[Blog] Social Capital in a Time of 'Social Distancing': A Reflection on the Impact of COVID-19 on Our Social Connections

At the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, researchers with various experiences and backgrounds are forging partnerships with diverse stakeholders and partners. We will share their knowledge and perspectives gained from their research activities in the form of blog posts. Research Fellow Lisette Robles writes about how the current pandemic brought changes to our social connections and how it transformed the way we create our bonds, engage with our bridges, and reach out to our social linkages during this global health crisis.

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Living in the time of a pandemic

The year 2020 proved memorable. Early in the year, there were bushfires in Australia decimating a number of wild animals, the drone strike in Iran that rippled into large public unrest and provoked retaliations, and a volcanic eruption in the Philippines that blanketed Manila and its nearby provinces with volcanic materials. All these seem like eons ago as a much larger crisis, that is the COVID-19 pandemic, has placed our global vulnerabilities and insecurities front and center. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes COVID-19 as an infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus, which was unknown before the outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (World Health Organization 2020a). Fast-forward to June of this year. There have already been about 7.03 million COVID-19 positive cases with 404,396 confirmed deaths in 216 countries and territories in the regions of Africa, America, Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, South-East Asia and the Western Pacific (World Health Organization 2020b). These numbers continue to rise with no clear end in sight.

COVID-19's rapid transmission across different parts of the world reaffirms our interconnectedness and the global nature of the crisis, demanding urgent action to mitigate and contain the pandemic. The speed and the extent of this pandemic's spread restricted the proper functioning of social infrastructure and institutions, necessitating urgent and coordinated interventions to prevent and contain the disease. Our current global predicament shows why infectious diseases go beyond a health issue, and are also a security concern (Enemark 2009; Caballero-Anthony 2006; Davies 2008). As a global public health challenge, they enjoin multi-sectoral cooperation from various stakeholders to enact sustainable and inclusive solutions to their direct impact and inescapable consequences. The present COVID-19 pandemic is no different from the other disasters we have been facing. It is equally catastrophic, and it renders serious disruptions to the functioning of our community, and

even society. What separates this pandemic from other crises is how the new coronavirus has affected people indiscriminately and yet disproportionately at such a rapid pace. We have seen how highly affluent and developed countries in North America and Europe were not immune to having large number of COVID-19 cases. There are also fragile and conflict-affected states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that suffered the additional impact of COVID-19, including a decrease in import earnings and reduced domestic activity (*1). Refugees and internally displaced people, 80% of whom are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, confront the challenges of limited access to water, sanitation systems and health facilities during this COVID-19 pandemic(*2), issues they have been confronting for the longest time now. These impacts to a multitude of people in varying settings and contexts demanded an all-inclusive response to such differentiated needs.

Among the inevitable consequences of this pandemic is the way it affected our social connections and interconnectedness. These social connections (in this context, we refer to them as "social capital")are the intermediaries to the fundamental resources we needed to respond to and recovery from this crisis. While social capital's actual value as capital remains a contested topic, it is worth noting that the social capital embedded in our social relations is leveraged to survive everyday life, especially in crises.

This short piece is written from a social-capital perspective, presenting the importance of the different (social) actors and their evolving roles and presence as impacted by the current pandemic. It will also briefly give insight into the inevitable impact of the crisis on development cooperation.

Social capital and health

Social capital, referring to the importance of social interactions and human (and institutional) connections as opportunities to access resources in certain circumstances, is not found in actual individuals or members of the community themselves, but rests in the connections/relations built between them. While material resources mainly deplete through frequent use, social capital multiplies from its increased usage (i.e. social interactions). Putnam (1993) suggested social capital as a collection of positive attributes including interpersonal trust, civic engagement and norms or reciprocity. At a time of health crisis like what we now face, these characteristics are essential. Our trust in other people and our need to engage and participate are found in the ties we have built with our various social connections.

