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Why do we need local governments in pandemics?

MAY 15, 2020



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All disasters are local. Local governments, being closer to people, are the first line of defense in fighting against a pandemic. Given their proximity to people, they are better positioned to identify potential vulnerabilities and design appropriate response actions.

The public increasingly expects better public sector leadership responding to all kinds of disasters, including pandemics.[1] To face the daunting task of pandemic response, governments need to examine their intergovernmental arrangements to deploy local governments effectively in fighting against the pandemic. The efficient provision of pandemic response service requires that governments satisfy the needs and preferences of citizens as well as possible. This is best achieved by the "subsidiary" principle; that is to say, responsibility for the provision of services should be assigned to the lowest level of government.

In many countries, including China[2] and South Korea[3], local governments are part of the coronavirus response, playing an important role in at least three categories of responsibilities:

1. *Increasing the level of local healthcare service delivery:*

- Increasing testing volumes
- Providing emergency care
- Retrofitting existing facilities for healthcare service delivery
- Procurement of medical and personal protective equipment

2. *Responsibilities in epidemiological investigations and tracking:*

- Identification of suspected cases
- Clinical investigation of suspected cases
- Contact tracing, recording and reporting of contacts
- Isolation of suspected cases
- Managing quarantine sites
- Containment of spread of the virus which requires enforcing proper environmental and sanitation

regulations

- Containment of the spread of the virus which requires administrative controls, such as closing restaurants and other businesses
- Production and dissemination of awareness-raising information
- Enforcement of public health measures, such as social distancing

3. *Responsibilities in economic and social relief activities:*

- Establishing and operating food and non-food (medicine) distribution centers
- Building and operating homeless shelters
- Ensuring the continuity of utility services, such as water, sewage, electricity etc.

Notwithstanding the discussions on subsidiarity principle, pandemic response is not a specific responsibility assigned to local governments. Externalities associated with the pandemic response make it a concurrent responsibility between local and central governments.[4] In many countries, concurrent service delivery responsibilities usually lead to poor coordination in service delivery between central and local governments, producing suboptimal level of service delivery.

International experience with past natural disasters and epidemics highlights the importance of coordination within the government and across levels of government to avoid duplication or shared responsibility challenges. [5]South Korea offers a good example of intergovernmental coordination. After the MERS epidemic, South Korea, amended its Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act (Act No. 14286) in 2016, establishing a comprehensive framework to respond to infectious diseases. When the first coronavirus cases reported in South Korea, local governments formed Local Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (LDSCHQ) to join the central government's effort to respond to the pandemic. LDSCHQs play an important role in epidemiological response actions. The government is undertaking vigorous epidemiological measures to track and test suspected cases jointly with local governments. In order to speed up epidemiological investigations, local governments are

responsible for conducting preliminary investigations. The central rapid response teams are utilized to help local governments in regions experiencing massive outbreaks.

Pandemics threaten lives by developing a gap between the capacity to provide emergency healthcare services and available resources. Therefore, governments need to mobilize all parts of the public sector, including local governments, for response actions. In devising a pandemic response strategy, governments can benefit from established theories in economics and political science which have articulated efficiency and accountability gains that could accrue from devolving certain service delivery responsibilities to local governments.[6] These arguments are valid in a pandemic situation as well.

[1] Kapucu, Naim and Montgomery van Wart. (2006). "The evolving role of the public sector in managing catastrophic disasters lessons learned" *Administration and Society* 38 (3): 1-30.

[2] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-wuhan-testin/getting-a-coronavirus-test-in-wuhan-fast-cheap-and-easy-idUSKCN21W0C5>

[3] <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/seouls-radical-experiment-in-digital-contact-tracing>

[4] According to Yilmaz, Vaillancourt and Dafflon (2012; p. 108), "if...the activities of one government have important external effects on the individuals or businesses located in other jurisdictions or on other government types, then these activities should be well coordinated among the affected governments." In the case of pandemic response, there are vertical and horizontal externalities. The nature of health pandemic response requires vertically integrated response; local governments providing certain local functions and central government backstopping local governments. There are also horizontal externalities as contagious nature of the disease makes it easy to move from one geographic area to bordering areas.

[5] The lack of coordination has been cited as one of the most pressing challenges to the containment efforts of the Ebola virus in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. See Oluseun Olu et. al. (2016); Sacks et. al. (2015); Ross (2017); Thiam et. al. (2015).

[6] There is also a robust literature on the role of decentralized governance for effective disaster prevention and mitigation which emphasizes local-level resilience to cope with disasters (Paton and Johnston, 2001; Tobin, 1999).

Local Governance

Keywords:

Pandemics people local governments