

The never-ending story

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We have not seen the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. After attempting to manage – with extremely variable results from one continent to another – the first episode of the pandemic during the first semester of 2020, the world now faces countless unknowns, with as yet unwritten scenarios.

Already discussed in the fourteenth issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives*, published last July¹, the impacts of Covid-19 on international aid, in both its humanitarian action and development dimensions, have yet to be identified, understood, foreseen even. In order to do so, we must build on the experience gained over the past nine months whilst cautiously looking to the future and considering the contexts where the direct and indirect effects of Covid-19 will continue to unfold. Such is the theme of this issue. Produced in partnership with the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA), it forms the second strand to this Covid-19 theme.

The “Focus” section consists of eight articles, which will allow us to switch between lessons learned and future challenges, whilst navigating between different geographical areas – commensurate with the pandemic itself. This is what the contributions of ACAPS (Assessment Capacities Project) analysts and Madhushala Senaratne (University of Sussex) are tackling, showing how approaches as diverse as data collection in Bangladesh or storytelling offer to objectify our understanding of the current situation while raising awareness of the fate of the populations – with all the difficulties that this implies in practice and the reinventions that may emerge as a result of this crisis. The issue of shelter is approached from two angles: on the one hand, that of the suffering of the homeless, through an analysis of the work of aid actors in Marseille, which has been subject to strong constraints (Olivia Nevissas *et al.*); on the other hand, the question of inequalities in housing, which had come under the spotlight with this crisis (George Foden). Likewise, differences in the approaches taken by countries from the Global North, as well as their strengths and their blind spots, are presented in analyses on Canada (Diane Alalouf-Hall *et al.*) and France (Emmanuel Baron and Michael Neuman). Ongoing revolutions, including the most important of them – the localisation of aid – are approached through the very different examples of Vanuatu, in Melanesia (M.-C. Savard *et al.*) and the African continent (Irène Sesmaisons). Both vividly demonstrate the importance of the local scale in understanding this crisis and those to come.

But the history of this pandemic has not yet been written – far from it. And even though this second strand makes its own contribution to that history, just like the first, it by no means covers all the unknowns to which we allude. As they are revealed, they will help to chart a clearer course for humanitarian actors. From our vantage point, we will do so by asking the questions that shape humanitarian aid.

To begin with, what will be the impacts of this crisis upon the world’s economies, at all their embedded

¹ *Humanitarian Alternatives*, Focus “Covid-19. Impacts in the humanitarian field”, issue 14, July 2020, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/category/focus-en/covid-19-impacts-in-the-humanitarian-field>

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levels? The micro level – that of family economics and food security, and, more generally, of day-to-day survival. The meso level – that of urban-rural exchanges, now punctuated by manifold lockdowns and border closures/openings, and the impacts of these latter upon the vitality of national markets. And finally, the macro level – that of countries and groups of countries at once connected by local trade and driving globalisation of trade.

Likewise, what will be the impacts of the crisis on the world's already weakened multilateralism, the fragilities of which are becoming increasingly apparent? It remains as critical now as it has ever been to resolve the world's many ongoing conflicts in which today's perpetrators of violence have applied exceptionally distinct strategies in order to profit from the pandemic. Will the post-Covid-19 world be able to face the many kinds of crises to come, and draw upon a global governance that has seldom been so unstable, not only in the arena of health but also in the geopolitical one? What can we reasonably expect, in particular from the United Nations, now that the World Health Organization is paying the price for its criticised management of the pandemic and its manipulation by the world's larger States, the United States and China front in line?

It is in this maelstrom that aid – both in its humanitarian dimension, which is responding to the urgency of crises, and its development one, which is supporting populations over the long term – must also find a footing. How will the roles of aid actors change, in a situation in which the mobilisation of international actors in their accustomed fields of intervention remains very restricted, the necessary empowerment of local actors makes them more self-reliant, and both private and institutional funding are at risk of massive reductions? How will solidarity reinvent itself? What impacts will the “crisis management” have upon health systems? Will we be able to put anticipation and preparation back at the core of these health systems? Will we be ready when, faced with a level of vulnerability never seen before in our societies, other major disasters occur on the fringes or, at best, the wreckage of this pandemic?

No, we have not seen the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. But since it is a question of seizing every opportunity to learn in real time, may this issue – the result of an unprecedented collaboration between *Humanitarian Alternatives* and the IHSA – be a useful stone in the construction of this collective knowledge.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

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