CARE Mali is responding to the COVID-19 virus with hygiene kits and demonstrations, in addition to mask making.

Photographed in Mali, West Africa in the spring of 2020.

COVID-19 and "building back better": Putting governance at the centre

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COVID-19 has highlighted with renewed urgency why governance matters. Although the virus presents health, humanitarian and economic crises, it also has governance dimensions that are essential for understanding what prospects there may be to "build back better" and foster states and societies that are more inclusive and resilient.

COVID-19 has laid bare and accentuated frailties and faultiness in political systems and the social contract that have been brewing in the context of widening inequalities within and between countries since (at least) the 2008 financial crisis. Those who have suffered most and have been most exposed to the health, economic and political fallout of the crisis are those who were already left behind, often on the basis of multiple and intersecting identity-based inequalities, including gender race, ethnicity, class, etc.

The virus has also crystallised the centrality of governance in addressing the diversity of challenges brought on by the crisis. However, some elements of governance have been less relevant than others. For example, regime type itself has not been decisive. Some democracies have performed well, while others (including some of the oldest and most established ones like the UK and the US) have not. The same holds for authoritarian systems: some have managed the crisis effectively, but not others.

As Francis Fukuyama has recently highlighted, the factors that have mattered most are state capacity, social trust, and leadership. These are important insights that reinforce other well-established research in the governance and development field. Historically, effective states that are supported by leaders who have a long-term developmental vision and can bring people together as part of a shared national project have been vital in in driving progress and promoting equality and inclusion . These kinds of states that have been able to deliver shared prosperity and well-being have also enjoyed the trust and legitimacy of the population.. However, they have not always been democratic – and there is nothing about democracies that automatically makes them more effective or better performing. In other words, inclusion in terms of process, as in a democracy, does not inexorably lead to inclusion in terms of outcomes, as in prosperity and development, for example.

This places democracy today in a precarious position.

By the time the coronavirus hit at the end of 2019, the world was already at a critical juncture where the stability and resilience of democratic governance had come into question,

not just in developing settings but also in some of the world's oldest and most established democracies. As increasing polarisation and the rise of populism attest, there is growing disenchantment with political systems that are perceived as dysfunctional and unable to deliver on the needs and aspirations of their citizens. Frustration with political elites that are seen as irredeemably corrupt and out of touch has set in, and this has severely undermined trust in governments, political parties, and traditional media alike. People are angry, and they want to be included – not just in terms of whose voices are heard in decision-making processes (vital as that is), but also in terms of how the benefits of development and well-being are distributed.

This calls for action on two fronts:
1. Promoting inclusive governance that enables marginalised or excluded groups not just to participate, but also to have greater influence on decision- and policy-making processes. This is the kind of work that CARE Netherlands seeks to support through its Every Voice Counts (EVC) programme.
2. Helping governance systems to deliver on core functions of the state, ranging from economic development to social protection to service delivery, in ways that are more broadly inclusive, fair and equitable. This has emerged as a particularly acute challenge for young and more established democracies alike.

This is exactly what CARE NL's Every Voice Counts Program aspires to do. And yet, as we know from history, addressing the dual challenge of promoting more inclusive processes *and* more inclusive development is extraordinarily complex. For one thing, as highlighted above, inclusion in terms of process does not automatically lead to more inclusive development.

Very often, states that are trying to become more stable, resilient and inclusive over time are trying to transform themselves in fundamental ways across multiple dimensions:

- From war/violent conflict towards peace;
- From weak to more effective and capable states;
- From closed and exclusionary political orders to more open and inclusive ones;
- From a narrow and exclusionary sense of nation towards more inclusive nation-building and a shared vision of an imagined community;
- From personalised systems of interaction to ones that are grounded in the rule of law; and
- From stagnating or narrow-based economies towards greater investment and (shared) growth.

Some of these dimensions of change may reinforce each another, but often they do not. We can't assume a linear relationship between all these different "good things" – even if normatively this vision (which lies at the core of the Good Governance agenda and is also articulated in the SDGs) is extraordinarily compelling. In fact, different dimensions of change often generate tensions and dilemmas. Potential trade-offs between equally important and compelling priorities will always exist, and there are no easy or ready-made ways to solve them.

