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This insight is part of the centre's [COVID-19 series](#), looking at current developments in the global pandemic and its future implications for the social, political and economic spheres in the region.

## Humanitarian Assistance in the Asia-Pacific during COVID-19

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*As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat of natural hazards still looms large. How will humanitarian response to a major natural hazard be affected during the COVID-19 pandemic? As the monsoon season begins in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in the South West Pacific and Southeast Asia, this is a scenario that countries face. The overlapping effects of a pandemic and a natural hazard can compound socio-economic vulnerabilities in countries. While the current focus is on managing the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and communities also need to be prepared for concurrent natural hazards. This NTS Insight explores the effects of concurrent pandemic-disaster events, and how they threaten states and societies in the Asia-Pacific. This Insight demonstrates the potential challenges of dual crises on societies and vulnerable populations. It argues that the current situation calls for a broader and deeper localisation of the humanitarian system, one that places human security as its core organising principle unlike the backseat it currently takes today. To this end, it argues that inter-regional cooperation can further localisation through the experience of the South West Pacific where human security is articulated as national security and the cooperation in Southeast Asia on disaster response which builds national capacity. With overseas travel and supply chain restrictions severely hampering the movement of relief items and international humanitarian workers, the need to empower and strengthen local humanitarian actors becomes even more pressing.*



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## Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [Shared Vulnerabilities and Inter-Regional Cooperation on Disaster and Pandemic Preparedness](#)
- [Is COVID-19 Accelerating the Push Towards Localisation?](#)
- [Impact of New Technologies on Humanitarian Action in a Post-COVID-19 World](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is currently creating huge challenges for countries and communities around the world. Governments have imposed movement restrictions and national lockdowns in a bid to control the spread of the virus. This has resulted in predictions of the worst global recession since the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> Even as some countries are gradually reopening their borders, the pandemic is far from being fully contained.

Amid this pandemic, it is easy to forget that the Asia-Pacific is also the most disaster-prone region in the world. Many countries in the region have already experienced significant impacts from natural hazards. In April, less than one month after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, a category-5 storm - Cyclone Harold - devastated several Pacific Island countries, including Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Solomon Islands.<sup>2</sup> In May, Typhoon Vongfong hit the Philippines, which affected roughly 380,000 people,<sup>3</sup> while Tropical Cyclone Amphan struck Eastern India and Bangladesh, leaving death and destruction in its wake.<sup>4</sup>

In all these cases, humanitarian efforts were hampered by the overarching responses to COVID-19, often at the expense of vulnerable communities. In the Philippines, local officials faced challenges in terms of keeping their citizens safe from both the typhoon and the virus. For instance, evacuations were slowed down as affected populations could not be transported in large numbers, while evacuation centres could only be filled to half their usual capacity to prevent the spread of the coronavirus disease.<sup>5</sup> Due to COVID-19 restrictions on transportation and movement, nutrition services in India and Bangladesh were disrupted, resulting in vulnerable populations having inadequate access to food.<sup>6</sup> In Vanuatu, strict quarantine rules meant that humanitarian relief items were quarantined up to seven days, later reduced to three days.<sup>7</sup> Such restrictions hampered relief reaching those most affected by natural hazards, which is made clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Insight thus argues for the need to redefine security priorities centred around people and communities to better prepare for a post-COVID world drawing on the experience of the South West Pacific as instructive for Southeast Asia. Regional cooperation through ASEAN in Southeast Asia to respond to disasters provides an important case to illustrate the benefits of

<sup>1</sup> Gita Gopinath, "IMF: New Predictions Suggest a Deeper Recession and a Slower Recovery", *The World Economic Forum COVID Action Platform*, 25 June 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/imf-lockdown-recession-covid-19-coronavirus-economics-recession/>

<sup>2</sup> Dan McGarry, "'It's all Gone': Cyclone Harold Cuts a Deadly Path Through Vanuatu", *The Guardian*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/its-all-gone-cyclone-harold-cuts-a-deadly-path-through-vanuatu>

<sup>3</sup> UN OCHA, "Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update: Typhoon Vongfong Leaves Trail of Damage as the Country Grapples with the 'New Normal'", *Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update*, 20 May 2020, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/asia-pacific/card/tjXV99QVBE/>

