRC, where clean water does not reach their homes. While private water tanks are active in distributing water around the city, the price is often prohibitive for a lot of people, who instead resort to fetching polluted water from the nearby lake Kivu.

Every disaster that hits people already at risk exacerbates other existing threats and increases their vulnerability, putting them at even higher risk when a new disaster strikes.

DRR policies are often ineffective because local realities don't inform the policy making process.

The Covid-19 pandemic shows that even where national policies on resilience and disaster risk reduction exist, addressing disaster risk can still be ineffective: where DRR responsibilities and budgets are centralised, local actors are cut out of the process. Understanding risk from a local perspective is essential, not only to plan the most effective response measures but also to lessen the impact of potential cascading disasters.

For example, a strict lockdown in a community that relies solely on daily wages is not an effective response measure simply because it cannot effectively be implemented; and where

⁹ <https://devinit.org/publications/coronavirus-and-aid-data-what-latest-dac-data-tells-us/>

¹⁰ <https://www.devex.com/news/exclusive-oxfam-to-lay-off-1-450-staff-and-withdraw-from-18-countries-97286>

it is implemented, it results in increased poverty and food insecurity. In India, the Madhya Pradesh state government decided to distribute some funding for economic support via bank transfer: however, many community members living in small villages would not be able to access those funding as no bank would be present in their village and strict lockdown would not allow them to visit the nearest bank¹¹. When the government of Malawi planned a strict lockdown to curb the spread of the virus, it did not consider the impact it would have on the poor and vulnerable communities: as a result, people protested when the plan was announced and the lockdown was effectively blocked a few days after its introduction, when it was understood that it could have significant impacts on poor communities.¹²

Different communities might need different types of personal protective equipment, or might have different cultural and traditional practices that could hinder access to healthcare (this was the case for several communities in West Africa during the 2014 Ebola crisis¹³).

Local actors have all this knowledge, but they often do not feel they have enough power to build their own resilience and reduce risks. At the same time, they often have the task of being the first responders by the very nature of being at the frontline of disaster risk.

Life under Covid-19 will soon become the new normal.

Covid-19 is shaping a way of life that we will have to adapt to. While research for a vaccine is key - if created it will help curb the crisis - many countries will not have access to it in the short term. Adapting to a post-Covid world seems inevitable. In this sense, building resilience and taking a risk-informed approach to development will become more pressing, but also more difficult.

Some countries already experience the challenges of preparing and responding to disasters in the context of Covid-19. Vanuatu was struck by an intense cyclone on April 6, two weeks after the country had declared a state of emergency to deal with Covid-19: moving people to evacuation centres while asking them to keep social distancing becomes a huge challenge, so does allowing international assistance while maintaining Covid-19 prevention measures in place.¹⁴ In May, East India and Bangladesh faced super cyclonic storm Amphan, that caused more than 100 fatalities, widespread damage to infrastructures and housing, and posed a new challenge to the government: evacuating millions of people while maintaining the distance needed to comply with Covid-19 prevention measures.

¹¹ GNDR member Indo Global Social Service Society reported this from the organisation's work with village farmers in Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh.

¹²

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/malawi-high-court-blocks-coronavirus-lockdown-200417184430403.html>

¹³ <https://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/one-year-report/factors/en/>

¹⁴

<https://www.undrr.org/publication/undrr-asia-pacific-covid-19-brief-combating-dual-challenges-climate-related-disasters>

Risk-informed development key to break silos and guide a better, more inclusive recovery

As often happens after many disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic provides also an opportunity to build back better and step up on our prevention efforts.

Put resilience building at the top of the political agenda.

Fully committing to achieving the Sendai Framework and integrating a risk-informed approach into all sectors is the number one priority. Following the adoption of the Framework, UNDRR worked to develop a wealth of knowledge and capacity strengthening activities for countries to implement the targets outlined, including on how to prepare for and prevent biological hazards.¹⁵

For many countries currently responding to the crisis, taking a comprehensive approach to response could allow for stronger response measures that simultaneously address the cascading effects of Covid-19 on other sectors, and do not cause an additional impact on already affected people. For example, lockdown measures that consider the needs of daily wage workers and food chain workers would lessen the risk of creating further impact on already at-risk people. Effective Covid-19 response could mean higher delegation of responsibilities to local governments and local actors, as they are not only the first responders but also the most knowledgeable of what response measure would work best in their locality.

Many countries who start looking at the recovery phase are likely to revise existing policies or adopt new ones, update contingency plans and reassess risk. In this context, achieving Target E on time becomes a priority for many governments: this should not be a box-ticking exercise but it should result in a strong and effective cross-sectoral policy, informed by local realities, owned by local actors and adequately financed.

Governments should build on this moment to strengthen their understanding of all aspects of risk, and develop a comprehensive multi-hazard policy: while reviewing national policies in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, this could be an opportunity to ensure that other types of risk are addressed. For example, while revising public health legislations, governments should ensure that plans are in place for hospitals not only to prepare for a future epidemic, but also to withstand the next earthquake or the next flooding.

