

# **LEADERSHIP IN THE SHADOW OF THE PANDEMIC:**

RESEARCHING  
SPACES OF  
RESILIENCE AND  
TRANSFORMATION

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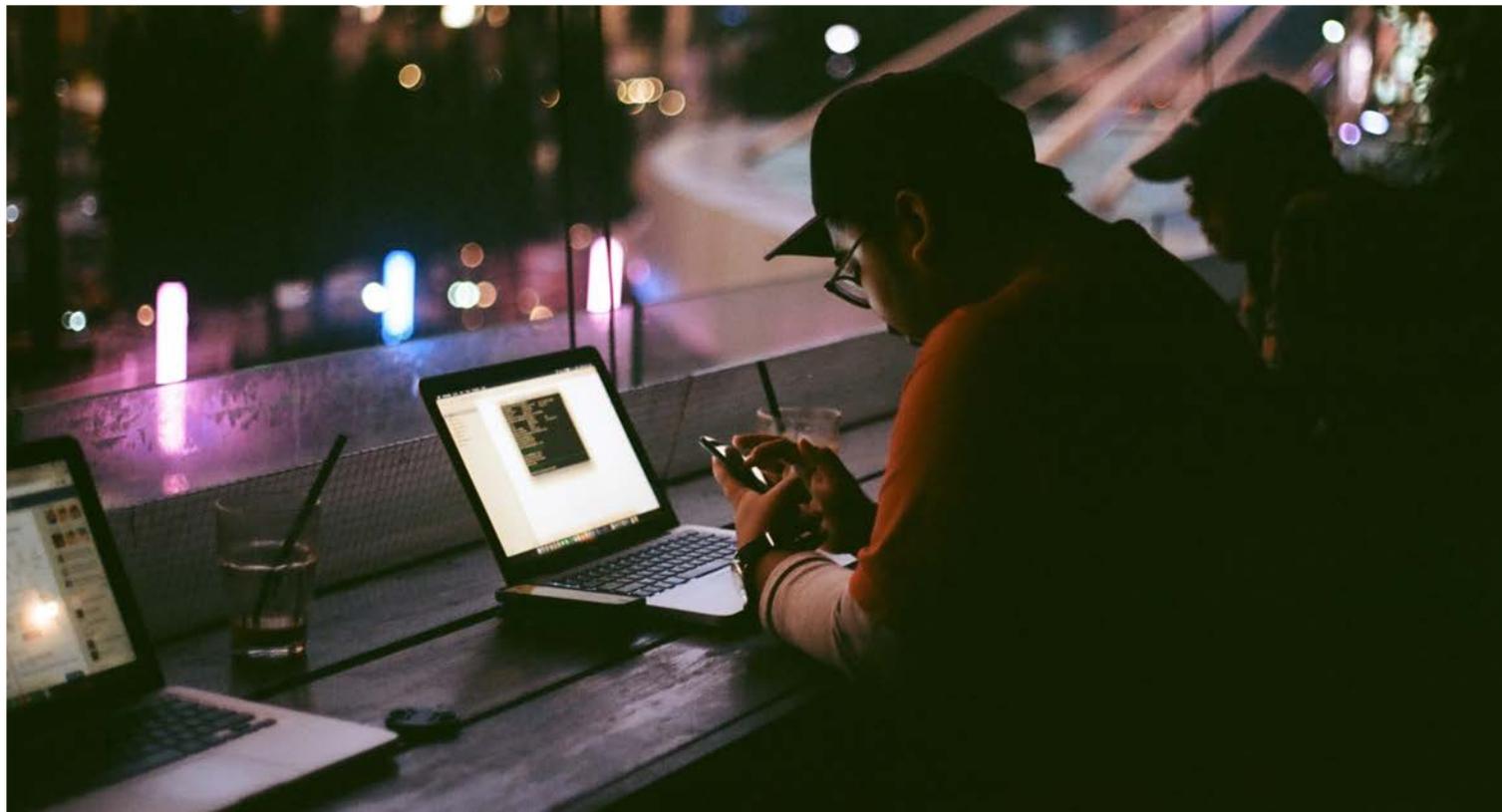
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- COVID-19 has presented enormous challenges to communities in the Asia-Pacific. However, it has also provided opportunities for communities to develop creative means of addressing these challenges despite, or maybe because of, the withdrawal of external development workers.
- Within Indonesia's disability activism communities, efforts to respond to the pandemic have reduced fragmentation and provided new opportunities for unity. The shift towards virtual communications has allowed Jakarta leaders to significantly improve their connections with local disability leaders, and has increased awareness of the need to address disability issues.
- In the Solomon Islands, resilient local communities have continued to develop their own initiatives to address local problems, often through forms of horizontal leadership, church and local government institutions, and through increased bartering.
- The closing of trade and borders due to COVID-19 has been met in Papua New Guinea's South Fly district (Western Province) with resilience. Commercial fishing has become a major way for village communities to support themselves, with villagers selling to buyers who come from the provincial capital of Daru to the villages.



