



On a village street corner, near Manila City's northeast border, tarpaulin announcements describe the Go Manila app, linking residents to local government.

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Abstract

Emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic can create tensions between national and local government when these are attempting to apply strategies to manage an urgent or major situation. This policy brief highlights the role of cities during the pandemic in terms of providing a link among citizens, and to the national government. Coordinating and connecting flows of information and resources between actors is essential. The findings in this brief are based on a case study of the cities of Manila and Pasig in the Philippines. Local governments are composed of officials who are also residents and thus are co-stakeholders within their cities or municipalities. They know the locality and its immediate concerns. They can create centres of access for people, lines of flow for resources, and channels of communication in each city or municipality, for the benefit of socially distanced communities.

Empowering Local Governments as Network Hubs in Facing Covid-19

Introduction

COVID-19 can also be considered a social illness, in the sense that it has also adversely affected society. The need for social distancing limits mobility and people's capacity to go about their everyday lives. Interpersonal contact is curtailed or prevented. Lines of communications and resources between and among people, establishments and governments are inhibited. Yet emergencies such as pandemics require a coordination of efforts. Given the restrictions, national and local governments can end up clashing instead of accomplishing the duty of serving their constituents.

The Philippines is an archipelago with a unitary system that constitutionally attempts to foster local democracy through decentralisation and devolution. However, the ideals of the law seem to get lost in times of emergency, when the national government attempts to consolidate power. During COVID-19, this type of power dynamic has emerged between President Rodrigo Duterte and the local governments of the Philippines. Despite the president's attempts to consolidate power, local governments have been thriving in their

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

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A network hub is the centre or core of a social or institutional network. As a tool for policy, a network hub functions as a place where lines of communications and resources interconnect and flow in order to reach other points within the locality.



handling of the pandemic. The cities of Manila and Pasig in the Philippines were both hailed for their COVID-19 responses and serve as examples of how local governments can become network hubs.

Methodology

This study used online research that documented activities of two cities from March to October 2020. News was collated from local media and from daily updates from the Public Information Offices of the cities of Manila and Pasig. Data were analysed to identify roles of each city as the hub or core of a social or institutional network. Analysed data were supplemented by a transect walk³, a social science research method used in community profiling. During the walk, the researchers visited various thoroughfares of a community while observing public life and speaking with local people to validate the projects of the two local governments.

Results, and Conclusions

An online review of local policies from the onset of lockdown in March 2020 until October 2020 shows an active network of communications management, resource management, and the availability and creation of physical and digital access points of goods and services for stakeholders.

Local governments, interconnector among residents

The national government provided goods and cash assistance to residents during the pandemic. Local governments fulfilled the important role of distribution within their respective localities. They also served as policy relay stations ensuring that residents were informed and able to understand general pandemic guidelines coming from the national government; these led to better policy implementation. Local governments, aside from the responsible use of their limited resources, also reached out to various local businesses and civil society groups to generate necessary supplies, testing kits, food, vehicles and spaces for treatment and testing. Manila City established linkages with international groups to gain access to health supplies for distribution to city residents. In Pasig City, resources, whether financial or services from civil society organisations, were also secured by the local government for their constituents.

³ A transect walk is a participatory community profiling method used to map out communities, socio-political actors and institutions, and the relationship of people to their environment. In this process, the researcher takes a literal walk through a community's main thoroughfare. 'Street life' reflects what is going on in the community and is noted through visual as well as other sense observations.



Lines of connections. Announcements on free access to transport for front-line workers and on medical guidelines for the community. Left – a crossroads in Pasig City. Right – a T-junction and village gate in Manila City.

Local governments, source of mobility

Social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, emails) are increasingly used to keep residents informed, facilitating pandemic protocol compliance, and access to government services and other areas of the city such as markets, banks and hospitals. Local governments also made use of digital apps that residents can download to their smartphones and other devices. These innovations further created access points and a means of contact tracing, providing residents with pandemic managed means of mobility, even during lockdown. These include provisions of means of transportations for those in need and the promotion of the use of bikes.

Strict guidelines from the national government caused confusion for residents in the Philippines. Strict guidelines can be used for health protocols but flexibility in management is needed for innovations. The cities were able to address local needs by promoting bikes and free rides as a means of transport when public commuting was limited, or by using smartphone apps to link residents within a community.



Activities in the city network. Pasig City's mobile app for linking residents. In most cities, each establishment uses their own contact tracing system. Here, the Pasig App is being used, ensuring better means of contact tracing by the city. The same app allows residents to use public services without having to leave their homes.

Local governments, one among stakeholders

Local government officials are also residents of the city where they govern. They know the place and the people connected to the civic groups. These contacts can be networked to improve their city. Manila City Mayor Isko 'Moreno' Domagoso and Pasig City Mayor Vico Sotto each conducted consultations with local groups, from youth to parents, from local to international business groups, and from local non-government organisations to international government and non-government institutions. Such relationships led to innovative programmes and projects that can address pressing needs, which range from basic needs of food, needs for access to medicines, and the need for proper information on guidelines, which helped them and the citizens to adapt to the social health impact of COVID-19. Social networks and digital applications managed by local government helped to ensure that citizens were aware of policies and could access services, even without the need to go out or have physical contact.

A functioning government has working parts in all sectors. Local governments are themselves stakeholders and are enmeshed with other stakeholders, making them ideal network hubs. They are relay stations of policies, information and resources. They create access points for stakeholders within their respective locales. This helps to create a functioning local democracy, with government units working together as part of a nation at war with a pandemic rather than a nation at war with itself.

Policy Recommendations

COVID-19 has affected society in different ways and key policies should go beyond health protocols. Therefore, governance during COVID-19 must be holistic and incorporate proper dynamics. This study highlights that cities are closer to their citizens than the national government; they are at the centre of activity and can create mobility for citizens in an otherwise restricted scenario. Since the Philippines has a unitary system with principles of local autonomy, we propose the following policy tract on local democracy to both national and local leaders:



National governments should uphold local autonomy by providing general or flexible guidelines for local governments to innovate to meet the needs of their localities.



There should be a strong working relationship between local and national government, as well as between local governments and the various sectors of society in their respective cities.



Local governments must be the hub or centre of a social network within their locality to reinforce lines of communication, resource distribution and access to goods and services for the different sectors of the city. Local governments' limited resources can be strengthened by encouraging the participation of civic groups. They can also extend partnerships to governments and organisations abroad.



Local governments must extend their efforts to the internet. Examples include updated social media, responsive lines of communication, and downloadable digital apps connected to city hall. Social networking tools can help to reach more people within the locality while creating opportunities for citizens to communicate with local authorities through an online presence.

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