Collective action and “social distancing” in COVID-19 responses

Ruth Meinzen-Dick¹

Accepted: 25 April 2020 / Published online: 31 May 2020
© Springer Nature B.V. 2020

Much of my research has been on the need for collective action in managing natural resources, and the value of groups to facilitate collective agency for women’s empowerment. Extensive research has shown that coordination among resource users is necessary to distribute rights and responsibilities for both appropriation and provision of common pool resources, such as for water withdrawals and maintenance of irrigation systems (Anderies and Janssen 2013). And we are learning about the mechanisms through which women’s groups contribute to empowerment, whether through collective enterprises (such as through self-help groups in India), access to finance, acquiring social services, or improving women’s bargaining power in their households (Brody et al. 2017).

What happens, then, when people cannot come together in person because of lockdowns to prevent transmission of COVID-19? What happens to the irrigation systems in Nepal and India that need collective labor to repair them? What happens to the women who rely on weekly savings group meetings to build their financial and social capital?

The results can be isolation and depression, as well as economic losses. But as “absence makes the heart grow fonder”, the requirements for physical distancing are also increasing appreciation for the value of coming together, strengthening the impetus to reach out to others. In this sense “social distancing” is a misnomer—physical distancing does not necessarily increase social distance. Use of ICTs (information communication technologies) can provide some substitute for physical proximity. Irrigation systems in Nepal and India were already using mobile phones for communication, reducing the need for face to face meetings. We are

seeing a lot of innovation in how people are using ICTs to connect with colleagues, friends, and family, such as the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) groups using Whatsapp to stay in touch when they cannot hold meetings in rural India. While much of the emphasis in the development literature has been on the use of ICTs for health or economic benefits, their value in maintaining social ties, to break isolation and maintain social capital, is harder to measure, but may be just as great in the long run.

What about those without ICTs? This is another example of how COVID-19 is increasing inequality, not only between rich and poor, but even between men and women. In Pakistan, 81% of men, but only 50% of women, own a mobile phone and use it at least once a month; 37% of men and only 19% of women use mobile internet. Overall in low and middle-income countries, women are 8% less likely to own a mobile phone (GSMA 2020).

In many ways we need collective action more now than ever, such as to promote behavioral changes to reduce transmission of COVID-19, or sharing food and necessities with those suffering most (e.g. Rathore 2020). For years, researchers have considered the “transaction costs” of meetings as a problem of the commons, while others have noted that there are values of the commons that go beyond the economic value of the resources, which derive from the social solidarity fostered by working together, and holding rights together. In that sense, meetings are an investment in building social capital and the cement for long term cooperation. Having to go without the chance to come together may give us all a greater appreciation of these face to face interactions, especially those involving eating and drinking together. And while ICTs and other mechanisms show that social solidarity can transcend physical proximity, the imposition of physical distancing orders—and their eventual lifting—provides an important opportunity for examining the value of different types of interaction for creating social solidarity.

This article is part of the Topical Collection: Agriculture, Food & Covid-19.

✉ Ruth Meinzen-Dick
R.MEINZEN-DICK@CGIAR.ORG

¹ Environment and Production Technology Division,
International Food Policy Research Institute,
Washington, DC, USA

Acknowledgements This work was undertaken as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Institutions, and Markets (PIM) led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

References

- Anderies, John M., and Marco A. Janssen. 2013. *Sustaining the commons*. Tempe AZ: Center for Behavior, Institutions and The Environment, Arizona State University.
- Brody, Carinne, Thomas de Hoop, Martina Vojtkova, Ruby Warnock, Megan Dunbar, Padmini Murthy, and Shari L. Dworkin. 2017. Can self-help group programs improve women's empowerment? A systematic review. *Journal of Development Effectiveness* 9 (1): 15–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19439342.2016.1206607>.
- GSMA. 2020. *Connected women: The mobile gender gap report 2020*. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>
- Rathore, V. April 24, 2020. Combating COVID: Villages in Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan Show the Way. *The Bastion*. <https://theba>

[tion.co.in/politics-and/combating-covid-villages-in-andhra-pradesh-and-rajasthan-show-the-way/?fbclid=IwAR2BHNrdXKnEv-QF0e5Vp-2HkPyGy8MmqNJMBs0TqfhirTPXnPpqtMCQSDA](https://www.thebastion.co.in/politics-and/combating-covid-villages-in-andhra-pradesh-and-rajasthan-show-the-way/?fbclid=IwAR2BHNrdXKnEv-QF0e5Vp-2HkPyGy8MmqNJMBs0TqfhirTPXnPpqtMCQSDA)

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Ruth Meinzen-Dick is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington DC. She conducts transdisciplinary research on collective action, property rights, natural resource management, water policy, gender, and the impact of agricultural research on poverty, drawing on field work in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe. She is past president of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), and recipient of the Elinor Ostrom Award on Collective Governance of the Commons 2019 Senior Scholar award.