The Global COVID-19 Response: Policy and Social Innovations

By Ben F. Belton and Stephanie K. Firestone

In the winter of 2019, an epidemic emerging in China's Hubei province became a global pandemic and — seemingly overnight — our world was turned upside down. In many countries, systems people rely on for their health and economic security began to break down, while technology quickly replaced physical interaction.

The impact on older adults, individuals with underlying risk factors, and poorer populations has been particularly devastating. And as countries sought to contain the virus's spread through strict physical distancing measures, we saw record job losses and the worse global economic downturn since the Great Depression. According to the International Labour Organization, many countries and territories enacted social protection measures in response. Informal-sector workers (e.g., day laborers, street vendors) — including older workers — were hit especially hard.

This unprecedented crisis spurred governments and communities to innovate, out of necessity, to protect the health and safety of their populations.

Country Reponses

Drawing on lessons from the Ebola outbreak, the World Health Organization's Dr. Michael J. Ryan encouraged swift action, stressing that "speed trumps perfection." In many places, swift action is what transpired. We witnessed countries such as Costa Rica, Germany, Georgia, New Zealand, Vietnam, and others, take early action to manage the medical crisis. And we also saw a tremendous amount of social innovation. Below we present four case studies — across developed and developing countries — that feature innovative ways governments and communities are helping their populations get through this crisis.

Ireland

Leo Varadkar, Ireland's Taoiseach (the equivalent of a Prime Minister), mobilized quickly, with the country's health department creating a national public health emergency team, and a society-wide response snowballed from there. Stepping up were private companies such as aircraft leasing company Avalon, which readied planes and recruited volunteer pilots to fly to China and bring back personal protective equipment. Civil society organizations engaged a massive volunteer base. And at the request of the health department, citizens kept a daily journal of every person they were with for longer than 15 minutes in order to help in the contact-tracing effort; indeed, this was viewed as a civic duty. The come-together spirit was modeled by the Taoiseach, who renewed his registration as a medical doctor so he could take on a weekly shift at a local hospital.

Local governments established community response teams, with participation from the police, mail delivery service, older people's councils, and other entities. These teams created protocols for a coordinated response and facilitated the elevation of local issues requiring national action. For example, when local response teams reported some landlords evicting health care workers out of fear they would infect others, the legislature passed a law prohibiting this practice within two days.

Pandemic Spurs the Return of a Centuries-Old Favor

In addition to its effective COVID-19-related efforts at home, Ireland recently returned a centuries-old favor to Indigenous tribes in the United States. Between 1845 and 1849, following their infamous "Trail of Tears" forced relocation, the Choctaw and other tribes donated $170.00 to the Irish people suffering through the Great Potato Famine, their empathy piqued by their own recent tragedy. Ireland saw the current pandemic as an opportunity to return the favor, so over 170 years later Ireland donated nearly $1.5 million to help Navajo and Hopi families currently affected by COVID-19.

The Age Friendly Ireland Network ensured priority attention to the impact on older people. An interactive mapping project created in collaboration with the health department, for example, has underpinned various community responses. The project, which was already underway prior to the pandemic, identifies clusters of older residents and maps local resources such as pharmacies, psycho-social supports, and transportation and recreation options. The coronavirus accelerated work on this project, which will also inform planning processes, such as where to build nursing homes and primary care centers. Catherine McGuigan, Chief Officer for Age Friendly Ireland, said, "I hope this community response has demonstrated what local governments can do to make it possible for older people to age in their homes and communities; if that's all that comes out of this, I'd be happy."

Singapore

On January 22, 2020, the Singapore government set up a Multi-Ministry Taskforce to coordinate a whole-of-government, nationwide effort to combat the virus quickly and effectively.[1] The Taskforce implemented various measures to safeguard the health and wellbeing of seniors in Singapore. For instance, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social and Family Development, and the Agency for Integrated Care worked with residential care homes on a range of safeguards, which included heightened infection control and prevention practices, access to a steady supply of Personal Protective Equipment for nursing home staff, safe distancing measures, split-zone arrangements and suspension of visitors. They also initiated testing for all 30,000 residents and staff and arranged for resident-facing staff to stay at designated accommodation facilities during the circuit breaker period.[2]

The government recognized community leadership as a key part of the response from the start. The government collaborated and partnered with local organizations to provide food, operate hotlines, and ensure that seniors were adequately supported during this difficult time. Older adults themselves were engaged as

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volunteers–to pack essentials such as masks for frontline transit workers, distribute hand sanitizers, and staff a new helpline targeting people who are socially isolated.[3]

The government also enacted and enforced safe distancing rules very early. On April 3rd, the Multi-Ministry Taskforce announced a "circuit breaker" period that ultimately lasted from April 7th to June 2nd, of social distancing that included the closure of most work premises and a requirement that schools shift to remote learning.[4] Early on, gathering with anyone outside one's household was pro¬hibited—even inside one's own home. This is particularly challenging in a place like Singapore, where parents often rely on grandparents for childcare, and the government ensured special arrangements for children of essential workers.

