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Conflict sensitivity in responses to COVID-19
Initial guidance and reflections

The international humanitarian and development aid sector is pivoting its programmes towards preventing the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in aid recipient countries, mitigating its worst impacts on vulnerable communities and providing relief to affected communities. Aid agencies are facing particular challenges and risks in COVID-19 related programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Without careful consideration of how COVID-19 – and national and international responses to it – interacts with conflict dynamics, there is a risk that aid could unintentionally exacerbate conflict in recipient communities, while opportunities to contribute to positive peace could be missed.

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This paper aims to provide aid agencies with initial analysis and guidance to inform the design, implementation and adaptation of conflict-sensitive humanitarian and development responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It presents a series of overarching considerations to take into account when determining how to build a conflict-sensitive approach into COVID-19 response activities, before outlining some initial, sector-specific considerations. Recommendations are presented throughout.

How COVID-19 related aid programming interacts with conflict dynamics will differ from country to country, and from community to community. Different sectoral interventions will also face particular risks and challenges. The analysis and guidance presented here is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather should act as a prompt to help staff think about challenges and opportunities, and how best to navigate them. We hope this guidance will act as a useful starting point for further investigation and consideration.

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Part 1
Overarching considerations

This section discusses emerging, cross-cutting challenges and opportunities presented by the international aid response to COVID-19 from a conflict-sensitivity perspective. Some initial guidance and considerations are included about how programming can account for these issues.

Context matters – ensure analysis is up to date

As a truly global phenomenon, COVID-19 impacts on social, economic, political and security dynamics in every country in the world; but the impacts won't be the same in each place. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the implications for peace and conflict may be profound. There are risks, for example, that the introduction of emergency legislation may be used to empower authoritarian regimes, curb or undermine freedom of expression and create a conducive environment for insurgencies seeking alternative governance models.[2] Equally, it is possible that the universal threat of a virus may act as a unifying force, opening space for dialogue across conflict lines or creating ceasefire opportunities.

The implications for local-level conflict also vary greatly. As resources become scarce, there is a risk of rising criminality and competition; as livelihoods and employment are lost, there is a risk of more people taking up arms; when families are ordered to self-isolate, there is increased domestic violence; if groups are stigmatised, there is a risk of driving identity-based conflict. But again, local-level cooperation could also boost social cohesion. What's more, these risks and opportunities may change over time, as COVID-19's secondary effects and the success or failure of responses become clearer.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Timely, updated, specific context analyses are critical to plan for the response to and mitigation of the effects of COVID-19 on existing conflict dynamics:
  - Where analysis exists, agencies should update this to integrate COVID-19 considerations, and share and coordinate this updated analysis with the wider aid community.
  - Where agencies do not routinely conduct such analysis, it will be essential to integrate it into community needs assessments, programme design and implementation strategies.

- Analysis should consider the implications of COVID-19 on social, economic and political relationships, and how they could affect risk factors for conflict or violence. Factors to consider include: elite capture of aid and state resources, particularly as these resources become scarcer and more contested; conflict between citizens and the state apparatus, particularly around lockdowns, curfews or the closure of 'non-essential' businesses; and conflicts within or between communities over access to resources or perceived unequal treatment.[3]

- Multi-stakeholder facilities[4] can help in sharing and pooling of analysis, and in coordinating and supporting agencies to interpret and make use of it. Where such facilities exist, agencies should consider how they can contribute to and make use of these.

- (Where appropriate) United Nations Offices for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and humanitarian cluster leads have roles in encouraging and coordinating joint assessments. Such joint assessments should include a locally relevant indicator on conflict or social cohesion.

Tailor interventions to specific contexts

Applying the same policies and regulations in different contexts without adapting to changes due to COVID-19 risks doing more harm than good. Public health policies aimed at 'flattening the curve' – such as enforced social distancing or self-isolation – may not be viable in densely populated urban areas or refugee camps, or in states which do not have enforcement capacity or the remedial measures to support those who lose income or other forms of welfare. For the many people who rely on aid or informal labour for their livelihood, the lack of economic earning opportunities due to confinement risks generating more pain and conflict than the virus itself. Women are likely to be disproportionately affected by the socio-economic consequences of confinement measures.[5] Ultimately, public compliance with measures that aim to control disease transmission depend on trust, access to coherent information and calculations of risk, which balance the benefits of applying such measures with the costs of losing survival and coping mechanisms.

