

COVID-19: Reaffirming State-People Governance Relationships

The emergence and spread of the coronavirus in late 2019 and the impact of its disease, COVID-19, which has been categorized by the World Health Organization as a global pandemic, is, at the time of writing, ongoing. Efforts by governments to try to control the pandemic's spread while managing its wide ranging impacts demonstrate the critical role of the relationship between state and people in shaping and determining government responses, strategies and approaches in tackling the crisis. While there have been some rapid and effective responses by governments, in many respects, the pandemic has exposed some of the shortfalls in countries' resiliency to crisis, and in particular in the way the state relates to its people in realizing the values and principles of effective governance.

Resiliency and effective governance go hand in hand, and are key elements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Together with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the Agenda provides a global transformational strategy which aims to foster resilient societies that embrace the values of equity, equality, inclusion, accountability, integration, peace and security, justice, respect for diversity, collaboration and partnerships. Resilient societies are premised on effective governance and the principle of leaving no one behind, key elements for being equipped to deal with unexpected crises. The United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) outlined 11 principles of effective governance¹, categorized into three groups: group one focuses on effectiveness (competence, sound policy making, and collaboration), group two focuses on addressing accountability (integrity, transparency and independent oversight) and group three focuses on inclusiveness (leaving no one behind, nondiscrimination, participation, subsidiarity and intergenerational equity). All principles are necessary for effective governance and sit at the core of the relationship that should exist between the state and people.

¹ See <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Intergovernmental-Support/CEPA/Principles-of-Effective-Governance>

Summary

This policy brief discusses the role of effective governance, and in particular the role of the relationship between the state and people, in building countries' resiliency and in responding to and managing nationwide crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. After outlining key elements of state-people governance relationships, the brief puts forward five policy messages emphasizing that (i): the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis while a challenge also presents an opportunity to design and operate a resilient public health infrastructure and effective institutions for handling crisis; (ii) the provision of essential services to all must be at the core of state-people governance relationship; (iii) social protection for all, especially the poor and vulnerable, is a pre-requisite to fostering a resilient society (iv) credible, legitimate and trusted state leadership is critical all the time but even more so during a nation-wide crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and (v) government in times of crisis must endeavor to keep the country unified, foster solidarity and avoid social disintegration.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IN MANAGING A GLOBAL CRISIS

In the space of a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has grown deadly, killing thousands and making ill millions while placing an unprecedented strain on health care systems and other public services worldwide. Available data show that over 4 million people around the world have been infected with COVID-19 and over 270,000 people have died from it (as of 8 May 2020, WHO, dashboard, Covid.who.int). The pandemic has also had a severe negative impact on economies, businesses, and social interaction, the effects of which, while still not fully known, are expected to run deep and long.

Efforts by governments to fight the spread of the virus have placed a spotlight on the critical role of effective and inclusive governance, and importantly on the relationship between state and people. Many governments have taken forceful measures, such as lockdowns (some seventy-three countries have implemented national lockdown measures, while others still have local measures in place), social distancing, contact tracing², work from home orders, and the closure of school and non-essential services and businesses to stop the spread and devastation of the virus. Indeed, the measures being undertaken echo many of those undertaken during wartime periods and the rhetoric of being at war with the virus is one being invoked by many leaders including the United Nations: “We are at war with a virus and not winning it”, stressed UN Secretary-General to an emergency virtual meeting of the G20 Leaders.

Indeed, in many countries, the state defense mechanisms have been activated to assist the people in the fight against COVID-19. In China, Italy, USA and other countries, national security forces have been mobilized to engage in activities that defend the population against COVID-19. In China the army constructed hospitals and deployed medical experts and volunteers in hospitals and treatment centres to fight the virus. In the USA, the Navy deployed hospital ships to provide medical support to local residents in badly affected areas while its government military laboratories have been working to help develop a vaccine for the virus. In Uganda and neighboring Kenya the army and police are patrolling the streets to ensure that the curfews and lockdowns are in effect to stop the spread of the virus. Similarly, in Italy, the military was called in to enforce the lockdown in the most hard hit areas to ensure people’s compliance with national executive orders.

However, the global response has not been uniform. Some governments have decided against taking measures such as those mentioned above, while others, namely those with federal systems of governance, have seen a disjointed response, with various states or regions enacting differing measures. Regardless of the response, in every country the state-people relationship has been placed under pressure and increased scrutiny. A nation-wide crisis of this magnitude inevitably forces reflections and reconsiderations of the roles, obligations, responsibilities of one and the other. How societies manage this relationship can potentially have a significant impact on the effective-

ness of containment, response measures and on the speed of recovery.

