Development Aid in the time of Corona Virus: rethinking development programming a Zimbabwean perspective.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is arguably one of the defining global health crises of our time and the greatest challenge humanity has contended with since the second World War. Since its appearance in Asia late last year, the virus has spread to every region apart from Antarctica. Cases are rising daily around the globe with the highest ceases recorded in Europe, the Americas, and Asia with Africa recording gradual increases in numbers. The virus is moving like a wave, one that may yet crash on those least able to cope. In response, countries are battling to slow the spread of the pandemic by testing and treating patients, carrying out contact tracing, limiting travel, quarantining citizens, and cancelling large gatherings such as sporting events, concerts, and schools. However, COVID-19 is more than just a health crisis, it has the potential to create devastating social, economic and political crises that will change the world as we know it as we are in uncharted territory. Many of the world's greatest cities are deserted as people stay indoors, either by choice or by government order. Every day activities have ceased and ordinary people are losing jobs and income, with no way of knowing when normality will return. It goes without saying that global catastrophes change the world, even if we contain the Covid-19 crisis within a few months, the legacy of this pandemic will live with us for years, perhaps decades to come. It will change the way we move, build, learn, and connect.

The development Aid sector is not spared from these challenges with governance, food aid, public health and humanitarian aid projects facing their biggest challenges yet. In the global south, challenges emanating from COVID-19 are further compounded by weak institutions, abuse of human rights and general despotic and autocratic tendencies by regimes. The adverse impact of the pandemic on the development sector is inevitable. This is largely due to the reliance of development interventions on citizen agency and voice which in underpin change on the ability of citizens to coalesce and collectively act together to influence change from the bottom up. In pursuit of this, traditional methods of anticipation like community meetings, street protests, breakfast meetings, petitions, position paper, consultation meetings. The common denominator among these activities is citizen/community inclusion where people physically meet and participate to foster change. A number of development partners have emphasized inclusion and consultation in decision making processes using some of these approaches. However, progress gained since the third wave of democracy in the south has the potential of being reversed if not stopped dead in its tracks. This brief seeks to understand the changes likely to be ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic and how these changes are likely to pattern development aid thinking and practice from an exploratory view-point. Using a desktop study research approach, the brief will provide a thematic presentation of discussions focusing on what changes are likely to happen, using experiences from governance programing, with ensuing discussions examining how these changes can be responded to in the process of re-thinking/re-tooling development aid theory and practice in developing countries like Zimbabwe.

COVID-19 in perspective

COVID-19 is a variant of the corona virus family which is said to be a mutation of the SARS and swine flue respectively, it is a new virus when it comes to humans thus little to no research existed on its spread, treatment and effect on the human anatomy until recently. The virus is said to affect the respiratory function in human beings. Its origins are contested with the first recorded human case of the virus being recorded in the Chinese province of Wuhan. With the

world grappling for a solution to the pandemic the buzz words doing the rounds at the moment have been quarantine, social distancing, isolate, test and lock down. The disease is said to be easily transmissible as the virus can be spread from various ways including everyday surfaces like door knobs, buttons and other surfaces. The virus's rapid rate of transmission has raised concerns on the ability of health institutions to respond and cope with a full blown epidemic hence calls from global leaders to 'flatten the curve'. In an attempt to flatten the curve governments have had to quickly adopt measures, in some instances without citizen consultation, to stem the spread of the disease with such decisions having an adverse impact on development aid, civic engagement and other democratic and civil liberties. With the COVID-19 pandemic posing conditions which are akin to war situations where physical and psychological strain is a norm our world is likely to change from this experience and questions on a number of phenomenon characterizing our 'previous lives' are brought to the fore.

COVID-19 and its impact on development programming

A test for Rights Based Approaches to development programming

Post the third wave of democracy and the Washington consensus, the world has been at task to reconfigure and move towards normative standards and systems that define development. This quest has provided the world with multiple viewpoints of development theory and practice. After the second world war and the impact of the Holocaust the world gravitated towards a more human centred approach to development with Rights Based Approaches (RBA) to development gaining prominence. The use of RBA to development then became a key feature of development programming in the global south where interventions sought to use human rights commitments as well as domestic laws and policies, to meet development objectives through implementing aid agencies and civil society organizations respectively. The primary interest groups in this approach have largely been citizens through interventions which seek to empower communities as right-holders to claim certain liberties from duty bearers.