The complex dynamics and dilemmas around elections are illustrative. Clearly, elections are essential to foster the legitimacy, accountability and responsiveness of a political system. Yet, they have also been associated with increased clientelism and corruption in developing settings. Money in politics has become a pernicious problem and has done much to pervert to process of democratic representation and whose voices are heard – in both developed and developing countries. In addition, electoral competition can generate incentives that foment fragmentation and undermine coherent policymaking based on longer-term priorities.

The struggle against inequality also helps to highlight these tensions. Historically, some of the greatest strides against inequality and exclusion have been achieved not through inclusive decision-making, but through much more controversial and perverse means. These include, for instance, authoritarian coercion (e.g. successful episodes of land reforms that obliterated prevailing hierarchical social structures in Japan, Korea and Taiwan), mass violence and war (e.g. the disintegration of the Roman Empire, the Russian and Chinese revolutions, and World War II), and pandemics (!) (e.g. the Black Death).

As Fukuyama has put it, the 'miracle of modern politics' is achieving political orders that are at once effective, inclusive and accountable.

So these following questions have never been more urgent: How can inclusive governance function more effectively and deliver on key priorities, needs and demands of the population in ways that are more inclusive, equitable and fair?
And how can inclusive governance help foster trust and legitimacy between state and society?

As hinted above, the COVID-19 crisis could, in principle, be a critical juncture opening space for contesting and renegotiating the rules of the game across different actors in state and society. However, policy choices responding to plagues and other shocks have altered societies in different

ways. It cannot be assumed that these will automatically act as 'great equalisers'. Interaction between government responses to crisis and societal responses, and what this means in terms of legitimacy and trust in government authorities, is crucial. And how the pandemic intersects with other junctures or watershed moments (e.g. death of current president in Burundi; postponement of elections) will depend on the nature of power dynamics on the ground and underlying political settlements.

As international development actors try to understand political contexts and potential entry points for change, some of the core questions that need to be explored include:

- How can CARE NL and other actors foster more equitable and fair states and societies at both the national and subnational levels?
- What kind of leadership is needed at this time of crisis, and how does it come about? What is the role of women leaders, and what is the substantive impact of more women in politics and the generational divide? This is an area that CARE Netherlands has done a lot of work on as part of EVC, , as its 2018 global report on women's political participation and influence illustrates.
- How can social exclusion and new social divisions be bridged? This is a crucial question at the core of EVC, with important implications around women's empowerment and gender inclusion in particular.
- What groups will renegotiate the social contract and how?
- What might be the role of civil society organisations in bridging local and national divides? What about bottom-up pressures for change, like social mobilisation and protest?
- How can the potential of technology be harnessed to promote greater inclusion, transparency and accountability?
- And how can we reimagine international development efforts on governance, conflict and fragility so it is fit for purpose?

On all these questions, key challenges that remain for international development actors include both how to understand context better, though for instance ongoing (rapid) thinking and analysis (e.g., on conflict, gender, etc.) on the politics of COVID-19, and how to infuse this kind of politically-informed thinking more effectively in programmatic decisions. International development actors also need to think about how to measure the effects of COVID-19 on different elements and dimensions of governance.

Key implications for thinking in more politically aware ways and working more flexibly and adaptively include:

- Developing an integrated approach to respond to COVID-19 that puts governance at the centre – governance and politically-aware perspectives are not a "nice to have", but absolutely essential. This requires among other things having a sound understanding of how Covid-19 interacts with other crucial contextual factors and dynamics in ways that may provide more/less space for progressive change.
- Ensuring "good enough" political economy analysis (including on conflict, gender, etc.) is being used to inform decisions on an ongoing basis. CARE's guidance on integrating gender into political economy analysis is very promising in this respect.
- Recognising the centrality of state capacity and working more purposefully to foster such capacity while continuing to work on the civil society side of the equation.
- Remaining mindful of dilemmas and trade-offs between different but equally compelling priorities.
- Facilitating spaces for interaction and collective problem solving across divides to help build trust and social cohesion across actors, which is essential in fostering legitimacy.
- Remaining aware of unintended consequences to avoid doing harm.
- Keeping an eye on windows of opportunity and how to capitalise on them.
- Leveraging existing partnerships and responding to internal pressures and opportunities for reform.
- Thinking much more thoroughly and proactively about what localised aid looks like and implies, especially given the constraints that COVID-19 poses for maintaining international assistance as is.
- Developing MEL systems that enable regular reflections to review context and asses impact, and that can help to change course and adapt as needed.