Experience from previous pandemics has demonstrated that communities are well equipped to adapt public health policies in line with local norms and customs, improving their effectiveness and avoiding the potentially damaging impacts of ill-suited responses. During the Ebola response in West Africa, it was only when communities were encouraged to adapt public health proscriptions around social and cultural practices (particularly traditional burial practices) that were spreading the disease that the crisis began to recede. Earlier efforts to impose changes in social and cultural practices simply increased tensions and undermined trust in health authorities.[6]

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Interventions must be nimble and rapid enough to scale-up and scale-down to match the contextual requirements. This will require flexibility on the side of donors and implementing partners, and clear communications and strong bonds of trust between them.

- Donors should invest not only in health systems, but any national systems that may preserve social cohesion, for example by funding supplements to existing social protection mechanisms to help handle increased caseloads.

- Donors, UN agencies and NGOs should make sure that country offices are working with governments to assess the conflict sensitivity of planned measures to ensure they do not push vulnerable people to violence as a way to gain respite from virus control measures.

- Programmes and policy prescriptions should be informed by an understanding of social norms and culturally accepted behaviours in focus communities (including at sub-national level), if people are to accept them.

- Local staff and partners should be proactive in informing, designing and communicating appropriate initiatives. Donors, UN agencies and NGOs should proactively seek their input.

Consider aid diversion and displacement risks

To take swift measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, many countries depend on the flexible, rapid financial support of international actors. However, there are risks associated with increasing and reorientating existing funds:

Funding reallocation: Contexts with the greatest pre-existing needs and weakest governance systems may be the most vulnerable to COVID-19. This will present challenging questions to aid actors when it comes to balancing existing relief - for example severe food insecurity, high levels of malnutrition or serious protection concerns - against new needs that arise as a result of COVID-19. Reorienting too many existing resources towards health and WASH risks creating grievances and exacerbating tensions within and between communities who rely on aid to meet other basic needs.

Aid diversion: Donors must be conscious that any major upsurge in resources to support the COVID-19 response may be diverted to elites, or even to conflict actors that will use it to advance their position. A recent World Bank study notes that large increases in aid into poor countries is frequently accompanied by increased outflows of capital into offshore havens, secretive shell companies and banks.[7] It is inevitable that many responders will need to work with conflict actors who may seek to instrumentalise aid for their own purposes.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Donors should be wary of diverting funding streams away from existing priorities to supporting COVID-19 emergency health responses. It may be better to identify and build on opportunities to a) adapt existing programmes to rapidly integrate COVID-19 outcomes; b) support sustainable infrastructure by building on existing capacities.

- With new COVID-19 funding streams, donors should ensure that funding strategies are informed by context analysis and take into account the long-term, secondary effects of the pandemic and new needs that will arise as a consequence. Funding should aim to be flexible and complement existing funding streams and objectives.

- Donors should coordinate to ensure that funding is complementary and informed by shared information and analysis.

- Consider augmenting national level auditing, monitoring and evaluation capabilities and resources to account for this increase in funding related to COVID-19.

- Agencies with experience of working in politically-fraught and conflictual contexts should share knowledge, analysis, experience and expertise in managing complex relationships.

Consider how different people and communties will be impacted

Pre-existing patterns of exclusion and marginalisation on the basis of identity, gender, location or political affiliation will play a major role in determining which groups of people are particularly at risk from the virus, but also potentially from response activities. Efforts to challenge gender norms or other identity-based discrimination, for example by including these groups in planning and implementing responses, are likely to face resistance from authorities, and in some instances other community members. A failure to do so however not only puts them at greater risk, but may also exacerbate underlying grievances that drive conflict. Dominant gender norms may mean that coordinating authorities led predominantly by men, for example, may deliberately or unintentionally overlook women's needs.