## DISABILITY LEADERSHIP IN INDONESIA

Prior to COVID-19, the Indonesian disability movement leadership was largely based in the capital city of Jakarta. Local disability leaders were often separated from these Jakarta leaders, who had greater access to national government and services. During the pandemic, the disability activist movement of Indonesia developed virtual platforms to address challenges faced by disabled people, and in so doing, also managed to significantly bridge this gap.

At the start of the pandemic, the Indonesian disability activist community responded immediately, whilst the government response left people with disabilities behind. Disability activist groups moved onto online platforms in order to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people's lives. This data has brought about positive outcomes in allowing disability leaders across Indonesia to coordinate faster, work together more collaboratively and consult with each other efficiently. It also allows activists from large distances away and living in different communities to come together effectively.

The use of WhatsApp groups and Zoom have therefore helped bridge the traditional gap between Jakarta activists and local activist leaders elsewhere. The work of these activist groups has contributed to a sense of greater need for disability inclusion, and humanitarian actors generally are now more aware of the need for disability in their COVID-19 response.

However, we still need further data on how the pandemic has harmed people with disabilities, particularly in terms of their mental health. As we move forward, it will be important to avoid reversing the gains made in the Indonesian disability activist community in terms of connection and inclusion.



## COLLABORATION IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS TO ENABLE POSITIVE CHANGE

In the Solomon Islands, tribal leaders are involved in organising development projects that take place in their communities. This is a largely horizontal approach to development: local rather than state driven (even when state funded) and with local tribal, church and government leaders playing an appropriate role as partners within projects. The church occupies a major role in development and leadership, for example by promoting healthy living as an important reflection of spiritual standing. In certain parts of North Malaita, inclusive prayer sessions also provide opportunities for project ideas to be brought up and debated among community leaders.

Members of Parliament have conveniently attributed the poor spending of Solomon Islands Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) to COVID-19. Rural people, meanwhile, continued with their usual lives during the pandemic. This means it has been left to local community initiatives to attempt to address issues that arose during the pandemic. Resilient local communities tackled gaps in need through developing informal barter systems, often within church structures, for everyday goods, as well as systems for valuing and exchanging these goods.

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## LEADERSHIP BEYOND STATE LIMITS IN SOUTH FLY, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Informal leadership remains strong within many communities in the South Fly District of Western Province, in the form of ward development committees, village courts, women's groups and in the churches. However, development projects have in the past sometimes negatively impacted these forms of local leadership, through the establishment of parallel structures. These external agencies have often selected new leaders for new committees, disrupting and undermining local leadership. This has in particular displaced ward development committees, which are generally seen as the most powerful institution at the village level.

At the same time within the province, most services and government workers are based in the capital of Daru. Travel is largely by outboard motor powered 'banana boats' that are expensive to run, due to the exorbitant cost of fuel. Community leaders and service providers need to travel to Daru, to conduct business, attend meetings and collect resources, which can take weeks, consuming much of the money intended for village use. This is one of the reasons little public finance reaches village level. Health posts are left unattended, which leads to significant resentment among villagers. However, the commitment of ward members in seeking government services and funding points to the motivation and potential of local leadership.

As might be expected, COVID-19 has brought significant challenges to the province. Borders have closed and formal trade with Australia and Indonesia has come to a halt. However, the people of South Fly have demonstrated great resilience. Villagers have taken the opportunity to look for alternative markets and to consider how to support themselves. Commercial fishing has provided a successful path for them to do this, with the fish being sold in the Daru Market, and to buyers who visit the villages from Daru. COVID-19 has thus disrupted how people trade and generate income; it will be important, as we go forward beyond the pandemic, to understand the positive and negative changes it has wrought, and provide aid without getting in the way of local leadership.



## CONCLUSION

The disruption brought about by COVID-19, including the withdrawal of foreign development workers, has also opened up opportunities and allowed local communities and local leaders to come forward with new and creative ways of functioning. Looking forward, the goal must be to protect the gains that have been made and spaces that have opened up for local leadership. While the need for development assistance has never been greater, development workers must avoid reverting back to old patterns, and occupying spaces in unhelpful ways. The onus is on the development sector to keep these spaces and the leadership that has emerged within them flourishing.

This report is a summary of the DLP panel 'Leadership in the shadow of the pandemic: Researching spaces of resilience and transformation' that took place on 2nd July 2021 at the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Conference 2021. We would like to thank the panellists for their contributions, as well as the conference organisers and all those who engaged with the event.

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The **Developmental Leadership Program** (DLP) is an international research collaboration supported by the Australian Government.

DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

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