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Challenges to NGOs’ ability to bid for funding due to the repatriation of volunteers: The case of Samoa

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Abstract

Although there are an increasing number of funding facilities accessible for non-government organisations in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, critics suggest that it is still insufficient. Non-government organisations provide many essential services across the world, especially in the developing world, where they supplement or in some instances extend the government services. With services from health to gender issues to humanitarian support, non-government organisations continue to grapple with insufficiency of core and programming funding and unstable staffing. In Samoa, technical assistance through government volunteers supplemented the need for expert human resource and enabled the ability to apply for funding. With the mass repatriation of government volunteers such as Australian Volunteers, American Peace Corps and Japanese International Cooperation Agency, it resulted in a sudden and massive gap in technical human resource, equipped to apply for the rapidly expanding number of funding options. Through the experiences of a non-government organisation worker and an academic researcher based in Samoa, this piece shares the current experiences and potential repercussions of this sudden change in the non-government sector and suggestions moving forward to utilize the existing expertise in country in the academic sector to support non-government organizations to access funding.

The world is still in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic (Euronews, 2020), with unspeakable sadness and strain on administrative and health systems becoming a fixture of countries across the world (OECD, 2020a, 2020b). Aid organisations and grant facilities have made funding opportunities for immediate COVID-19 response more readily available (Cornish, 2020), with shorter application time frames and decision timelines. These expedited processes can potentially mitigate some of the immediate concerns and needs for first line responding organisations; allowing them to provide essential pandemic preparedness, prevention and response programs and projects to try to mitigate the socio-economic fallout of COVID-19 (Cornish, 2020), while also meeting the sudden gap in core funding (Lamble, 2020).

Non-governmental organisations provide key services and programs (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2020) in many developing countries, which are even more vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 due to under resourced healthcare systems, concerns related to water, sanitation and hygiene, high rates of poverty and a heavy reliance on external countries for aid support. These above-mentioned accelerated funding mechanisms are greatly needed, however the technical assistance resources required to complete most of these application processes were also a casualty of the pandemic. The authors of this piece write from the experience of a couple of non-government organisations in Samoa, which applied to funding facilities made available to address the socio-economic fall-out of COVID-19.

Samoa, like many other developing countries, embraces technical assistance from other countries through skilled volunteers attached to local organisations. Each placement involves a component of capacity building and payment of living allowances is managed by the volunteers’ home governments (Australian Government DFAT, 2020a; Georgeou, 2012, p. 147; Toleafoa, 2016). The majority come from English speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States, with volunteers also coming from Japan and China. All volunteers have completed an academic degree, and most are required to have a number of years’ experience in their chosen field. Before the recall by country governments due to the pandemic in 2020, there were an estimated twenty Australian Government funded volunteers and sixteen Japanese Government funded volunteers in Samoa.
Senior volunteers bring a wealth of experience from their home countries and fill highly technical roles. In March 2020, as governments around the world made the decision to close borders, they also recalled volunteers, in mass, suddenly and rapidly (Mayron, 2020b; Peace Corps, 2020).

In Samoa, non-government organisations are core providers of essential services (Tamaalii, 2020) particularly in areas relating to gender, health, education and inclusion. Difficulties for such organisations are continuously experienced in trying to source core funding, as the majority of funding supports programming initiatives, and COVID-19 has certainly not made these difficulties any easier. Non-government organisations are often small and grassroots with excellent capacity to develop culturally adapted programs in-country but limited administrative systems and technical capacity to be able to navigate the complexities of overseas funding mechanisms (Slatter, 2006, p. 33).

The attachment of experienced volunteers to non-governmental organizations provided evidence of technical and managerial capacity to manage funding; an essential component of the grant application process. As would be expected, English is a second language to most staff of local Samoan non-government organisations and many lack the advanced academic writing skills needed to prepare most medium to large scale international applications. Grant applications require a high level of professional writing, with the use of terminology that is not common in everyday dialogue. A high and nuanced understanding of the language the grant application is written in is required to be able to successfully complete a submission.