<sup>4</sup> Zaw Htet and Thet Naing, "Cyclone Amphan Brings Heavy Rain, Destruction to India, Bangladesh", *VOA News*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/cyclone-amphan-brings-heavy-rain-destruction-india-bangladesh>

<sup>5</sup> UN OCHA, "Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update: Typhoon Vongfong Leaves Trail of Damage as the Country Grapples with the 'New Normal'", *UN OCHA Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update*, 20 May 2020, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/asia-pacific/card/tjXV99QVBE/>

<sup>6</sup> Shoba Suri, "Coronavirus Pandemic and Cyclone will Leave Many Indians Hungry and Undernourished", *Observer Research Foundation Commentary*, 16 July 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/coronavirus-pandemic-and-cyclone-will-leave-many-indians-hungry-and-undernourished/>

<sup>7</sup> Dan McGarry, "Cyclone Harold: Relief for Vanuatu Delayed by Coronavirus Contamination Fears", *The Guardian*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/cyclone-harold-relief-for-vanuatu-delayed-by-coronavirus-contamination-fears>

of partnership within the Asia-Pacific. Shared vulnerabilities and the experience of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia raise the possibility of fostering inter-regional cooperation and information-sharing between the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia for an equal and mutually beneficial partnership. This Insight explores how the pandemic has heightened the need to reconceptualise the localisation agenda moving away from the dichotomy of local-international towards niche capacities and a 'pluriversal world'<sup>8</sup>, where multiple actors and systems are recognised and work in tandem to provide the best possible assistance to affected populations. With overseas travel restrictions severely hampering the movement of relief items and international humanitarian workers, the need to recognise and empower the capacities, role and knowledge of local humanitarian actors becomes even more pressing. For the purpose of this paper, localisation will be used in reference to national and local humanitarian and aid organisations. To this end, it assesses the impact that an increased use of new technologies can play in humanitarian action in terms of remote management, empowering local staff, and reconfiguring supply chains.

## Shared Vulnerabilities and Inter-Regional Cooperation on Disaster and Pandemic Preparedness

As of August 2020, the world is currently grappling with a pandemic that has infected 24.6 million people and claimed roughly 835,000 lives.<sup>9</sup> A vaccine is still far from ready, and measures to contain the spread of the virus have had varying levels of success. Commentators have stated that the current COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis, but a human security crisis as well.<sup>10</sup> While not new, it has regained more traction as countries, and vulnerable communities in particular, experience overlapping and compounding human security threats during COVID-19 from increased domestic violence to limited access to basic necessities during lockdown. Calls for traditional definitions of national security – protecting the nation-state from military aggression - to be enhanced around human well-being and people-centred security have resurfaced.<sup>11</sup>

In the Asia-Pacific, the effects of the pandemic are exacerbated by natural hazards. While individual countries face varying levels of disaster risk, most of the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asian states are vulnerable to similar effects of climate change and climate-related hazards. They also face similar unparalleled challenges in having to deal with the effects of a global pandemic. This shared vulnerability to the debilitating effects of natural hazards and pandemics raises the possibility of fostering inter-regional partnership between the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia, in the realm of disaster governance and pandemic preparedness.

Both regions are inordinately exposed to natural hazards. As such, they can share their experiences to cultivate knowledge of disaster governance and learn from one another to inform their own context. Such interactions would enhance the ability of people, communities, states and the environment in the respective regions to better prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. Apart from rational and functional motivations for inter-regional partnership, there is also evidence that conditions in both the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia are favourable for such an endeavour.

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<sup>8</sup> David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, "Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (2017) 45: 3, pp. 293 – 311.

