

KUNO Covid-Café in cooperation with Oxfam Novib

Episode 4: How Covid empowers Local Humanitarian Leadership

A conversation with

Hero Anwar (Program Director at REACH Iraq),

Gloria Modong (Executive Director, Titi Foundation South Sudan and Deputy Chair NGO Forum South Sudan) and

Feliciano Reyna (Executive Director and Founder of Acción Solidaria in Venezuela and representative of Civilis)

Kick off with a stand-up blog by **Thea Hilhorst** (International Institute for Social Studies, Erasmus University)

Co-moderated by Peter Heintze (KUNO) and Anita Kattakuzhy (Oxfam International)

The Covid-19 crisis is posing a challenge to the world in unprecedented ways and it is influencing our daily lives. It changes also our work in the humanitarian sector. This is why KUNO in cooperation with partners, is introducing the KUNO Covid Café. Every week we organize an online café, to discuss the changing world with inspiring speakers and a wide audience.

In this episode we talked about the influence of the Covid crisis on local humanitarian leadership with 3 directors of local civil society organizations in Iraq, South Sudan and Venezuela. The first question was for Anita Kattakuzhy, namely, why does an international NGO like Oxfam need a policy advisor specifically on localization? Localization should not be only addressed by local and national organizations she says, the whole sector is responsible and actions by all actors are necessary to take the agenda forward.

The conversation with the panelists was kickstarted by what Thea Hilhorst called a ‘mind floss’, she presented a column on the Covid crisis and the importance of a bottom-up approach to complement the top-down crisis management that is happening now. She made a strong call – without denying the need for top-down approaches – to better link these to bottom up initiatives. The Covid crisis made (again) clear that the humanitarian sector needs to stay alert on this. The full blog can be read [here](#).

Gloria Modong presented the situation for her foundation in South Sudan where she sees positive as well as negative implications of the Covid-crisis. Negative effects are the weakened positions of local partners in terms of decision making due to for example technological barriers and lack of funding. This leads to the fact that the dominant part of humanitarian response is then left to UN organizations and international partners. Another negative effect on local partners is the increased health risk for staff due to Covid. The positive implications are that even though operations might be dominated by UN and international organizations, they cannot actually get their staff on the ground because of travel restrictions. That means that local organizations have to take over and retrieve more responsibilities. The international environment should see this as an opportunity to recognize this and redirect funding and change coordination structures to make local humanitarian aid more effective. Another opportunity that the Covid crisis brings is the attention for gender issues in the sector, like gender-based violence, or the fact that men are being hit harder by the Covid-crisis than women.

Feliciano Reyna talked about the difficult situation in Venezuela, which has already been in a humanitarian crisis for the past 4 years and now Covid is coming on top of this. The dangerous part is that when treating the situation *just* as a public health crisis, the other crises before are being forgotten or overseen. What happened with the Covid crisis is that many civil society organizations who did not work in the humanitarian sector before, now had to change part of their programs to address humanitarian issues as well. But again, problems like malaria, gasoline prices, electricity and water shortages should not be overseen. In terms of local leadership, we see that local organizations play a big part in retrieving and publishing trustworthy data in the Covid crisis. The UN structure that is there for example works together with the government and therefore keeps the sensibilities around some data in mind, whereas local civil society / non-governmental organizations publish more freely. Then the last thing he addresses is the food crisis that was already an issue in Venezuela, and which is now even extended due to the Covid-regulations. One cannot expect someone who is dependent on their work outside of the house, to stay indoors without being able to provide food for their families. So quarantine is not an option, because it might help in the one crisis but it worsens the other(s).

Lastly **Hero Anwar** elaborated on the situation in Iraq. She explained that the work for NGOs in Iraq is fairly complex due to the two governments that rule the country, of Kurdistan and of Iraq. This leads to a lot of access issues for international, national and local NGOs. Another thing that hampers the work of NGOs in Iraq is the curfew that is established due to the Covid-regulations. These regulations also led to an increase in jobless people, an increase in vulnerability and therefore more work for these NGOs, but less space for them to work in and funds for them to work with. The lack of direct funding to local NGOs leads to a dependence on international NGOs, which is a vulnerability because when they (for some reason) cannot or will not pay, local projects cannot continue.

The main take-away points for co-host **Anita Kattakuzhy** were:

1. The examples of the speakers show that localization discussions should really be embedded in a country context, because funding, governance and coordination mechanisms differ in each country.
2. There are however common drivers and needs of local and national organizations where Oxfam (and other international organizations) can contribute to. A lot of that comes down to good partnerships, funding mechanisms and pushing donors to do so as well.