A way to look at social capital is based on the social ties we develop with others. Szreter and Woolcock (2004) presented the distinction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital, capturing the typologies of social ties as convenient visualizations by the actors and of the interactions they involve. Social bonds are the trusting and cooperative relations between members of a network who see

themselves as similar, while bridging social capital describes the relationships of respect and mutuality between people who know that they are not alike in some demographic sense. Moreover, linking social capital considers the network of trusting relationships across (vertical) explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society (654-5). Individuals and groups determine those they identify as their social bonds, bridges and linkages with the specific roles inherent in these social ties that aid in achieving their goals. Each of these social ties enriches our interactions and social relations, and seemingly, during a pandemic, these social connections adds to our resilience toward the virus and its challenges in various aspects of our lives.

Redefining our social space to bond and bridge during a pandemic

Our social bonds commonly comprise our families, relatives and friends. For migrants, they may even include co-nationals as the supplementary sources of regular interactions and informal support. The strong ties built with our families and friends provide access to certain resources and information not generally available to everyone. They are nurtured through the frequency of contact and support, often developed across a certain period. Physical presence, whenever possible, strengthens the bonds that people make and have. The collective experience of a crisis aids in generating a common coping strategy and response that translates to shared resilience. However, during this COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to actualize face-to-face interaction is quite limited. It took away (for most people) the ability to be physically present to enhance their safety and resilience. Instead, as a strategy for coping with the virus, people are strongly encouraged to maintain a safe physical distance from one another to avoid further transmission of the disease. We have heard and seen reports of how at-risk population like the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions are isolated from their family members to avoid the chance of contracting the virus. Unfortunately, not all people have the privilege of isolating themselves as a means to prioritize their safety. Refugees, internally displaced people and informal settlers, especially in densely urban places, are among those who have heightened vulnerability given their inability (or limited capacity) to self-isolate. Such circumstances illustrate how our strong ties can potentially be a source of vulnerability and insecurity for our social bonds and us.

Our social bridges, or our connections with people from other communities and groups with whom we conventionally maintain regular social contacts, have also been altered by the current health crisis. People in other communities or groups are equally exposed to the threat of the virus. Thus, in attempts to abate its spread, social engagements with people outside our immediate social circles are reduced. Together with constant reminders of regularly handwashing, and wearing facemasks in public spaces, gatherings of a significant number of people in public areas are strongly discouraged if not heavily restricted. Policies like area-wide lockdowns and quarantines (in the case of Japan, a state

of emergency) have impacted interaction in common spaces like schools, offices, restaurants, churches/mosques and commercial spaces. Being at risk of becoming spaces to contract the virus, they have been subjected to (provisional) closures.

As social beings, we thrive in the ability to communicate and interact with other people as part of our human experience. This pandemic demanded (temporary) isolation as a response strategy requiring a form of "social distancing." Therefore, did the pandemic change our connections with our social bonds and bridges? The same actors continue to exist as our sources of strong social ties (bonds) and diverse resources (bridges). However, the way we conventionally cultivate these relations and interactions have somehow changed. While it remains a challenge to maintain communication and connections with people with whom we had regular contact, the present circumstances demanded alternatives to our connectivity. Technology became a very convenient tool for many people, primarily to offset the inability to be physically present. Messaging, voice calls and video calls have been prominently used whenever possible to confirm family and friends' well-being and safety during this pandemic. In addition, teleconferencing substituted several face-to-face engagements both at the workplace and in school. The use of these devices to communicate to faraway families and relatives is nothing new. Migrants have been using these devices to maintain connections and contacts with their families and friends in their home countries. However, the current pandemic has shifted this usage of digital devices from alternative engagements to mainstream modalities for communication and interaction.

Places where we conduct collective activities like schools, workplaces and other public spaces were forced to adopt alternative means of assembly to ease the physical gathering of people in confined spaces for extended periods. Some schools have implemented online learning schemes, and companies have devised means to accommodate working from home during the pandemic. Social media functions both as medium for information dissemination and as a messaging platform to augment the limitations of face-to-face contact. The ability to reach out and connect in real time through these technologies has preempted further isolation from people with whom we maintain social ties.