Conflict-affected populations, especially internally displaced people (IDPs), refugees or other groups on the move or in hiding, are hard to reach with information (in an appropriate language), struggle to access basic services and often lack hygiene products. In Myanmar, for example, some areas are facing internet blackouts imposed by the military. Communities in mixed-control areas can be particularly hard to reach as they are not under the clear authority of any one group, with some communities keeping themselves distant from all authorities because they do not trust them. Daily wage labourers, migrant workers, the elderly, and people with disabilities or mental health issues are also likely to face particular challenges and vulnerabilities. Gender affects access to resources; for example women are less likely to be literate, and more likely be harassed accessing services.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- The short- and long-term responses to COVID-19 should be gendered. Rapid gender assessments should take place in the short term and intersectional gender-conflict analysis included in medium to long-term programmes.[8] Funding proposals should include gender analyses and protection mainstreaming provisions, and gender experts should be involved in the design and delivery of COVID-19 response programming.

- Make sure that data used or generated by programmes is disaggregated by gender, age and disability. Too often in crises, data on the differentiated impact for different groups is collected long after the crisis begins.

- Ensure that COVID-19 responses are informed by and tailored to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups. For exmaple, social protection systems put in place to support communities affected by COVID-19 should be universal, gender responsive and conflict sensitive.

- Aid agencies should anticipate higher costs for reaching the most marginalised groups, not only in an effort to control COVID-19 transmission, but as a conflict-sensitivity measure. They should consider the potential risks associated with authorities' or other groups' resistance to such engagement, and build in appropriate mitigation measures.

Exploit opportunities provided by new ways of working

COVID-19 has brought major changes to the way that the aid sector operates. The closing of international borders and restrictions on travel within countries has undermined the ability of the humanitarian community to 'surge' capacity to manage anticipated and emerging needs of communities in hard to reach areas. Response activities in many difficult locations (such as Mogadishu, Juba or Kabul) are being managed by international staff who know that if they choose to leave (to see family, access medical treatment, take R&R and so on), they risk not being able to return soon. The longer such restrictions are in place, the greater the pressure aid workers are likely to face.

This situation presents conflict sensitivity challenges and opportunities. Remote working will make it more difficult for aid workers to engage directly with people and organisations in each context. This can inhibit cultural understanding and the relationships needed to help facilitate effective operations. The increased pressure that aid workers are facing can also disincentivise the application of more considered analysis, and limit the diversity of sources of information and data that staff rely on for programme design and implementation. COVID-19 may necessitate alterations to traditional approaches to conducting community consultations and analysis.

At the same time, national NGOs or community-based organisations have the opportunity to take more of a critical leadership role in the COVID-19 response. International agencies should make the most of these opportunities to support responders, and to take their lead from locally driven responses. Local organisations are likely to have stronger understanding of the conflict dynamics and diverse needs of communities than their international counterparts, making them better placed to identify conflict risks, tailor messages to norms and practices and build on pre-existing bonds of trust. Local agencies are also more likely to be responsive to the diverse needs of communities and less limited by thematic or sectoral funding silos. In Yemen for example, peacebuilding coordination hubs have also become forums for rapidly assessing the impact of COVID-19 and facilitating planning.[9]

The current situation could also spur new and innovative approaches which may contribute to more conflict-sensitive aid. If the lessons from COVID-19 can be captured and used to support and encourage more adaptive and flexible programming beyond the current crisis, this could have a significant impact on conflict sensitivity over the longer term.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Aid agencies should support local agencies to take a leadership role in intervention design and implementation, and in aid coordination mechanisms.

- Agencies should provide flexible and predictable support to partners. This includes being aware of the additional risks and pressures that organisations and staff may be under, and making efforts to provide additional support in these areas, including tailored technical support, and core support for institutional development.

- Social distancing measures will make many forms of participatory conflict analysis that rely on focus group discussions difficult to undertake. Analysis is likely to be more reliant on individual key informants, so it is important to include a suitably diverse balance of informants, but also to allocate sufficient time and resources to conducting analysis.

- New ways of working may bring new risks – these should be monitored to enable further refinement of approaches.

Part 2
Sector-specific considerations

This section identifies conflict-sensitivity considerations related to humanitarian and development sectors and thematic priorities. It is not intended to be comprehensive, but to present a snapshot of issues that programmes may face with initial reflections on how aid actors could manage them.