<sup>9</sup> Worldometer, "Coronavirus Update (Live)", 28 August 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

<sup>10</sup> Akiko Fukushima, "COVID-19 is a Human Security Crisis", *East Asia Forum*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/04/16/covid-19-is-a-human-security-crisis/>

<sup>11</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, "COVID-19 will Redefine the Meaning of National Security", *Channel News Asia Online Commentary*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/covid-19-redefine-national-security-defence-military-12808144>

Countries in the Pacific have demonstrated a “strong historical commitment to regional cooperation, consensus decision making and environmental sensitivity”.<sup>12</sup> The most obvious manifestation of this can be seen in articulations of a common regional identity, dubbed ‘the Pacific Way’, which emphasises moderation, respect, consensual dialogue and inclusiveness.<sup>13</sup> At face value, this seems consistent with the ASEAN Way, which favours consensus-based decision-making and a “process of regional cooperation and interaction based on discretion, informality, consensus-building and non-confrontational bargaining styles”.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, developments in the Pacific – most recently, in the Boe Declaration - indicate the primacy of human security in regional security discourses.<sup>15</sup> These common regional experiences identify the potential to develop a relationship between people, communities and countries in the two regions facing natural hazards.

As with any new partnership, one can foresee obstacles in the initial stages. One challenge lies in determining the extent of inter-regional partnership and what form it should take. While the two regional blocs do have aligned interests, their members have vastly different capabilities. Another challenge lies in ASEAN’s preoccupation with sovereignty and non-interference.<sup>16</sup> Some scholars have argued that ASEAN’s stance towards disaster management remains primarily state-centric. National governments tend to take centre-stage when disasters hit. This may make it difficult to convince individual governments to engage in inter-regional dialogue, as it might be misconstrued as an attempt to undermine their authority and involve yet another external actor in domestic humanitarian responses. This underlines the need to cultivate a partnership based on the common bonds between the people, communities and states exposed to natural hazards.

To this end, cultivating knowledge through sharing experience to natural hazards is a potential starting point upon which to build. There is growing potential for ASEAN and its counterpart organisation in the Pacific, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), to leverage on each other’s local knowledge, approaches and technical expertise within their respective regions. In particular, the Boe Declaration is instructive in placing human security at the core of national and regional security.<sup>17</sup> This can take the form of joint training programmes on disaster and pandemic preparedness, or inter-regional summits which scale up current regional forums such as the ASEAN Strategic Policy Dialogue on Disaster Management (SPDDM) and exercises like Exercise Coordinated Response (ExCORES) to include strategic exchanges. Relative geographical proximity and shared vulnerability to natural hazards and climate change lend credence to the argument for advancing inter-regional partnership on disaster governance necessarily across multiple and overlapping areas of community, national and regional levels. As disasters - and pandemics - continue to affect the Asia-Pacific region, the challenge is to build a platform for cooperation to cultivate ways of governing the global challenges we face in two regions linked by a common archipelagic and coastal experience.

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<sup>12</sup> Terry Jeggles, “Disaster Risk Management at the Regional Level”, in *Disaster Risk Management in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Ian Davis, (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Elise Huffer, “Regionalism and Cultural Identity: Putting the Pacific back into the Plan”, in *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands State, Society and Governance in Melanesia*, ed. Stewart Firth (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “Boe Declaration on Regional Security”, Suva, Fiji: PIF Secretariat, 5 September 2018 <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

<sup>16</sup> Lillianne Fan and Hanna Krebs, “Regional Organisations and Humanitarian Action: The Case of ASEAN”, *Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper*, September 2014, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9207.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “Boe Declaration”, Suva, Fiji: PIF Secretariat, 5 September 2018, <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>.

## Is COVID-19 Accelerating the Push Towards Localisation?

The localisation agenda has been at the forefront of global discussions amongst humanitarians ever since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. The debate has nevertheless suffered from a domination by United Nations agencies and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) at the global level and national government capacities in Southeast Asia. These often exclude provincial, local and community discussions and leadership, illustrating the contested nature of the localisation debate on humanitarian action.<sup>18</sup>

In recent years, we have seen shifts towards more 'localised' responses in the region. In the wake of the series of earthquakes, tsunami and soil liquefaction that affected Indonesia in 2018, the Indonesian government delivered a nationally led response with limited international assistance. It acted quickly to impose restrictions on the types and quantity of assistance required from international organisations, and only allowed assistance to be channelled through local partners and NGOs.<sup>19</sup> International actors were 'forced' to step aside and national and local actors were given the space to take on greater leadership and implementation roles.<sup>20</sup> Conversely this was seen in the region as an activation of agency at the national level identifying niche contributions needed in the response. The reaction of INGOs to this development highlighted the supply-driven nature of the global humanitarian system over a needs-based one. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) played a key coordination role in the response to the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake, tsunami and soil liquefaction. This highlights the continued and enhanced role of the regional body in humanitarian assistance and disaster response activities in Southeast Asia.