Social distancing from our social bonds and bridges seems a viable solution to slow down the spread of the virus. However, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone has the resources to continue their interactions, and to consciously self-isolate using these alternatives. Though some schools encourage online platforms to conduct classes, the situation reveals the fact that not everyone has the tools (smartphones, computers) to do so. In addition, the work-from-home scheme may not be applicable to many activities. Some production and service industries demand physical presence to

conduct their operations. In the more vulnerable settings of conflict, displacement and extreme poverty, the availability of these technologies are farfetched privileges.

Technology becomes an additional important intermediary to the way we maintain our contacts and connections. While this has been instrumental in defying the limitations of physical connectedness, its absence for some people highlights the gap in accessibility among various people. This disparity in resource access among the vulnerable population permeates to our linkages or the institutionalized connections to resources necessary during and after the pandemic.

Trust with our linkages

"Accordingly, just as health outcomes can be improved by expanding the quality and quantity of bonding social capital (among friends, family and neighbors), and bridging social capital (trusting relations between those from different demographic and spatial groups), so, too, is it crucial to facilitate the building of linking social capital across power differentials, especially to representatives of institutions responsible for delivering those key services that necessarily entail ongoing, discretionary, face-to-face interaction" (Szreter and Woolcock 2004, 655).

Just like our social bonds and bridges, our linkages, the people and institutions of power that connect us to the various information and resources to respond and survive this pandemic, are challenged with mandated tasks and duties. Every day, we laud the unceasing commitments of medical and other essential workers on the ground who work alongside the government and related institutions to keep our society functioning. As we comprehend this health crisis as a human security concern, we also recognized the need for simultaneous coordination with various institutions to address the pandemic's impact on our well-being, and to a larger extent, on our economy and society.

Our social linkages are essential in the way we respond to the pandemic, and that trust and confidence in formal institutions make a significant contribution to our success in responding to the pandemic on a larger scale. Taiwan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia are among those highlighted as having successfully responded to the virus (*3). Whether it is the trust founded in the "paternal relation" between the state and its citizenry that encouraged cooperation (Xiao, 2015), or the culmination of state capacity, social trust and leadership (Fukuyama, 2020); it is evident that the element of trust substantiates these statewide pandemic response successes. However, trust is not won overnight. It is gained through repeated positive interactions between the people and the state, and the current COVID-19 pandemic is one of the circumstances where people validates these ties with their social linkages. The trust people put to these formal institutions can help leverage resources, especially for the marginalized during this pandemic.

COVID-19 brought disruptions to various activities and services that are necessary to the proper functioning of society (as we used to know it). As social linkages attempt to address these challenges in real time, we continue to look ahead and predict how we can go about our activities in this "new normal." Among the linkages impacted by the pandemic is international development cooperation. While we continue to address the crisis, we also begin to look ahead and navigate what our post-COVID-19 world will be like, especially to those who are already marginalized and vulnerable.

Post-COVID-19 links to development cooperation

In an April 2020 UNDP webinar on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for international development cooperation, Izmestiev and Klingebiel raised the discussion of how the current global health emergency, is either a game changer, paving the way to rethinking how things operate, or a super accelerator, necessitating a means to fast-track how we approach things (*4). These are important points to consider as we continue to find ways to approach this crisis.

Pandemics are not new challenges for development cooperation. Influenza pandemics along with the outbreaks of diseases like malaria and Ebola have already confirmed the capacities of development agencies to provide support for the most vulnerable and at-risk populations. Ideally, these linkages connect to the community across a vertical gradient through provisions of support and assistance. Armed with the appropriate resources, development actors are able to provide for vulnerable and marginalized people. Developmental work advances by understanding the community served. Bottom-up activities are built on the constant interaction between the participating development workers and communities they are helping. It is through the comprehensive understanding of the community's needs and capacities that development agencies create suitable support for its specific context. The current pandemic placed the development actors and the community mutually at risk of transmitting the virus. To ensure the safety of everyone, the physicality of doing such activities needed to be kept to a minimum. Given such circumstances, what lies ahead for development cooperation?