The basic underpinning of development programming in most cases has been the emphasis on the progressive realization, protection and promotion of human rights. Considering this, RBAs thus require community-led, stakeholder driven or basically bottom-up approaches to development. Such an understanding of development brings to the fore Amartya Sen's notions of rights as entitlement or rights as a capability dichotomy which interrogates whether the fulfilment or violation of a right must be understood whether that right is recognized and citizens are entitled to or that right is recognized and fulfilled through lived experience as a capability.

Understanding the entitlement Vs capability dichotomy in the context of the COVID-19 situation is a worthwhile endeavour. While RBAs to development are commended for citizen inclusion and being stakeholder driven, do such approaches have the same potency and appeal in instances where the very communities being served are partly removed from the equation. For example, the declaration of a 21-day national lock-down by the Government of Zimbabwe. The declaration was a source of divided opinion among citizens. Notwithstanding the polarizing nature of the decision, the fact is limited stakeholder inclusion and consultation was done in leading up to the decision. Secondly, the decision was not informed by a through impact analysis which ensured the protection of certain citizen's rights e.g. freedoms of movement, association and rights to food and water. Secondly, the GoZ deployed the police and army to ensure citizens comply to the lockdown stipulations further restricting movement and creating fertile ground for human rights abuses by state actors. The question which the COVID-19 pandemic poses to practitioners using RBAs to development is on the extent of the effectiveness of such approaches in times of crisis, how can such approaches be more amenable

to contextual changes and still have the desired impact? How can such approaches remain true to bottom-up, community-led stakeholder driven interventions even in cases where citizens are inaccessible or unavailable? What strategies can be employed to ensure citizens are engaged and consulted even in times of crisis?

Rethinking Citizen Agency

Citizen agency is the new buzz word in development programming. There are multiple definitions of what it constitutes and the extent of its influence in promoting democracy, transparency and accountability. For the purpose of this brief citizen agency will be used to refer to the activities of people that participate in socio-political activities whose participation influences decision making processes. Rajani (2008) posits that citizen agency is not only the purpose, or the ends, of development and democracy, it is also its most effective means. People that act as citizen agents are initially moved by injustice, inequality or discrimination.

While citizen agency is a good indicator from democracy and development it goes without saying that the context in which it occurs determines its effectiveness and impact. Bearing in mind the previous discussion on RBAs and their emphasis on citizen inclusion, and how this poses challenges in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed questions around citizen agency and its importance in decision making processes in a crisis context. With citizen's ability to coalesce and self-mobilize temporarily curtailed by the pandemic how can citizen agency be re-thought and driven to guard against democratic reversal. Given that citizen agency profiles the means to ends relationship it brings us to understand the validity of this assertion when it comes to citizen agency within a crisis context. The GoZ argues that the decision of the 21-day lockdown was informed by the greater good bent on ensuring citizens are safe guarded from infection. However, the means and methods of arriving at such a decision have been criticized for being exclusionary and arbitrary without consideration of the decision's impact on the lives of ordinary citizens without adequate measures to respond to citizen needs.

With restrictions on public meetings, the ability of citizens to move and speak with one voice has been handicapped adversely affecting the potential of citizen agency to influence and impact social change and decision making processes. At the moment, decisions on COVID-19 responses have been the sole responsibility of government with limited stakeholder inclusion in such decisions. Resultantly, decisions have not been relevant to community realities or informed by citizen perspectives which are key in promoting citizen driven responses by the state. In this light, citizen agency is necessary more so in times of crisis and development programing is faced with the biggest challenge of how to promote citizen agency beyond traditional forms of engagement which require citizens to act collectively, at multiple levels, through physical interaction, consultation and advocacy and engagement. How do we promote citizen voices without the need to reach out to citizens, how do we remotely coordinate citizen voice? Re-conceptualizing and expanding the parameters of citizen agency could assist in broadening the facets of citizen agency and its importance in development discourse and practice.

Re-conceptualizing civic space

From and abstract view-point civic space implies that civil society and individuals are able to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance, and in doing so, influence the political and social structures around them. As a healthy civic space is understood from these three fundamental freedoms, of association, assembly, and expression, and these define the boundaries of civic space. Save for the freedom of expression, association and assembly are mutually dependent with the key ingredient being citizens acting collectively towards a

common cause. In most cases, civic space has been appreciated and evaluated using the ability of citizens to meet freely, dialogue and engage with duty bearers on issues affecting them. In addition, the operating space environment has been key in interrogating the closure or opening of civic space and the extent to which citizens can or cannot meet.