At a time when affected communities require more humanitarian support, COVID-19 lockdown measures have restricted humanitarian access to people most in need. It has forced countries to focus on containing the pandemic with national lockdown measures — at the cost of hindering humanitarian action and denying an adequate response to many affected communities in the Asia Pacific. It was reported that lockdown measures in Bangladesh resulted in an 80 percent reduction of humanitarian workers in refugee camps, which put refugees at risk of food and water shortages.<sup>21</sup> In May 2020, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) stated that almost a third of their international staff meant to be deployed to Cox's Bazar were unable to travel into Bangladesh.<sup>22</sup> The adverse effects of stretched humanitarian capacity in Cox's Bazar is further exacerbated by the threat of natural hazards during the cyclone season. With overseas travel restrictions severely hampering the movement of international humanitarian workers, the need to recognise and empower local humanitarian actors becomes even more pressing. It accelerates the need to move to a locally driven, regionally supported and international as necessary humanitarian system. The current pandemic is forcing the international aid sector to adapt to a 'new normal' – restricted humanitarian access - and to reconceptualise humanitarian action.

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<sup>18</sup> Alistair D. B. Cook and Christopher Chen, "Humanitarian Action: Southeast Asia's Local Turn", *RSIS Commentary*, 6 December 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/humanitarian-action-southeast-asias-local-turn/#.XxBtQSGzZPY>

<sup>19</sup> Ivany Atina Arbi, Agnes Anya and Andi Hajramuni, "Indonesia Restricts Foreign Helpers in Central Sulawesi to 'Avoid More Work'", *The Jakarta Post*, 11 October 2018, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/10/11/indonesia-restricts-foreign-helpers-in-central-sulawesi-to-avoid-more-work.html>

<sup>20</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group, "Charting the New Norm? Local Leadership in the First 100 Days of the Sulawesi Earthquake Response", *Humanitarian Horizons Practice Paper Series*, March 2019, [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HH\\_Sulawesi-Practice-Paper-4\\_FINAL\\_electronic\\_200319\\_v1.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HH_Sulawesi-Practice-Paper-4_FINAL_electronic_200319_v1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: Covid-19 Aid Limits Imperil Rohingya", Human Rights Watch, 28 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/28/bangladesh-covid-19-aid-limits-imperil-rohingya>

<sup>22</sup> MSF, "COVID-19: Five Challenges in Bangladesh and the Rohingya Refugee Camps", *MSF Article*, 10 May 2020, <https://www.msf-me.org/article/covid-19-five-challenges-bangladesh-and-rohingya-refugee-camps>

For example, in the aftermath of Cyclone Harold, the Vanuatu government and humanitarian community recognised that the response was going to be vastly different from previous responses. This was largely by necessity, as problems created by COVID-19 travel restrictions – forced repatriation of international staff, quarantine requirements on aid supplies, internal travel restrictions, prevention of international surge deployments – meant that technical support and response efforts were focused on the agency of local communities.<sup>23</sup>

As such, it is evident that, when facing a double disaster, localisation through national staff, in-country teams and local organisations is the only way to ensure that aid is provided to affected populations. When external humanitarian agencies are unable to respond due to restricted access during COVID-19, the onus falls on national and local actors to scale up their humanitarian efforts to vulnerable and affected populations. To adapt to this ‘new normal’ and offer a broader and deeper localisation effort, there are a few issues that need to be considered.

Firstly, it is important not to allow localisation discussions to centre around the creation of false dichotomies between the ‘local’ and the ‘international’. Doing so might result in unhealthy competition between international, national, and local actors.<sup>24</sup> It also risks “reproducing stereotypes and current power asymmetries within the humanitarian system through a focus on Western international actors and a blindness towards dominant local or non-Western international elites”<sup>25</sup> and those of and in affected communities.