As has been the case across the globe, however, many older people found it difficult to socially isolate. The Housing Development Board collaborated with social service agencies in a targeted approach to engage elders and educate them on the importance of staying home during the circuit breaker.[5] Quoted in the Straits Times, Kavin Seow, the senior director of TOUCH Community Service, explained, "The hardships they have endured in the past have further strengthened the elderly's resilience and determination to hold dear to what matters to them—their freedom and independence."[6]

To make it easier for residents to comply with stringent social isolation measures, the InfoComm Media Development Authority (IMDA) launched a series of proactive Connectivity, Content and Accessibility[7] initiatives. They worked with industry to provide computers and laptops where needed and strengthen network capacity. They worked with the media and other partners to create relevant content— from exercise classes to skills development—to ensure that all residents, particularly seniors and children from low-income households, could remain connected. A newly established SG Digital Office under IMDA launched Seniors Go Mobile, which was enabled by public-private partnerships with telecommunications companies that provided inexpensive smart phones and mobile plans

to seniors,[8] included learning content for older adults and Digital Ambassadors to reach out and help seniors feel confident communicating and transacting digitally.[9]

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's citizens benefited from early and decisive action from the government. To contain the pandemic, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared a state of emergency and officials closed borders and schools, banned gatherings, and restricted inter-regional public transportation. Shortly after the first confirmed infections, officials freed thousands of prisoners to relieve overcrowding and sprayed disinfectant on the main streets of the capital city.

People entering the country were subject to a mandatory 14-day quarantine and physical distancing measures were enacted. As part of the state of emergency, the government banned certain employers from laying off workers and prohibited evictions and rent increases. And to support the public health response, retired and in-training medical professionals were called to serve. The government also unveiled a plan to fight the virus and its impact on several fronts, providing supports related to health care, emergency shelter, nutritional needs, agricultural production, as well as relief for vulnerable people.

As in many countries, in Ethiopia radio and television are lifelines for older people in times of crisis. HelpAge Ethiopia translated health information materials into Amharic, for distribution through mass media channels including national radio. A two-hour radio program also ran for over four weeks to educate older people on how to protect themselves and seek treatment. To combat hunger, a group of volunteers fed thousands of vulnerable people during Ramadan as mosques were reportedly closed and religious gatherings were restricted. This group plans to continue their actions as long the pandemic poses a threat.

Argentina

Argentina took immediate action to slow the spread of the virus. The government made the early decision to fully close borders and implement a nation-wide quarantine. It passed a sweeping economic and social relief package, suspended evictions and rent hikes, and provided support for vulnerable groups and low-income workers. The Ministry of Health secured the cooperation of private health service providers to ensure adequate resources. The armed services is building triage centers in the event of a surge in infections.

Protecting older people seems to have been a priority from the very beginning of the country's response. The government announced that workers over 60, with the exception of health care workers, are entitled to paid leave from their jobs, and an executive order was issued to protect retirees' access to essential services such as gas, water, and electricity. Argentine President Alberto Fernández announced specific hours for older people to visit banks and medical centers, while grocery stores opened earlier for people over the age of 65. Banks also adjusted rules regarding access to retiree pensions.

As is the case around the world, citizens themselves are taking meaningful and brave actions. A group of mothers in one of Buenos Aires's poorest barrios held workshops at tables near the barrio's busiest roads to raise aware-ness about the pandemic. They also walked all 24 blocks of the barrio to hand out bars of soap, which they cut into quarters so they would have enough for everyone. This personal contact enabled them to convey health advice and further educate their neighbors.

The coronavirus may take a heavier toll in still-developing countries, often characterized by fragile and overburdened health delivery systems and limited social protection schemes. Meanwhile many countries around the world are reopening and establishing a "new normal." As we head into the next phase of the pandemic, now is the time to closely examine responses from countries and communities around the globe, to capture lessons, and to prepare for

the possibility of a COVID-19 resurgence. AARP International has launched a digital platform to showcase innovative global responses to COVID-19. Please share any blogs, issue briefs, and insights that we can highlight at https://www.aarpinternational.org/resources/covid19. ●

1 https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/ministerial-state-ment-on-whole-of-government-response-to-the-2019-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov)

2 https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/support-measures-for-seniors-during-COVID-19

3 https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/helping-singapores-seniors-cope-covid-19

4 https://www.imda.gov.sg/seniorsgodigital

5 The Housing Board collaborat¬ed with social service agencies in a targeted approach to engage elders and persuade them to return home.

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7 https://www.imda.gov.sg/news-and-events/Media-Room/Media-Releases/2020/Supporting-National-Efforts-to-Stay-Home-Go-Digital-And-Stem-COVID-19-Infections

8 https://www.imda.gov.sg/programme-listing/Mobile-Access-for-Seniors

9 https://www.imda.gov.sg/news-and-events/Media-Room/Media-Releases/2020/New-SG-Digital-Office-Established-to-Drive-Digitalisation-Movement

Ben F. Belton
Director Global Partner Engagement
AARP

Stephanie K. Firestone
Senior Strategic Policy Advisor, Health and Age-Friendly Communities
AARP