The challenge which COVID-19 presents for Zimbabwe is that civic space has been opening up and shrinking at different intervals since independence. To further compound the situation, most rights and freedoms as we know them have been suspended in the fight against COVID-19 meaning emphasis has shifted to COVID-19 at the expense of civil liberties creating an opportune environment for a reversal of democratic gains attained to date.

Civic space in this regard has been a key determinant of the extent of citizen engagement in governance processes and this engagement has largely been through town hall meetings, community meetings and various engagement and dialogue platforms. These methods have been instrumental in promoting transparency and accountability. Given the COVID-19 crisis and social distancing, it is next to impossible for citizens to physically engage and dialogue with duty bearers and with the country in lockdown some duty bearers are not only unavailable but unresponsive to citizen demands. The question however is how does development programing ensure sustained citizen engagement for transparency and accountability in crisis situations. What other typologies of citizen-stakeholder engagements can be explored to ensure accountability and citizen inclusion in decision making processes continues. How can we understand civic space beyond the physical space and platforms which communities are accustomed to using for engagement purposes?

The real test for digital/ICT based advocacy

In response to the challenges crated by 21-day lockdown most development programs have shifted their focus to monitoring government responses to COVID-19 using a transparency and accountability narrative with regards to the use of public resources. Such interventions have seen an increase in the use of online and offline digital media tools such as mobile phones, computers and tablets to access critical information through websites, social medial pages and other digital platforms. Since the late 1990s, the prospect of using ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) to improve accountability, transparency, fairness, and effectiveness of authorities has attracted general optimism (World Bank, 1998). However, early hopes that such initiatives would be the panacea of all the problems have given way to more modest claims with the biggest test being posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Online based advocacy has received its fair share of criticism with some opinion leaders arguing that it promotes the exclusion and marginality of low income and literacy groups and that it is urban focused. To what extent can advocacy be premised on online or virtual engagement given the challenges associated with tech based interventions in the African context where internet speeds, data affordability, mobile reach and penetration are a reality to contend with. How can sustained engagement and dialogue be promoted and achieved through tech based advocacy. Are tech interventions drivers or enablers of change or there is need to explore their capabilities beyond the binary relationship of driver vs enabler of change?

Should Political Economy Analysis move beyond politics

Most development programs rely on political economy analyses to posit certain assumptions about programs and projects. As the name suggests, these assumptions are informed by the contextual drivers of change from political and economic lenses. Such analyses are essential in understanding the structural, individual and institutional challenges, barriers and drivers albeit with little consideration to potential pandemics like COVID-19. The inability of programs and projects to forecast the probability of such occurrences inherently renders most projects unable

to respond to non-political and economic crises. This brings to question some of the tool development aid are currently using to anticipate, manage and respond to change. What a number of programs have been doing in light of COVID-19 is improvise interventions to respond to this emergency without structure or nuance. While this pandemic is largely health related, its impact has been far reaching in affecting governance intervention in their entirety. Some points to ponder revolve around how deep should such analyses go within the feasible and plausible spheres of development programming.

Things to consider moving forward

While it is certain that once the COVID-19 pandemic has been abated it will not be business as usual, there are a few preparatory lessons which can be derived from this experience. These lessons are around the structuring of development aid and interventions, grant making models and responsive development programming in general. Discussions under in this section will focus on possible lessons from the pandemic.

A glaring fact is that the COVID-19 pandemic caught the world off-guard with responses being developed on the go to respond to needs as they emerged without a clear plan or strategy. The inability of the development sector to respond accordingly is another indicator of the complexity of the development sector in its programming, responses and intended outcomes. This adapt as we go method exposes some of the new challenges emerging from COVID-19 regarding traditional forms of citizen. What is evident is that such normative forms of engagement strongly rely on conducive environments for change to be realized. Without an enabling environment little gains are realized and democratic regression becomes more likely. The biggest challenges at the moment is how and through what platforms can development programs promote sustained engagement between citizens and solution holders in extra ordinary circumstances.