Secondly, the question of how to support localised response should be addressed more substantively. There is a need to recognise and strengthen local humanitarian capacity. However, this should not be piecemeal in nature. Change requires deliberative and affirmative action, and not just passive commitments to localisation. Local NGOs need to have access to direct funding from donors. In Vanuatu, national organisations noted that they received less funding for Tropical Cyclone Harold as compared to previous responses<sup>26</sup> again illustrating the supply-driven nature of the humanitarian system. The general consensus is that the step up in national and local leadership during the cyclone response has not been met with a similar step up in direct resource allocation.<sup>27</sup> Access to sustained, long-term funding is thus of paramount importance to the development of local capacity. One way to do this is to leverage on existing consortiums or networks of local NGOs to petition for more funding from donors. In the Philippines, the Zero Extreme Poverty 2030 Cebu Convergence (ZEP) has been petitioning for increased support from international organisations and humanitarian funding institutions to enable local NGOs to address the needs of vulnerable communities in Metro Cebu amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, while national and local actors need to continue stepping up their efforts to address gaps and improve the effectiveness of their response mechanisms, international actors also need to devolve more agency and autonomy to their

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<sup>23</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group, “No Turning Back: Local Leadership in Vanuatu’s Response to Tropical Cyclone Harold”, *Humanitarian Horizons Practice Paper Series*, June 2020, [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TC-Harold-Practice-Paper\\_final-electronic.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TC-Harold-Practice-Paper_final-electronic.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Larissa Fast, “Upending Humanitarianism: Questions Emerging ‘From the Ground Up’”, *Humanitarian Policy Group Briefing Note*, December 2017, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11941.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Kirstina Roepstorff, “A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action”, *Third World Quarterly*, (2020) 41 No. 2, p. 284-301 (p. 292).

<sup>26</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group, “No Turning Back: Local Leadership in Vanuatu’s Response to Tropical Cyclone Harold”, *Humanitarian Horizons Practice Paper Series*, June 2020, [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TC-Harold-Practice-Paper\\_final-electronic.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TC-Harold-Practice-Paper_final-electronic.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Fundlife, “FundLife joins Local CSOs in Cebu, Philippines to Call for Greater Support and Direct Grassroots Funding from INGOs and Wider Humanitarian Sector”, *Fundlife International News*, 22 July 2020, <http://www.fundlife.org/news/fundlife-joins-local-csos-in-cebu-philippines-to-call-for-greater-support-and-direct-grassroots-funding-from-ingos-and-wider-humanitarian-sector?fbclid=IwAR2mNCC0LF7tvA1F5rJFFlzOcqHOMGt9C2tDSZUV0qFOkyB5Is5DD5cQHA>

local counterparts. They need to build equitable, sustainable partnerships with local actors, and identify areas where they can value add.

However, they should not use this as an excuse to take themselves out of the picture completely and shift the burden of care entirely to national and local actors. It is important to note that supporting local humanitarian action does not simply imply a reduced or non-existent role for international organisations.<sup>29</sup> By and large, international organisations still have the monopoly on technical expertise and resources, and as such have capacity and experience to contribute to the response effort. The key is to build complementary structures, so that national and local actors can build their own capabilities and take on greater responsibilities.

## Impact of New Technologies on Humanitarian Action in a Post-COVID-19 World

Most environments in which humanitarians operate are constrained in some way. In the current pandemic situation, access to affected populations is the biggest constraint. In response to this, humanitarian organisations have invested in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) solutions to support the planning, design, targeting, implementation, and monitoring of their operations. Improving the effectiveness of humanitarian operations has become an aspirational goal, and related to this, is the idea that innovation and the use of new technologies can expedite this change.<sup>30</sup>