STATE AND PEOPLE GOVERNANCE RELATIONSHIP DURING NATIONWIDE CRISIS

In times of nationwide crisis the people turn to the state and its institutions for leadership and unified action. Ironically, it is during a crisis too that the capabilities of the state and its institutions get challenged most. This is the case during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

Across the world, the state provides, to varying extents, critical services such as health, education, infrastructure, information, justice and others. Such services can be delivered in various ways (free, subsidized, or at full cost to the consumer). But in severe crises, such as the current pandemic, the relationship of provider can be stretched. From Rwanda and Uganda, where governments are distributing foodstuffs and other essentials, such as soap, to the poor and vulnerable, to the USA, where the federal government has provided COVID-19 stimulus checks to people and businesses based on income levels and family size to cushion them against the difficulties caused by the pandemic, to Ghana where the government has taken measures to ensure continuity of water and electricity supply throughout the pandemic, governments, irrespective of their economic development levels, are manifesting their provider relationship towards the people. Provision of health and medical services, including testing and hospitalization for COVID-19 are also mainly provided by the state. The quick roll-out of free drive-thru testing for COVID-19 in the Republic of Korea has been hailed as one of the reasons the country has managed to get the virus under control relatively quickly. In times of crisis the old cry (in some circles of public governance) for government to get out of people’s lives and business dissipates and the demand for government intervention as a provider of basic services and safety nets takes over. This is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The state as protector of its people, especially of the poor and vulnerable, must prove effective during a nationwide crisis. In particular, a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can easily open up or exacerbate divisions and inequalities in society. This can be on geographical, ethnic, racial, religious, economic, gender or age grounds. During the COVID-19 crisis some populations disproportionately hit more than others, notably, older persons and those with existing health conditions who have higher morbidity rates from the disease, those in precarious employment who have lost jobs, contracts, benefits and

² In public health, contact tracing is the process of identification of persons who may have come into contact with an infected person (“contacts”) and subsequent collection of further information about these contacts.

entitlements; ‘essential workers’, including health care professionals and workers in law enforcement, transport, service and hospitality industries, who continue to work onsite and are exposed during the crisis; children and young people whose schooling and education has been disrupted, those with disabilities whose daily services have been suspended, and women and children in domestic abuse situations, who are at risk of increased isolation and abuse, amongst many others.

However, from the perspective of a resilient society and a resilient state, the role of protection should not only be invoked during a crisis. The modality of social protection and social security needs to be set forth strategically to make life predictably assured for such vulnerable sections of society both during normal times and during crisis.

ADDRESSING THE CRISIS: EMBRACING A WHOLE OF SOCIETY APPROACH, ENHANCING CREDIBILITY AND TRUST, AND COMBATting MISINFORMATION RESEARCH

To address the COVID-19 crisis effectively, the state needs to be a collaborator, creating partnerships with civil society and the private sector in a ‘whole-of-society’ approach so as to inclusively engage all communities and stakeholders in efforts to find solutions to the various challenges posed by the pandemic. The state has to relate to the people as a unifier, by not leaving the population alone to face the unaddressed risks of social disintegration. It is in such efforts to maintain the unity of the country that a whole-of-society approach can be of great use.

Under a whole-of-society approach, the governance relationship between the state (provided it is democratic and credible) and the people during a crisis of this magnitude must be based on listening to each other. The people need to listen to the state and to air their demands through designated channels and the state needs to listen to the people, because in most cases the people do understand the problems and challenges of the crises and often have solutions to propose. Among the people there are experts who have knowledge about the crisis are: health care providers and medical workers who clearly understand how to handle health challenges; researchers who can deploy their research acumen to arrive at a solution; sociologists who may have clues as to how society should handle the challenges caused by the crisis; and so on. It is therefore of great importance that mutual listening becomes prominent in the relationship between the people and the state in the midst of a crisis.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, law enforcement efforts will also rely on trust and collaboration from the people, as some people may object to and not follow the guidelines given by the national or local authorities and as a consequence, pose a danger to the rest of the population. From Wuhan in China, where tens of millions of people were the first to experience being placed in lockdown early in 2020 to the seventy-three countries that followed-suit and as the pandemic reached their shores, including Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain, New Zealand, Colombia, Peru, Rwanda and many other countries, to Republic of Korea where contact tracing was enforced, efforts to enforce executive measures to contain the pandemic are demonstrating the importance of mutual trust between the state as enforcer of orders to protect the people.