Health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

COVID-19 has the potential to overwhelm health systems in every country. In conflict-affected contexts, many of which already suffer from weak or poorly resourced health services, the effort to save lives will require a huge and rapid increase in clinical capacity, outreach, testing, contact tracing and public health messaging – in short every aspect of health response. Authorities will tackle this challenge in different ways, many of which are likely to have conflict implications.

The centralisation of health services in quarantine camps is a strategy being applied in some areas, such as on the Pakistani border with Iran, as well as in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Nepal.[10] In addition to concerns about poor conditions and transmission of the virus, such camps may present conflict risks. During the early stage of the Ebola response in West Africa, a similar approach resulted in facilities being attacked by community members suspicious of the very high death rates associated with them. The shift towards treating people in much smaller community care centres close to where transmission was taking place helped to change the relationship between families and Ebola responders from fear to active cooperation.[11]

The areas prioritised – and who is able to access support – will be significant factors in determining the conflict sensitivity of COVID-19 health and WASH responses. Conflict actors may open or close humanitarian space to responders depending on the political affiliation, ethnic composition or strategic interests of different groups. In Syria for example, the government has prevented testing kits and essential health supplies reaching rebel-controlled areas.[12] On the other hand, non-state actors may allow humanitarian access to areas under their control as a means of gaining greater legitimacy. In Afghanistan for example, it is possible that agreements over humanitarian access could help strengthen pro-peace members of the government and the Taliban.[13]

Directing resources and attention away from other pressing health concerns may contribute to a surge in other diseases, or further limit access to healthcare facilities for vulnerable people.[14] In conflict-affected contexts, this could exacerbate divisions within society over who is able to access support, where and for what.

Effective public health messaging and communications are critical to a conflict-sensitive response. Poorly contextualised messages can not only undermine the effectiveness of interventions, but also lead to increased tensions and the blaming or targeting of 'others'.[15] Inter-group conflicts often feature narratives about 'other' groups being dirty and disease-prone, and weaknesses in public health messages could play into these narratives with near- or long-term risks for violence.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Conflict analysis should assess whether armed conflict actors may try to advance their position by challenging public health information issued by authorities or opposition groups.

- National staff and partners should be encouraged to develop and disseminate culturally appropriate public health messages, rather than relying on a global, 'one size fits all' approach.

- Prioritise community consultation at early stages to inform design, help to ensure that approaches are culturally appropriate, and have community ownership and buy in.

- Agencies that rely on community health workers/health extension/outreach workers should consider the specific identity of those workers in their recruitment. This may affect the level of trust they command within communities. Sensitive discussion of conflict dynamics could be included as part of training or inductions.

Food security and livelihoods

COVID-19 and subsequent mitigation measures are expected to interrupt agricultural production and disrupt food aid supply chains. The result is likely to be a major increase in food insecurity and major disruption to livelihoods for many people.[16] How this impacts conflict dynamics will differ between contexts, but must be considered as part of any response strategy.

In many places, people displaced by conflict are dependent on general distributions of food aid. These are typically done in large groups, making them a risk for COVID-19 transmission. The same is true to a lesser extent for targeted food distributions. As a result many agencies are adapting practices, for example by controlling crowd sizes more tightly. This can however slow down distribution and be misinterpreted in conflict-affected areas as a politically- or conflict-motivated withdrawal of support.[17] Meanwhile, as caseloads increase in insecure areas, politicisation of food aid by state or non-state armed groups is likely to become a greater challenge than it already is.

There are major concerns that deteriorating macroeconomic conditions due to COVID-19 will increase staple food prices. In the Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for example, the price of rice, beans and cassava has reportedly doubled.[18] Meanwhile, mitigation measures that limit market activity, such as the closure of non-essential businesses, coupled with restricted movement and reduced access to markets, may undermine the ability of households to generate sufficient income to provide for basic needs.[19] Panic buying may also increase prices, while loss of income from remittances is likely to further exacerbate food security challenges. Many of these risks are particularly acute in urban areas where demand is already outstripping supply of basic goods, compounding inflation.[20] There is a strong association between price hikes and violence, especially in urban areas.[21]

Many agencies are further increasing the use of cash transfers as a means of meeting the challenges of the crisis. There is ample evidence that cash programming can improve food security

outcomes. However, this relies on functioning markets that can supply goods to buy with the cash. With major market upheaval, cash programming must be informed by consideration of how it will impact local markets, including which groups will benefit most, and who will not, from such programming.[22]

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

■ Any changes in aid delivery modalities should be accompanied by frequent and clear communications delivered by appropriate and trusted representatives.