One example is the use of telecommunication technologies and platforms to facilitate humanitarian action.<sup>31</sup> Communication services during crises are useful in supporting the delivery of aid to people. Often this takes the form of information; affected populations are able to use such services to access important information such as evacuation and supply distribution points, as well as risk information and sometimes engage directly with humanitarian organisations. For instance, WHO launched a dedicated messaging services with partners WhatsApp and Facebook to keep help people safe during the current pandemic. Available in Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, this easy-to-use messaging service enables WHO to disseminate COVID-19 information directly to affected people conversant in these languages.<sup>32</sup> In Vanuatu, in the aftermath of Cyclone Harold, international technical support and remote training was conducted via Zoom for local volunteers.<sup>33</sup> In Indonesia, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is supporting frontline responders from the Indonesian Red Cross by providing training sessions on Skype.<sup>34</sup> This use of telecommunication technologies takes on even greater significance in the current COVID-19 context, as international aid agencies are compelled to remotely manage their local counterparts. Indeed, the pandemic has forced a significant change to the traditional modality of sending technical advisers to affected countries; online and digital training is now increasingly

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<sup>29</sup> Larissa Fast and Christina Bennett, "From the Ground Up: It's About Time for Local Humanitarian Action", *Humanitarian Policy Group Report*, May 2020, [https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/17-19\\_ip\\_synthesis\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/17-19_ip_synthesis_web_0.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Chen, "Humanitarian Technology: Taking the 'Human' out of Humanitarianism?", *RSIS Commentary*, 5 August 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/humanitarian-technology-taking-the-human-out-of-humanitarianism/#.XxGLaigzZPY>

<sup>31</sup> UN OCHA, "Five Ways Humanitarians Use Technological Innovation to Deliver During COVID-19", *Medium*, 11 June 2020, <https://medium.com/humanitarian-dispatches/five-ways-humanitarians-use-technological-innovation-to-deliver-during-covid-19-40ce8e977fc4>

<sup>32</sup> WHO, "WHO Health Alert Brings COVID-19 Facts to Billions via WhatsApp", *WHO Feature Stories*, 20 March 2020 (Updated 21 August 2020), <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-health-alert-brings-covid-19-facts-to-billions-via-whatsapp>

<sup>33</sup> Jessica Alexander, "COVID-19 Changed the World. Can it Change Aid, too?", *The New Humanitarian*, 16 July 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/special-report/2020/07/16/Rethinking-humanitarianism-will-coronavirus-change-aid>

<sup>34</sup> ICRC, "ICRC Operational Response to COVID-19 in the Asia-Pacific", *ICRC Document*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-covid-19-response-in-asia-pacific>

conducted by staff based at home, using digital communication platforms.<sup>35</sup> However, while there is considerable potential to bridge the divide between affected communities and the wider international humanitarian community, greater emphasis is needed to empower local communities to take the lead and not simply be implementation partners.

Cash-based transfers (CBT) via digital platforms is another potential use of technology in a disaster-pandemic context. Donors and humanitarian agencies increasingly view cash-based interventions as one important emergency response to meet immediate needs in the aftermath of a disaster. By providing affected populations with immediate access to funds to purchase supplies, it cuts down on the time delays that are often associated with procurement procedures. Cash-based programming also helps to support the local economy by encouraging purchases from local suppliers.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, cash transfers give disaster-affected populations more autonomy and flexibility to craft their own responses.<sup>37</sup> In a disaster-pandemic situation, CBT should be encouraged. For instance, instead of setting up food distribution stations, mobile money cash transfers can be used. This provides people with cash to buy food at their own convenience and helps avoid the massive gatherings that food distributions can draw, which can fuel the spread of disease.<sup>38</sup> At present, CBT might be an issue in countries without the necessary digital infrastructure or access to the needed supplies, but it is an endeavour worthy of future investment which could shape the way aid is being provided in a post-COVID-19 world.

The current COVID-19 pandemic is adding more pressure to rethink how we meet humanitarian needs. Humanitarian crises usually create a temporary spike in the demand for certain relief items. This is further exacerbated by disruptions to supply chains and travel routes as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>39</sup> This results in inadequate relief to affected populations. To this end, new technologies such as 3D printing and drones have been used to ease the strain on global supply chains. In Singapore, researchers have developed a new method of mass-producing COVID-19 testing swabs using 3D-printing technology.<sup>40</sup> With mass testing a priority in many countries, innovations such as this enables swab kits to be produced locally, more affordably, and on a larger scale. Such technologies can help augment and localise strained supply chains. In Ghana, drones have been used to deliver medical supplies and COVID-19 test samples to and from difficult-to-reach rural areas.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Yonah – a Singapore start-up – has been working on building a cargo drone delivery system to help deliver healthcare supplies to remote communities in the region.<sup>42</sup> These initiatives help to circumvent physical barriers such as movement and travel restrictions and allow humanitarian supplies to reach affected populations in inaccessible areas. Moving forward, such technological solutions that help to deliver services remotely will increasingly become integrated in relief efforts.

