

“Efficient crisis handling requires coordination between government and other actors, such as citizens, civil society including community and non-governmental organizations, and other network partners.”

– Thai NGUYEN, Young Global Changer



Image Source: Distribution of healthy food packages for traditional art performers who were impacted by the pandemic, as a part of ICCN program Aksi Bersama Bantu Sesama (Solidarity Act) for Covid-19 pandemic mitigation. Image Source: Indonesia Creative Cities Network (ICCN). Rescue packet in Indonesia. Image by ICCN, all rights reserved ©. Note: We apologize for the low image quality.





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### **A grounded response to COVID-19: On informal civil society and support**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious consequences beyond medical concerns at local, national, and global scale (Slater, 2020; Weible et al., 2020). Most national governments have formulated and implemented policy responses, drawing from both existent and makeshift framework(s), to various degrees of efficiency and success. However, efficient crisis handling still requires coordination between government and other actors, such as citizens, civil society including community and nongovernmental organizations, and other network partners (Kapucu, 2006). Much research is still needed to understand how such coordination actually materialises. Understandably, formal NGOs might benefit from a higher level of interaction with institutional actors. Still, the pandemic has also highlighted the responsiveness of local community-led initiatives, as observed, for instance, in Hong Kong by Wan et al. (2020), Latin American cities by Duque Franco et al. (2020), or in

China by Hu and Sidel (2020) and Miao et al. (2021).

Thus, to address community resilience, as defined by the main themes of this e-book, requires better understanding of how informal civil society, particularly community-based groups and/or initiatives, as opposed to formal NGOs, can contribute to the resilience of the community in terms of not only medical but also livelihood security, such as food and hygiene, support. White and Banda strongly argued for the capacity of civil society to “bolster defence from the ground up” (2009: 111). Civil society, especially those of grassroots nature, have an edge over institutional actors in terms of (i) providing legitimisation for difficult policy choices via raising awareness, (ii) functioning as a channel for community-based knowledge, providing a clearer picture of human and technical needs and capacities, (iii) providing on-the-ground aid, (iv) identifying gaps in regulation, pressing for compliance, and advocating for change and (v) contributing to policy making process.

Echoing these propositions, there are examples where community-led initiatives have provided much needed on-the-ground aid and ensured compliance with measures. Hong Kong networks of District Councillors, local organisations and shop owners coordinated masks sharing events, using local knowledge to identify and prioritize groups with higher level of exposure risk (Wan et al., 2020).

In China, the pandemic has led to an increase of volunteers, most of whom were mobilised at their own will, albeit in a state-led manner (Miao et al., 2021). The assistance provided by the volunteers ranged from offering pandemic-related support for special need children and families to employing ridesharing platforms to support emergency patient transport, material delivery, rescue, and logistics (ibid., 3). That said, the ability to contribute to regulation and policy remains limited. Looking at bottom-up initiatives in Latin America, Duque Franco et al. (2020) concluded that these initiatives provided valuable help to informal settlements in terms of food security, hygiene, accommodation, and income. Their findings, however, did indicate efforts to influence political participation through preparing analysis and recommendation for local and national governments.

The ability to identifying gaps in regulation is exemplified by One Egg a Day (OEAD),<sup>1</sup> a volunteer group in Vietnam. In the process of providing food and other necessities to workers of informal economy as well as homeless people, the group has used their presence on Facebook to advocate for recognition of such population in the formal systems, since the lack of such recognition have prevented this group from citizenship's benefits. This drawback has been somewhat exacerbated by social distancing measures and the growing discourse on digitalisation that occasionally forgoes the privileged-ness of technological access.

The discussed examples have highlighted how informal civil society, i.e., community-led or volunteer-based groups, have responded to the pandemic in a grounded and practical manner, or in other words, fulfilling roles (i) to (iii) in broad terms, with a touch on (vi) and (v). An effective coordination, as mentioned earlier, requires these groups to increase their capacity in all roles, particularly (vi) and (v). The question is, then, how can other government and formal NGO actors can contribute to building such capacity without overreliance on citizen volunteerism (Bovaird, 2007) or abrogation of the state's own responsibility (McLennan et al., 2016)?

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