■ Food distributing organisations should anticipate how access and distribution planning will be affected in advance to avoid food aid becoming a conflict issue.

■ Where there are tensions and a history of violence among urban communities, these should be considered when developing transparent targeting criteria for any food and nutrition support.

■ Social safety net programmes will need to be expanded. If they are not scaled up to match potential losses in income or production capacity, the severity and magnitude of acute food insecurity is likely to expand and may pose violence and conflict risks.

■ Cash programmes must be informed by assessments of local political economy and market conditions.

■ Make sure cash and voucher assessment feasibility and risk assessments, and market monitoring are in place. Build on existing work – including networks – and favour simpler, trusted modalities as people will want to use dependable services they know and trust.

Protection

COVID-19 and related intervention strategies may exacerbate protection risks for already vulnerable groups. Women face particular risks, as do children, including increased rates of family and gender-based violence (GBV). Lockdowns and restrictions of movement mean that some women and children are forced to spend longer in confined home environments with abusive partners, parents or guardians.[23] Levels of violence within the home meanwhile may be exacerbated as traditional gender roles and norms are subverted as local economies are shut down, meaning that many men are unable to fulfil their socially expected role of breadwinner and provider for the family.[24] Measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 may also be increasing risks of other forms of GBV, such as sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse from male-dominated security forces and other state and community officials tasked with enforcing lockdowns, movement restrictions and quarantines.[25] Meanwhile, access to formal or informal support services and networks is likely to be reduced. Some conventional protection interventions, such as women- or child-friendly spaces, are not able to operate due to government restrictions and the risk of virus transmission.

School closures are creating particular vulnerabilities for children outside of family care who are at a heightened risk of abuse or exploitation. Children or young people who lose their caregivers to COVID-19, or its secondary effects, will be particularly vulnerable in conflict-affected contexts, where they may be exploited by conflict actors for labour, sex or combat. Such exploitation can create both near and long-term risks for grievances and conflict.

Evidence from previous public health emergencies, including Ebola in West Africa and DRC, indicates that risks of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers are likely to increase as the numbers of people reliant on aid increases.[26] Aid workers themselves may face protection concerns. In some places,

narratives that blame the international community for the spread of COVID-19 are emerging, for example in South Sudan and DRC aid workers have reported increased threats related to COVID-19.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

■ Adopt conflict-sensitive alternative modalities for case management and referral pathways, including emergency protection case management interventions, in alignment with other sector interventions. Consider the potential conflict sensitivity benefits of increased dependence on community-driven approaches and remote management.

■ GBV programmes are life-saving humanitarian interventions and must continue. If physical 'safe spaces' are too high a transmission risk, remote contacts with professionals or among psychosocial support groups should be preserved (for example by phone where possible) and COVID-19 responders should be trained in safe referral mechanisms.

■ Work with governments to ensure that COVID-19 measures are necessary, proportionate, limited in time and neither arbitrary nor discriminatory in nature or application. Highlight protection concerns that emerge from policies and advocate for these to be appropriately planned for and mitigated.

■ Conflict analysis can identify potential protection concerns for different groups that could be associated with COVID-19 response policies and practices. These should be used to inform subsequent programme design considerations.

Shelter and camp management

The interaction of shelter and camp management responses with conflict dynamics is likely to be particularly acute where people are newly displaced because of conflict, or because of the secondary effects of COVID-19. Displaced people will often join family members in new areas, or congregate into formal or informal camps or settlements. In either case, the potential for overcrowding – and related pressure on housing costs – as well as services (especially healthcare, WASH and education) are likely to cause tension at the best of times. Concern about the spread of infectious diseases is likely to make a tense situation worse. Grievances may be exacerbated if there are disparities in shelter standards or COVID-19 resources supplied between host communities or historically displaced people, and people displaced as a more immediate effect of COVID-19.

