



‘Funding local responses while cooperating at a global scale’

HERE, Now, and in the Future Series

Notes from the interview with Christina Bennett, Start Network, 2 April 2020

Start Network is made up of more than forty aid agencies across five continents, ranging from large international organisations to national NGOs. The aim of Start Network is to transform humanitarian action through innovation, fast funding, early action, and localisation.

On the day of the interview, 2 April 2020, Start Network launched the [Start Fund COVID-19](#). It is to be used by members to cope with incidents of coronavirus in their respective countries but also to anticipate and set up preventive measures to mitigate the effects of the crisis. The fund was kickstarted with a donation from IKEA Foundation for €1.5M. Soon after its launch, the Start Fund COVID-19 received a record number of requests to access the fund – 86 alerts from its members working in 69 countries.

Responding to a question on the *how* network members set priorities when using the fund, Bennett explained that this is done by using a collective decision-making process. She clarified: “As Start Network, we have very little to do with that decision-making, we facilitate the meetings, we provide the platforms for the discussions, we provide some guidance, but do not interfere in the decision as to how the money is used – those decisions are made by organisations on the ground”. It is critical however that efforts made to anticipate and respond to this crisis do not happen at the expense of existing programmes.

Christina Bennett further noted that Start Network’s efforts complement those of the IFRC and OCHA. As she explained: “The world needs all of us working in tandem and in concert because we do represent different levels and aspects of the response.”

The way this pandemic unfolds urges the humanitarian sector to find localised responses. Bennett noted that the use of the COVID-19 Start Fund reflects this necessity, e.g. by funding local organisations with direct access to communities in need. In her words, “responding to the virus requires highly local, highly targeted responses, whether we are talking about medical responses or community efforts such as social distancing and lockdowns.” The need to push this kind of response is one lesson learned from the Ebola crisis, where community actors and organisations operated at the frontline reduce mistrust towards the health systems, articulate appropriate public messaging, and set up hand washing stations – crucial activities that eventually stopped Ebola.

At the same time, the need for local responses is deliberately misused by some governments that push for protectionism and transform the humanitarian crisis into a security issue. Here, Bennett pointed for example to European governments closing borders, and to Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, where international organisations are not able to operate, and where the government seems unwilling to take necessary steps to provide refugees with much-needed help. Bennett concluded: “The message that we as humanitarians need to be sending to governments is that there is a need for taking a wider view to this response – it’s not about retreating to your protectionist tendencies, you have to model good behavior, encouraging other government to act in similar ways. We need to be operating across the world, being open to helping others”.

Full interview available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SceSNoqTB5g>