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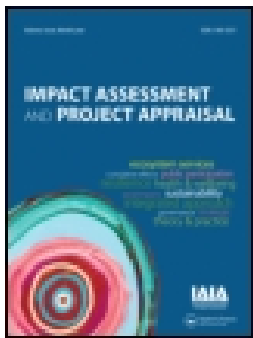
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1. The problem: uncritical localisation and impact assessment in rapidly changing environments

Impact assessment faces challenges in dealing with the 'magnitude, the speed and the complexity of current global problems and new societal dilemmas (needing) new facilitating strategic choices to achieve broader sustainability goals and objectives' (Partidario 2020). The past is not necessarily a guide to future risk. Retief et al. (2016) identified global megatrends of demographics, urbanization, technological innovation, power shifts, resource scarcity, and climate change that demand new approaches. Responding to an escalating scale and complexity of disasters within this context necessitates rapid decision making – but the speed can compromise the quality of the response and its effectiveness. As fake news raises the question of who to trust (Fischer 2018), engaging and empowering citizens in developments generally becomes even more important (Bice and Fischer 2020). Human rights impact assessment offers a way to recognise and focus on the rights of the most vulnerable, in ways that are embedded in the legal obligations of states (Harrison 2011).

Recent events highlight the need for effective localisation strategies that build self-sufficiency as anthropometric climate change intensifies. Some Pacific island states such as Vanuatu, in the forefront of such change, are building governance structures to address links between climate change, disasters, the wider environment, and the risks posed to the people and the economy. This has the potential to promote stronger and more coherent links between environmental governance, defined broadly, and disaster management, as envisaged by Tajima et al. (2014).

Cash programming for multi-sector disaster response is empowering and has been successful in meeting human needs. Cash has been used both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific – but when it is delivered and distributed too quickly problems can arise. Governments, donors, and administering organisations can do even better. They can, with pre-planning, public consultation, and *ex ante* impact assessment, design programs that are even more inclusive, more local, and better-aligned with their respective human rights obligations.

Taking a double disaster – the combined impact of COVID-19 pandemic closures and the cyclone emergency in Vanuatu – shows why this is necessary. Vanuatu was one of four Pacific countries hit by Cyclone Harald that had closed their borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those closures hampered rapid emergency reporting, response and assistance. Cash, delivered through technologically innovative forms, is particularly suited to these difficult circumstances – providing that those in need are the ones who receive it.

This letter presents a strategy for improving cash programming in the urban Pacific that focuses, most immediately, on anticipating the effective and inclusive distribution for those in need, taking account of trends in demographics, urbanisation and power shifts. The letter also demonstrates how early selection of a cash delivery mechanism can allow for public consultation and can reinforce the importance of an equitable, rights-based, rather than a charity-based, approach to COVID-19 recovery that is grounded in local realities. A rights-based approach to impact assessment requires governments, donors, and aid agencies to find out more about the leadership structures and land conflicts in communities where they are allocating cash – and to work with community leaders to identify vulnerable populations and individuals in most need.

2. A triple challenge for planning, delivery and impact assessment: a pandemic, closures and a cyclone

In April 2020, Tropical Cyclone Harold crashed through four Pacific countries – Vanuatu, Tonga, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands. It caused injuries, destroyed housing, infrastructure, food crops, and essential supplies. Its arrival following pandemic border closures highlighted the need for effective localisation strategies that can report, organise and coordinate a response locally and distribute assistance effectively using local frontline volunteers supported by remote health surveillance, training and materials supply. The cyclone was at its strongest over the Republic of Vanuatu, a country composed of 280,000 people, 82 islands, and a 2019 GDP per capita of 3,200. USD Cash assistance programming

was a logical choice as a response mechanism. Cash does not require the personnel and materials to pass over borders. With no recorded COVID cases, the Government of Vanuatu was not eager to host international administrators and humanitarian workers. The growing hardship of the pandemic response favoured cash, at least where markets still operated, or could be revived.

Based on favourable evaluation in previous humanitarian emergencies during previous humanitarian emergencies the Government of Vanuatu, with its development and humanitarian partners funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), determined cash to be a good strategy for rebuilding the homes devastated by Harold. This would in turn make families and communities more robust should a COVID outbreak occur. The program would use new technologies: mobile phone hardware and cash cards in-country, to distribute cash to communities. Five members of this author group (Authors Day, Tabawa, Netaf, Pakoa, and Ulas) successfully requested the Cash Working Group to reconsider the use of area councils as a distribution mechanism (April 2020).

However, the CWG continues to use the area-council structure to design and implement its programming – specifically, to design baseline assessment surveys to apportion need, and to evaluate the program (Oxfam 2020). This raises questions on the way in which the program was conceptualized and prepared, specifically as assessed against the criteria to be inclusive and accountable (DFAT 2017). It also raises the question of pre-planning for emergencies and disasters, so that tested strategies can be promoted that have already passed the test of community consultation.

3. Vanuatu's cash programming and governance

Localisation is a high-profile component of recent aid and humanitarian work, and there is significant institutional commitment within humanitarian and aid organisations – like Oxfam and the Australian aid program – to ensure that responses are localised (DFAT 2017). Localisation *should* be a priority – but sometimes, in attempting to localise programming, humanitarian and development organisations inadvertently neglect trends in urbanisation, demographics and power shifts that undermine delivery outcomes for the most vulnerable. In Vanuatu's cash assistance programming, it is the uncritical reproduction of the colonial area-council structure that concerns us. Area councils are structures of the state that leverage Pacific respect for chiefly authority (Wairiu 2006). The term, area council, in Vanuatu refers to two related concepts: First, it is an administrative geography, used to enumerate

population for all areas except inside the municipal boundaries of Port Vila and Luganville. Secondly, each geographic area council is, or will be, led by a group of local leaders called the area council. Centred on historic villages, their leadership is drawn from the village chiefly ranks. Established by an act of Parliament in 2003 (Government of Vanuatu 2003), area councils have been gradually mobilised as a kind of local government in Vanuatu.

Governance that acknowledges custom and uses customary practices is a founding principle of the Republic of Vanuatu and is embedded throughout the *Mama Loa* (the *Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu*). However, custom is changing, adaptable, and capable of accommodating the new urban forms. We argue here that the uncritical adoption of area councils as a geography of enumeration and a governance mechanism for cash programming, is fraught with problems, including that:

They do not reflect recent trends in demographics and urbanisation so do not represent most urban people. In Port Vila, area councils are formed around urban villages that were present around the cities at the time of independence (Rawlings 1999). Around half of Port Vila's population is composed of migrants from other islands that are not part of these villages, living in communities that are not directly represented by the community leaders comprising the area councils.

They are not fully functioning. In Luganville – on of the areas of implementation for this cash-programming initiative – area councils have yet to be formalised and launched.

They are not currently gender-inclusive, being composed almost entirely of men.

There are conflicts of interest. Because many urban communities are in standing land conflicts directly with members of local area council leadership (personal communications, October 2017 – September 2020), the leaders in area councils have an incentive to exclude them from cash allocation. Using area councils as bases for aid programming could exclude significant proportions of the population from meaningfully participating in benefitting from cash payments.

4. Human rights programming and impact assessment

As Vanuatu evaluates its current cash programming initiative and plans for its next initiative, one critical point of assessment will be in whether GoV and its assisting partners identified the appropriate governance institutions as units of enumeration and analysis – that is, whether area councils were the right choice. We propose that stronger, activated links between impact assessment and disaster management in the pre-planning phase could result in better cash management delivery and distribution strategies. This would

include questions relating to benefits distribution and utilisation, including for new urban communities. Social and custom assessments are already envisaged in the Government of Vanuatu's Environmental Assessment Regulations, as amended, and procedures (GoV 2011–2012). We also propose that a harmonised HRIA would be a useful tool in operationalising a rights-based approach to cyclone and COVID-19 recovery and response.

Rights-based approaches are not the only option to evaluate the impact of programs such as cash assistance. Gotzmann et al. (2016) find much in common between Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and HRIA in terms of: their shared objective to identify and address adverse impacts; to meaningfully include vulnerable people in consultation and benefits; and their focus on process as well as outcomes. The differences – in standards applied; in conceptualising project benefits; and the identification of stakeholders as rights-holders and duty-bearers – are being explored, to learn valuable lessons for mutual reinforcement. Both SIA and HRIA offer significant potential for enhanced distribution and equity. HRIA brings a particularly valuable focus on rights that is compatible with the particular features of Vanuatu: a commitment to localising governance shown by government in its implementation of area councils, a civil society that is seeking stronger representation for marginalized communities in the cities, and thus-far weak implementation of localized governance processes.

4.1. Rights-based approaches give scope to civil society

Partnership with local organisations that represent new demographic formations is a key part of rights-based approaches. Inclusion of civil-society organisations (CSOs) creates opportunity for deep engagement with recipients of the aid. Further, by making civil society partners in designing and monitoring programming, inclusion of CSOs can achieve the goal of creating 'an important corrective against human rights violations' (Künnemann and Leonhard 2008, p. 50). An alternative is that cash programming serves as a mechanism for consolidating existing power concentrations: an un-desired outcome (Künnemann & Leonhard 2008: 50).

4.2. Rights-based approaches include the vulnerable

Rights-based approaches are helpful for promoting social justice because they involve ubiquitous responsibility. The State's human rights obligations impact all government departments and agencies that design, shape or influence recovery and response policies

when carrying out their respective mandates while jointly ensuring policy coherence designed to protect human rights. Similarly, foreign States, international or regional financial institutions and private actors must systematically consider the impact of their actions or inaction on the enjoyment of human rights in debtor or beneficiary States (Human Rights Council 2018).

Meaningful, informed and effective participation of all persons in decision-making processes that affect them is another key component of a rights-based approach to pandemic and cyclone recovery (UNEP & OHCHR 2020). A rights-based approach requires specific attention to those who are already living in vulnerable situations. People in vulnerable situations include women, children, the poor, minorities, migrants, persons with disabilities, and importantly for our argument here, communities that are currently living in conflict with their landlords. Identifying them and targeting them for assistance, then, is a natural component of a rights-based approach.

5. Conclusion

Megatrends, in this case particularly the interplay between demographics, urbanization, and associated power shifts, change the patterns of vulnerability and need. A rights-based approach for designing and allocating cash programming, and for assessing the impact of the cash payments once the program is complete, requires an expanded understanding of what counts as community leadership. Over-reliance on area councils by aid agencies and government authorities can skew aid away from those who need it.

We have contended that the Government of Vanuatu's structural linking of impact assessment and disaster management sets a positive framework for pre-planning on the optimum delivery and distribution in advance for cash in the event of disaster. A human rights approach can be relatively easily harmonised with impact assessment at the pre-planning stage, including environmental, social and custom impact assessment, and used as a basis for ex post impact assessment of equity and effectiveness.

We encourage GoV, donors, and humanitarian agencies to re-examine existing distribution systems to ensure greater equity in access to assistance. Rights-based approaches are not desktop exercises. Empirical evidence must be collected both *ex ante* (i.e. prior to the proposed measures) and *ex post* (i.e. afterwards to assess their actual impact). There is an array of community-based associations and organisations that, if included in both the upcoming evaluations of cash programming and future administration processes, could expand the understanding of the effectiveness of distribution mechanisms. Such evaluations could yield valuable lessons for impact assessment in the context of megatrends in disaster

management.

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