Beyond the national level, collaboration and partnerships need to be established with global actors in a ‘whole-of-the-world’ approach, for example, government medical researchers are working with their counterparts in the private sector and civil society to develop a vaccine against the virus. Governments are collaborating with the WHO and other international organizations in efforts to contain the spread of the virus. In an interconnected world, this pandemic cannot be solved by a single country on its own.

In his video message on COVID-19 and Misinformation on 14 April, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres drew attention to another epidemic, that of dangerous misinformation. As knowledge on COVID-19 is growing so too are the many rumours that surround the virus, causing fear and jeopardizing efforts to fight and contain the pandemic. In times of crisis the people look to government to provide credible information based on facts. This credibility not only hinges greatly on the trust the people have in government but also depends on the way and through whom the government provides constant and reliable information to the people. The state must deploy modern technologies and structure their operations in such a way that they constantly counter false information and manipulated data with facts and reliable data sources. In this context, the United Nations Secretary-General announced a new United Nations communications response with channels to disseminate accurate facts based on science to counter the growing scourge of misinformation.

In times of crisis, more than ever, legitimacy, credibility and trust serve as the bedrock for positive state-people relationships. This largely depends on whether the people perceive the state institutions and leadership

as legitimate and whether there is a high level of trust between the people and government leadership and public service. The way the crisis gets handled may enhance or diminish the trust the people have in government institutions and leadership. In other words, a crisis even one as serious as the current pandemic, can provide an opportunity for enhancing the trust people have in government. Finally, legitimacy, credibility and trust are necessary for the people to respond through collaborative engagement with public authorities in whole-of-society strategies to combat national and global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, governments must acknowledge that for this to be effective well established political inclusion and responsive accountability mechanisms that enhance trust and credibility should be in place well before crisis point.

KEY MESSAGES

1: The COVID-19 pandemic and crisis presents a challenge but also an opportunity to design and operate resilient and inclusive public health infrastructure and effective institutions for handling crisis: The COVID-19 pandemic while primarily a health and medical crisis but is turning into an economic and humanitarian crisis. Its management has far reaching implications for the relationship between the state and the people. As such it provides an opportunity for the state and the people to reflect on the kind of governance relationships that need to be in place to ensure the resilience, sustainability and wellbeing of all in society. The COVID-19 pandemic, devastating as it is, has provided a moment for each government, and indeed the whole world, to put in place governance and public health infrastructure that can foresee, identify and respond to pandemics quickly so as to minimize the suffering they can bring to people. It has provided an opportunity to realize and address inequalities and various forms of exclusion so as to enhance the wellbeing of the people.

2: Providing essential services to all must be at the core of state-people governance relationship: It should not take a pandemic or a crisis for the state to figure out how to provide critical services to its citizens. In 2015 the 193 Member States of the United Nations agreed that Governments have to champion the achievement of the SDGs and leave no one behind. This translates into ensuring that people have access to inclusive and affordable services that contribute to sustainable and inclusive development. Long-term policies and strategies need to be designed,

agreed and implemented to effectively provide public services which take into account the needs of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

3: Social protection for all citizens, especially the very poor and vulnerable, is critical to having a resilient society: The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need for the state to put in place policies, strategies and institutionalized means of ensuring social protection for all, especially the very poor and vulnerable. Social protection needs to be designed to cover all people, reduce poverty and inequality, promote sustainable development and growth and support social inclusion, social cohesion, democracy, just and peaceful societies. The biggest lesson learnt here is that the state should not wait for a crisis to put in place social protection mechanisms. Rather social protection mechanisms should be designed with responses to possible crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic built in so as to avoid a panicky search for solutions in the midst of a crisis.

4: Credible, legitimate and trusted state leadership is critical all the time but more so during a nation-wide crisis such as the COVID-19 Pandemic: Strong state-people relationships are highly reliant on high levels of trust in government and its leadership. Government leaders must create conditions that cultivate trust from the people by, among other things, ensuring the dissemination of fact-based information and communication, acting with transparency and integrity, serving the public equitably with accountability and humanness, and working in partnership and collaboration with stakeholders, including the private sector and civil society.

5: Government in times of crisis must endeavor to keep the country unified to avoid social disintegration: A unified people stands a greater chance of overcoming any crisis. The policies the government makes, the strategies it elaborates, the emergency services it delivers, and the directives and guidelines it puts forward must be seen to be benefiting everyone in the country equally so as to foster equity and solidarity. This is as true at national level for national unity as it is at international level for keeping the world united in the face of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak and rapid spread of the virus has demonstrated clearly that an outbreak in one country is a threat to all countries; something that strongly calls for international solidarity in fighting it and preventing such pandemics in future.