There may be specific conflict-sensitivity risks associated with efforts to relocate residents from densely populated camps for displaced people. The virus is likely to spread rapidly through such crowded environments, among populations poorly served by WASH facilities. Such camps are often sources of tension for host governments and communities in which they are located. There is a risk that COVID-19 will be seen as an opportunity for local authorities, host communities or conflict actors to push for the closure, relocation or comprehensive sealing off of camps or IDP settlements.[27] Doing this – or denying residents access to communities, markets or facilities – risks exacerbating (often already high) tensions between host and displaced communities. Forcing communities to return to areas from which they have been displaced may put returnees at risk of further persecution, or reignite conflicts in areas of return. Returns can be a vector for spreading the virus across large swathes of a country – another potential source of tension with communities in areas of return.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Agencies engaged in shelter and camp management should ensure that their involvement is informed by conflict analysis – including of existing camp dynamics, locations of new shelters, places of origin, and places of return or relocation. Such analysis can be used to help reduce the risk of contributing to conflict.

- Any efforts to encourage or support displaced communities to return to their home areas should be done on the basis that individuals are informed about the potential risks of doing so, and undertaken on a voluntary basis.

Democracy, human rights and governance

There is a major risk that governments – especially those in countries with weak democratic institutions – will take advantage of the crisis and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 to undermine democratic norms and practices, and to consolidate power. Governments in more than 80 countries have already declared some form of national emergency with associated executive powers.[28] In many places, such powers may be proportionate, legitimate and necessary. But authorities can also use emergency legislation to target certain groups, prevent legitimate political activity and limit civil society space. Emergency measures such as curfews, widening of population surveillance and limits to mobility, may be used to obscure or justify human rights abuses, reverse progress towards gender equality, empower security actors and enable discrimination and repression. Such powers may be extended beyond the emergency situation as political leaders rely on them to maintain power. Where elections have been postponed because of COVID-19, the temptation to use the virus as a pretext for further delays and narrowing of political space may exist.[29] These rights may be hard to win back once the emergency is over.

The pandemic has the potential to destabilise existing political structures and undermine trust in state and security institutions due to the escalation of negative public perceptions of the government response. In Kenya for example, police brutality in imposing COVID-19 related restrictions on movement and gatherings has caused at least a dozen deaths and provoked public protests.[30] There is a risk that these measures will strain relationships between governments and citizens in areas where social contracts are already weak, as groups are forced to disobey policies or choose not to adhere to measures which they see as less of a priority than other areas of life, such as income-earning activities.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Make sure that human rights are at the centre of all prevention, preparedness, containment and treatment efforts. The impact on people's rights needs to be considered when deciding on measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.

- Programmes that support state and security actor responses should ensure that measures intended to mitigate the health emergency are implemented in a way that people understand, that is informed by their needs and that does not undermine their basic rights.

- If elections are postponed, donors may offer support to mediate potential conflicts and find acceptable interim or transitional solutions.

- Donors and aid agencies need to maintain vigilance and advocate for the removal of emergency legislation at an appropriate moment to avoid it becoming a long-term situation. Civil society including women's rights organisations should be consulted on their use, misuse and impact.

Gender equality

The impact of COVID-19 is deeply gendered. While it will affect all groups, the impacts will be felt most by those already suffering as a result of structural inequalities, including women. Supporting women and girls to play a major role in decision-making on responses to COVID-19 will be critical to avoid further entrenching gender inequalities in conflict-affected contexts. It could also contribute to progress towards greater gender equality, for example by ensuring that women's economic rights and rights to justice form integral parts of immediate and longer-term COVID-19 response strategies.[31]

There is evidence that at the global and national level, women are already being excluded from important decision-making processes, despite their active participation in the response itself. Only 25 per cent of the senior leadership positions in healthcare are women, yet women make up 70 per cent of healthcare workers.[32] Maximising the potential positive contribution of response activities on gender equality will require both the integration of gender-sensitive approaches into short- and long-term programming, as well as programming focused on transforming gender norms.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- All responses should ensure the implementation of existing commitments on gender equality and women and girls' rights.