Granting Mechanisms

One way of doing this is investing in more adaptable and responsive granting mechanism which are responsive to real time change. Development aid partners have used such rapid response mechanisms through support to short-term high impact activities which provide relief to citizens in times of crises. The challenge is that such interventions have largely been limited to crises of a political nature like civic unrest war, conflict and insurrections at the expense of health and/or other non-political crises. This monolithic approach to understanding crises is a common feature of development and governance programs. The rigidity of program outcomes, indicators and intermediate results leave little to no flexibility for development programs to respond to unforeseen crises of a non-political nature. While this point is debate it remains without question that a program's efficiency and effectiveness is judged by its ability to deliver on its promise as informed by its theory of change, objectives and results.

Integration of development programs

International development agencies, through support to CSOs, recognize that socioeconomic development is premised on a complex range of interrelated processes, resource and capacity endowments, historical pathways, and socio-political structures. However, such understanding has often promoted socio-political development through policies and operations in distinct sectors compartmentalizing CSO efforts. Consequently, development efforts have been packaged into sector focused programs and projects. Historically, donors and academics have sought to clarify what makes sectoral projects effective and sustainable contributors to development. Among the key factors identified have been (a) the role and capabilities of the state and (b) the relationships between the state and citizens, phenomena often lumped together

under the broad rubric of "governance." Given the importance of a well-functioning state and healthy interactions with citizens, development partners have treated governance as a sector in its own right, with projects ranging from public sector management reform, to civil society strengthening, to democratization and public health. This has rendered most development interventions inadequate to holistically respond to most citizen needs. In addition, there is little cross-learning and sharing of experiences between sectors and actors for more broad-based responses to citizen concerns. Several discussions have arisen as a result of this, with program integration being cited as a solution. However, there has been limited commitment to integrate projects despite compelling evidence on its value. In contrast, expanded awareness has not reliably translated into effective integration of governance into sectoral programs and projects in, for example, health, education, water, agriculture, or community development. The bureaucratic realities of development programming offer a partial explanation. Given the increase in support towards 'governance' interventions and the complexity of the ecosystem, there is need to provide a meeting point for practitioners in their diversity for collective reflection and troubleshooting through the sharing of experiences.

Understanding marginality beyond exclusion

Several development interventions have been geared towards promoting the rights and participation of marginalized groups such as women, youth and people with disabilities. What this has done is promote the participation of these groups in public spaces with the intention of making their voices heard. While noble, this has limited the appreciation of marginality of citizens from a spatial representation point of view. COVID-19 helped appreciate that marginality is much more complex and development programs need to be alive to the contextually informed understanding of marginality.

The GoZ of Zimbabwe in response to the pandemic proposed a raft of changes which were not adequately communicated to rural communities who remain marginalized in as far as access to real-time independent sources of information is concerned. Additionally, the government passed restrictions curtailing freedom of movement with little consideration to economically inept sections of both rural and urban populations which by the way constitute a big percentage of the country's demographic profile. Lastly, most civic organizations in urban Zimbabwe have developed jingles, social media posts, radio programs to raise awareness and monitor government response for social accountability and transparency with little consideration to how such platforms in themselves perpetuate marginality based on income, level of literacy and geography. Considering this, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted development programs to consider the complexities of marginality beyond just inclusion in decision making processes.

The potential of ICT in promoting citizen agency

An aspect that has received much attention, but with little investment in understanding its true potential, so far is the use of ICT in support to citizen agency; to inform and involve communities, and enable them to interact and influence authorities. This continued interaction with citizens directly contributes to effective and ethical governance. There are quite a few examples of successful smaller projects in this realm in developing countries. But emerging technologies (e.g. smart mobile phones) create new momentum for strengthening citizen agency on a larger scale. The rationale behind this is that enabling citizen agency potentially creates action at a scale that existing development structures cannot achieve, simply because of the amount of actors that can be involved, and this can be supported even further by technology, that has scale intrinsically built into it. The scale effect will be most effective if it is not just bottom-up (citizens-authorities) but also horizontally, amongst citizens to create coalitions. A growing branch of research is investigating the effectiveness of the use of mobile

phones during times of crisis. There is need thus from research around, ICT and citizen agency, and its potential in calling for authorities' accountability.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 has had an impact on various aspects of our social, political and economic lives and there is little doubt that once the scare is over the world as we knew will not be the same. While change is inevitable various lessons can be drawn from this experience and certain actions can be considered moving forward. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a time for development practitioners to evaluate the appropriateness, effectiveness and relevance of current development intervention and mechanisms. Notwithstanding anticipated changes as a result of COVID-19 there are communities whose lives depend on development intervention hence the need to explore associated risks, gaps and opportunities as lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience.