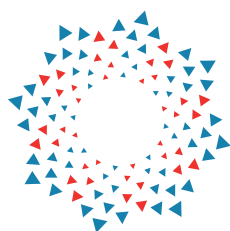# COVID-19, Inequality & Volunteering for Development

Considering a Capability Approach

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The COVID-19 pandemic, the worst in 100 years, has thus far taken a heavy toll on human lives and quality of living across the world, and has been particularly damaging to fragile national health, social protection, and economic systems in the Global South.

The World Social Report (2020:3)[1] reveals that income inequality within countries, including most developed countries with China and India, has grown substantially between 1990 and 2015. The share of income of the richest 1% of the global population has increased in 46 out of 57 countries where data was compared. A recent World Bank estimate[2] suggests that about 97 million people were pushed into poverty in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A Brookings study[3] (2020) suggested that as many as 60 countries, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, are likely to be off-track to meet the SDG target of eradicating poverty, exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A question naturally emerges - while almost all developed economies have experienced negative economic growth in 2020/21, why has the pandemic inflicted the highest and severest social and human impact in the Global South, particularly in the least developed and emerging economies? A series of global studies and evidence in 2020-21 attribute the impact of the pandemic to two major systemic and structural problems. One is a huge capability gap between nations, and the second, a widening capability deficit between groups of people within nations.

So, how do we address this? My argument is two-fold: first, to recognise the root cause of capability inequality and second, to address this inequality systematically and sustainably by using the volunteering for development methodology as a mainstream development approach in national development strategies and plans. Why?

Amartya Sen's work (2000)[4] on the capability approach focuses on creating opportunities, awareness, and mobilisation for poor, marginalised, and vulnerable people to be able to access basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and social protection without barriers. However, a market and private sector-dominant approach to development, as against a people-centric one, has continued to flourish. The 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention the extreme climate crisis, expose the inherent systemic weakness in the disempowerment of the most marginalised and vulnerable people and communities.

Increasing evidence from development organisations applying a volunteering for development methodology suggests that it enables development actors to adopt a root cause analysis (focused on exclusion, accountability and resilience), and to involve the most marginalised and vulnerable communities to lead their development journey and apply a relational volunteering model[5] to build community capability and system-strengthening for accountability to reduce poverty and inequality.

1   World Social Report (2020). United Nations: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/01/World-Social-Report-2020-FullReport.pdf

2   Daniel, G.M, Nishant Y, Christoph L, R.Andres C.A & Haoyu W. June 24, 2021. Updated Estimates of the Impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Turning the corner on the pandemic in 2021? World Bank.   https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-COVID-19-global-poverty-turning-corner-pandemic-2021 (Accessed 7th October 2021).

3   Homi Kharas& Kristofer Hamel (May 6, 2020). Turning Back the Poverty Clock: How will COVID-19 impact the world's poorest people? Brookings: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/05/06/turning-back-the-poverty-clock-how-will-COVID-19-impact-the-worlds-poorest-people/ (Accessed 9th May 2020).

4   Sen, A.(2000).Development as Freedom. Anchor Books.

5   Valuing Volunteering: The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development (2015). IDS & VSO. https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/the_role_of_volunteering_in_sustainable_development_2015_vso_ids.pdf

The volunteering for development methodology may emerge as a human capability model for the SDGs and social justice as it builds the voice and choice of the most vulnerable, marginalised and excluded groups of people. Volunteers work in multiple settings, from communities to government ministries. They connect communities with the duty bearers and stakeholders (the state and the market) to demand and access quality, accountable and basic services that meet their well-being and a right to life with dignity.

A million people around the world volunteer, of which 70% are informal, contributing directly in their own communities (UNV 2018: x)[6]. This is a powerful resource, and we need to better understand, recognise and apply its contribution to nations' social outcomes. Through the OECD's Better Life Initiative, countries have started to develop much-needed policies to understand the importance of well-being measurements[7] that directly reflect on improvement to people's capabilities. It is time for donors, as well as national and international frameworks, to adopt a volunteering for development methodology that aims to plan, deliver, and measure the capabilities of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. This will enhance these communities' ability to manage and overcome emergencies such as COVID-19, and will continue to build marginalised and vulnerable people's chances of realising their rights under the Sustainable Development Goals.

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6   The Thread that binds: Volunteerism & Community Resilience State of the World's Volunteerism Report (2018). UNV

7   How is Life? 2020: Measuring well-being (March 2020). OECD