Development cooperation flourishes in the field and when workers engage with the people. JICA places a similar emphasis on the gemba (現場) as the space to learn and develop interaction with the community to create sustainable solutions to their varied human security concerns. The current restrictions on our mobility have unavoidable consequences in accomplishing development programs. Thus, we must rethink how these development linkages can be sustained, while prioritizing the safety of both the community and development actors. Considering the changes brought by the pandemic,

the importance of the field (gemba) in development work did not disappear. Instead, we recognized that we must shift our engagement to alternative settings.

In the past, there have been modalities to conduct business in challenging scenarios like the COVID-19 pandemic. Humanitarian actors in intensely high-risk conflict settings have been utilizing remote operations like remote control, managing, supporting and partnering with vulnerable populations to support the affected populations. Development actors can adapt a similar modality to offset the current limitations caused by this pandemic. Remotely managing projects and programs is a viable option to continue with their work, amid these challenges.

From the examples of the ongoing health and sanitation awareness campaign in Cambodia through the JOCV Handwashing Dance Videos (*5), to the continuity of knowledge transfer through remote technical cooperation in Ghana (*6), unceasing development cooperation needs to adapt to the changing landscape in delivering assistance and development initiatives. Nonetheless, it is critical to recognize the importance of trust in these social ties to effectively carry out these activities. Hence, as development actors continue to find ways to deliver support during this pandemic, it is imperative to pay attention to the quality of relationships built between these development actors and the communities they serve. Healthy partnerships should be made by creating opportunities for more cooperative and collaborative engagement among actors. Now more than ever, development cooperation remains relevant to deal with existing and emerging challenges compounded by the pandemic. COVID-19 has added an extra layer of challenge to development cooperation. However, along with other existing social ties, the trust between development actors and the community enriches their engagement in carrying out their activities.

Looking ahead

One of the features of our globalized connectivity is our mobility. Yet during this time of pandemic, movement threatens the safety of our social bonds, social bridges and ourselves. Even our links to resources for responding to this pandemic have weakened. Over the years, we have reaped the benefits of globalization with our increased interaction and mobility, but the current pandemic has directly affected these activities.

To reiterate, the current pandemic is a human security concern that heightens our differentiated vulnerabilities and insecurities. Our social links have been a source of top-down protection, and equally as important is our collective empowermente with whom we have social bonds and bridges. The people and institutions in our social networks are essential to actualizing a human security approach to COVID-19.

Social capital/social networks mainly required the investment in time and presence as we built our interpersonal trust. By being physically present to be involved and engaged with other people, we reiterated our belongingness. However, this pandemic demanded that we redefine and adjust how our social capital develops. It seems paradoxical that our mantra during this pandemic is "We will come through this together," (*7) and yet now our localized effort demands that we (temporarily) be physically distant. Adapting to the new mode of interaction, trust and reciprocity are essential. Our connectivity, including physical mobility, communication and interaction, need to adapt to this new context. Our social bonds, bridges and linkages are still there; we just have to reconfigure our interaction to fit this tough time.

■Profile

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The views and opinions expressed here are those of the author and in no way represent the views, positions or opinions expressed or implied by the Institute.

Footnotes:

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[2] UNHCR. "Coronavirus Outbreak" *UNHCR Asia Pacific*, https://www.unhcr.org/coronavirus-covid-19.html

[3] Bremmer, Ian. "The Best Global Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic", *Time*, June 12, 2020, https://time.com/5851633/best-global-responses-covid-19/

[4] Izmestiev, Artemy and Stephan Klingebiel. "International (development) cooperation in a post-COVID-19 world: a new way of interaction or super-accelerator?" *DevPolicy Blog*, May 1,2020, https://devpolicy.org/international-development-cooperation-in-a-post-covid-19-world-a-new-way-of-interaction-or-super-accelerator-20200501-1/

[5] 【今、日本 からで きる こ と を！一 時帰国 中の海 外協 力隊員が 活躍　その 1】赴 任国に向 け、リ モート で 支援. Link: https://www.jica.go.jp/topics/2020/20200812_01.html (2020/08/12)

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