Many of the skilled foreign government volunteers attached to non-government organisations are native English speakers with experience in grant writing and as such, are well placed to support their local counterparts to successfully utilize funding facilities. However, with the mass repatriation process for skilled volunteers around the world in response to COVID-19, local non-government organisations have been left to fend for themselves just at the time that they have to produce more grant applications than perhaps ever before. Funders, through the best of intentions, in expediting timelines, have further added to the strain of these organisations, making it necessary to develop submissions with much faster turn-around, during a time when they have found themselves under-resourced and without technical assistance due to the sudden departure of their capacity development resources. Expedited application timelines have not guaranteed imminent decision making. The workforce around the world has been severely disrupted. Large and small organisations are navigating remote work locations, and those working in development are experiencing an increase in workload as they support countries and communities at various stages of COVID-19 response. Small, grassroots organisations are juggling their own adaption to remote work with limited access to technology and the internet, less technical support and competing deadlines whilst trying to ensure consistent and targeted support to their beneficiaries (Diaz, 2020). With such unprecedented levels of under resourcing, and a greater need for technical capacity to pivot and mobilize quickly to address the COVID-19 fallout needs of the populations they seek to serve, small changes to the processes of funding mechanisms could greatly increase the accessibility of funding opportunities to these essential, grassroots organisations.

In order for the changes to funding availability to truly benefit smaller organisations in developing countries, coupled with shorter timelines for application submissions and decisions, there needs to be a simplification of templates and language utilized in grant application processes, making opportunities more accessible to those without English as a first language. In order for these applications to be able to benefit smaller organisations, they must be accessible without the support of foreign technical advisors. Many of the grant opportunities in circulation at the moment require applicants to be able to demonstrate the ability to successfully implement large scale projects. For small organisations in developing countries such as Samoa, few are able to meet such criteria. Small organisations rely on small-scale projects to support their beneficiaries and often rely on small numbers of staff and limited resources to implement projects. Much of the funding that has become available is for COVID-19 response is of a much larger scale than many grassroots organisations are used to. Consideration must be given to the scale of funding opportunities—it may be beyond small, localized non-government organisations’ capabilities to manage large-scale projects. Having smaller minimum budget thresholds would allow more opportunities for organisations to source funding to meet their needs without needing to commit beyond what they have the capacity to deliver.

And what of our long-term considerations? Important research is pressing ahead furiously on treatments and a vaccine for COVID-19, but the effects of this pandemic are not limited to health. COVID-19 has changed the way in which skilled volunteer assistance is provided and viewed, with the potential expansion of volunteerism (which brings additional challenges for remote locations with unreliable internet and technological access). Uncertain timeframes of attachment, and the now demonstrated ability for such volunteer programs to be shut down at a moment’s notice, have undermined the reliability of such support for local non-government organisations.

Furthermore, during this present crisis, there is currently no known timeline for when such support will be available again. This provides a significant opportunity for those who remain in country and who have the capacity to provide such technical assistance and capacity development to take up the role. For many developing countries, the resources that non-government organisations need are there. Universities have staff and students who are trained for the high level of writing that is needed to navigate many funding applications. Large donor organisations with offices and staff around the world also have the skills and knowledge in navigating the larger scale funding mechanisms and the resources to be able to provide capacity development to local organisations to support them in navigating funding opportunities to support COVID-19 response.

Academics in local universities and technical experts that remain based in large international aid organisations such as the United Nations are needed now more than ever, to reach out to their smaller counterparts, support them with the technical assistance needed to be able to access currently inaccessible funding mechanisms, to monitor and evaluate and report on project outcomes. These unprecedented and difficult times provide a new opportunity for partnerships to be forged and knowledge and skills to be shared. Larger organisations with the technical skills needed have an open opportunity to drive more locally focused and lead programming, ensuring that development efforts are truly in line with local need and contextualized to suit culture and local situations. Smaller non-government organisations in developing countries have the opportunity to forge more permanent, long term support pathways that are not as reliant on foreign priorities and resources.

What may start as a volunteer partnership born out of necessity to enable the continuation of the work of non-governmental organisations, has the potential to yield longer term benefits. In the longer term, the strengthened relationship between technical experts in academia and non-governmental organizations can lead to synergism, delivering high quality evidence driven output. Volunteerism may shift towards the online environment more heavily, with experienced professionals able to provide mentorship in specific areas, over a longer period of time. Most importantly this
can contribute to a paradigm shift in thinking that values the knowledge and expertise within developing countries.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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