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<sup>35</sup> Lisa Cornish, "First Came the Coronavirus. And then the Cyclone Hit", *Devex Inside Development*, 21 May 2020, <https://www.devex.com/news/first-came-the-coronavirus-and-then-the-cyclone-hit-97261>

<sup>36</sup> Silke Pietzsch, "Unconditional Cash Transfers: Giving Choice to People in Need", *Humanitarian Practice Network Magazine*, February 2011, <https://odihpn.org/magazine/unconditional-cash-transfers-giving-choice-to-people-in-need/>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Sara Jerving, "Cash Transfers Lead the Social Assistance Response to COVID-19", *Devex Inside Development*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.devex.com/news/cash-transfers-lead-the-social-assistance-response-to-covid-19-96949>

<sup>39</sup> Alistair D. B. Cook and Christopher Chen, "Establishing Humanitarian Lanes During COVID-19", *East Asia Forum*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/06/30/establishing-humanitarian-lanes-during-covid-19/>

<sup>40</sup> Timothy Goh, "NUS Invents New Way to Produce Covid-19 Swab, 40 million to be Produced in Coming Months", *The Straits Times*, 13 June 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/nus-invents-new-way-to-produce-covid-19-swab-40-million-to-be-produced-in-coming>

<sup>41</sup> Sara Jerving, "Remote Technologies Find a Role in COVID-19 Response", *Devex Inside Development*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.devex.com/news/remote-technologies-find-a-role-in-covid-19-response-97056>

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Kwang, "Singapore Start-up Aims to Bring Healthcare to Papua New Guinea's Needy, One Drone at a Time", *Channel News Asia Online*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/technology/singapore-start-up-aims-to-bring-healthcare-to-papua-new-guinea-9956414>

While technology can be an enabler of localisation as well as help increase the effectiveness of humanitarian responses, it is important to note that its use is largely dependent on systems in place in the affected countries. Communications infrastructure can often be damaged during a natural hazard, as experienced in Vanuatu during Cyclone Harold<sup>43</sup>, which impedes the use of such new technological initiatives. In rural areas, there might not be adequate infrastructure in place to facilitate the use of technologies such as 3D printing or drones. Hence, this requires a holistic assessment of new technologies and their impacts and limitations on relief activities.

## Conclusion

This NTS Insight has explored the effects of concurrent pandemic-disaster responses, and how they threaten states and societies in the Asia-Pacific. Broadly, it has demonstrated that the potential challenges of dual crises on societies and vulnerable populations require a broader and deeper localisation of the humanitarian system. It has argued that shared vulnerability raises the possibility of fostering inter-regional partnership between the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia, in the realm of disaster governance and pandemic preparedness. It has also indicated that inter-regional partnership between the South West Pacific and Southeast Asia can draw on their respective approaches and capacities for mutual benefit. Further, with overseas travel restrictions severely hampering the movement of international humanitarian workers, COVID-19 has accelerated the pace of the localisation agenda in many countries. The current pandemic is forcing the aid sector to adapt to a 'new normal' in terms of providing humanitarian assistance, one that places more emphasis on locally led, regionally supported and international-as-necessary responses. Finally, it assessed the increased role that new technologies can play in humanitarian action in terms of remote management, empowering local staff, providing an alternative to in-kind assistance, and localising global supply chains. Faced with the most significant global pandemic in a century, the humanitarian system will be forced to reconfigure itself to reach those most in need. This NTS Insight highlights the need to rethink how best we meet the needs of those affected by recognising and empowering local humanitarians, cultivating knowledge with similarly affected communities, countries and regions to build a more sustainable and equitable system for now and the future challenges we face.

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<sup>43</sup> Ben McKay, 'Cyclone Harold's Devastation Revealed', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/cyclone-harold-s-devastation-revealed-20200408-p54idw.html>

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