Collaboration is part of the solution.

Covid-19 has confirmed that we live in a global village, where coordination and collaboration are required. Whether we refer to health systems, communities or individuals, we must leave

¹⁵ https://www.preventionweb.net/files/52828_05biologicalhazardriskassessment.pdf

no one behind. Governments in particular must champion the principle of collaboration over competition in all sectors and with all parts of society. Only through a true all-of-society approach such disaster can be prevented in the future.

In practice this refers to more meaningful engagement of governments with civil society organisations, private companies and research institutions, in policy-making processes and in coordination structures, such as the national and local platforms for disaster risk reduction.

Meaningful engagement with civil society needs to go beyond allowing representatives to simply *observe* policy processes: engagement that is truly meaningful comprises a series of actions aimed at listening to, learning from and collaborating with civil society at the local level. Similarly it is key to ensure that engagement happens with the right people, those who most comprehensively represent communities at the frontline of risk: large international organisations need to allow for CSOs with local knowledge to represent themselves directly.

Furthermore, collaboration means developing local DRR strategies in coordination with neighboring localities, or national strategies in coordination with neighboring countries. It also means acting together when the threat or its consequences are transboundary.

Collaboration is facilitated by investments in knowledge exchange and learning programs at different levels. Learning between different parts of society is also key, as all of society is involved in building risk-informed development: this includes activities such as community exchange visits, trainings and simulations on effective collaboration and creation of multi-stakeholder spaces for discussion. CSOs and communities most at risk have valuable knowledge and experience to contribute, so do local governments, small businesses and other local actors.

Empower local actors in response, recovery, preparedness and prevention.

In many countries local actors have been the first responders to the Covid-19 pandemic, reaching communities where national government often cannot reach. This includes volunteer organisations, faith groups, grassroots organisations, CSOs and local leaders. These are groups who are traditionally excluded from the decision-making process and are not empowered to effectively lead their own resilience building.

A stronger emphasis on local actors should be placed in all resilience building and risk-informed development policies. This includes in response and recovery, but also in preparedness and prevention.

Response policies that empower local actors to effectively perform their duties as first responders are crucial. More so in a context where travel restrictions result in countries having to rely more and more on local responders to meet humanitarian needs.

Recovery plans should be informed by the lessons learned and the innovations documented during the response phase by all actors involved, and in particular by communities themselves.

This increased reliance on local actors must result in an increased representation in coordination and decision-making forums. UNDRR highlights this as one of the key recommendations to ensure better preparedness for and prevention of future threats.¹⁶

Build coherence into governance structures and risk assessments.

A recovery that looks at going back to normal is not acceptable anymore, because of the changed nature of risk: as the 2019 Global Assessment Report highlights, risk is now systemic, joined-up and cascading.¹⁷ Risk cuts across all the three dimensions of sustainable development as outlined in the Agenda 2030: economic, social and environmental.

We already know that disasters do not occur in silos but that communities face multiple threats at the same time, with connected underlying conditions.¹⁸ As an example, a community could be threatened by natural hazards and food insecurity: addressing each of these threats in isolation is not effective and can lead to increased impacts on the others. Measures like creating flood barriers to respond to the threat of floods could exacerbate food insecurity if the barriers cut across paths to water access in the future. This pandemic is an example of this connection at a global scale.

Understanding risk is essential and it needs to inform decisions in all sectors of government and society: only by understanding risk in its multiple facets will we be able to build back better and prevent similar disasters to happen in the future. Covid-19 opens up opportunities for this change. This is the time to initiate a structural change towards risk-informed development, starting from the national and local DRR strategies: new and more effective strategies ought to be developed, designed to create integration among all sectors of government and all levels of society. This can help countries better prepare and prevent future threats.

For example, India's National Disaster Management Act 2005 has been very useful in providing a pre-existing legal structure for Covid-19 response, connecting different government sectors and creating the basis for their joint action.

Covid-19 highlights that cross-sectoral solutions are essential to avoid further cascading effects of this disaster: risk assessments must map the multi-faceted nature of risk, and take into consideration all threats and underlying causes of risk experienced by communities.

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<https://www.undrr.org/publication/undrr-asia-pacific-covid-19-brief-combating-dual-challenges-climate-related-disasters>

¹⁷ <https://gar.undrr.org/chapters/chapter-2-systemic-risks-sendai-framework-and-2030-agenda>

¹⁸ See VFL dataset [here](#).

Civil society organisations around the world are responding to this disaster on the ground and building a wealth of knowledge that need not be wasted. Networks such as GNDR can provide support to governments wanting to learn from local CSOs on the ground and engage them in the recovery process. Collecting and disseminating innovative solutions to inform the recovery phase is also a key element that civil society networks can offer.

As in many disasters, this pandemic provides a window of opportunity to build momentum for risk-informed development. As some countries move towards the recovery phase, it is the right time for governments to reflect on how to build back better, and these recommendations aim at helping that process.