- Women activists and women-led organisations are playing a critical role in the response to COVID-19. To ensure their rights and needs are met, it is essential that they fully participate in decision-making and the design of the response.

- Support for women's economic rights and justice should form part of COVID-19 responses to make sure that the negative impacts on women and girls' rights are mitigated.

Sustainable economic development

COVID-19 is having a significant impact on the global economy. The damage to fragile states and emerging markets is likely to be deep, long-lasting and accompanied by political instability and outbreaks of violence. Reductions in global trade, extreme volatility of oil and commodity prices and potentially drastic disruption to global supply chains could all potentially contribute to undermining local economies. UNDP has estimated that income losses may reach US$220 billion in developing countries, while the International Labour Organization has estimated that half of all jobs could be lost.[33] Global remittance flows meanwhile are expected to drop by 20 per cent this year.[34]

Economic downturns are correlated with increased levels of violent crime[35] and higher prevalence of GBV. They can give power to nationalist or exclusionary political narratives and increase rates of horizontal inequality (a predictor of conflict), while at the same time reducing government income and capacity to maintain security. Sudden drops in commodity prices and subsequent impacts on trade imbalances are correlated with increased intensity and duration of violence in fragile contexts.[36]

Within such contexts, competition over the control of economic assets, including jobs, bank loans or productive natural resources can be intense. In some instances, economic and political elites may be well positioned to capture the benefits of such economic packages, and to distribute these benefits to supporters and patronage networks. Groups who were poor and vulnerable before the crisis are likely to be living an even more precarious existence. Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan for example are largely employed in the informal sector and have been the first to lose jobs. But they are also unable to access government-backed support packages.[37] Women and girls already affected by conflict will also be disproportionately impacted, as they are overrepresented in informal, unpaid or low-paid work. COVID-19 will restrict their livelihoods and economic opportunities even further.

Ultimately, if the benefits of economic development programming are seen to be unfairly captured by a single group, they risk exacerbating grievances and divisions within society, as well as entrenching power in the hands of unaccountable elites.

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Economic support programmes for conflict-affected countries will be essential but must be informed by nuanced analysis of the likely winners and losers of such initiatives.

- Conflict-sensitive responses should take into account the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on the poorest and most vulnerable and the negative implications this is likely to have for conflict. Pro-poor and gender-sensitive approaches may help economic development packages to support conflict prevention and peacebuilding objectives.

- The likelihood and implications of a long-term economic downturn should inform analysis and planning for all country strategies, including how this may impact existing conflict or cause new tensions.

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding

COVID-19 will create new challenges for conflict prevention and peacebuilding agencies and interventions. Conflict mediation, inter-communal dialogue and participatory peacebuilding initiatives are premised on the ability to bring diverse groups together to build shared experiences; a task made difficult by social distancing rules. Some agencies have expressed concern that resources may be directed away from peacebuilding priorities towards servicing immediate health needs.[38] There are concerns that conflict actors may use the opportunity of diminished international pressure to renege on commitments and provisions of tentative or fragile peace processes, consolidate power or position themselves for renewed fighting. In South Sudan for example, international and regional diplomats have played an important role in corralling the peace process.

The rapid change in the context also presents opportunities for peacebuilders to leverage greater impact in conflict-affected contexts, and indeed working with community leaders and existing peacebuilding networks could provide valuable opportunities to strengthen the response to COVID-19. Periods of crisis can stimulate cooperation and technical collaboration across divides. Collaboration between communities, civil society, and authorities during crisis can establish relationships for longer-term gains in security and justice sector reforms. Following the UN Secretary General's call for a global cessation of violence, a number of ceasefires have been announced.[39] While these are likely to be temporary, they do provide opportunities for building trust. Peacebuilders have a critical role to play in countering divisive narratives that have emerged as a result of COVID-19, as well as in supporting wider aid actors to adapt programmes in line with a nuanced understanding of local conflict dynamics.[40]

Implications for a conflict-sensitive response

- Peacebuilding agencies could use this window to: press governments and opposition groups to find and build on common ground; support existing capacities for peace in communities such as forums where rival groups come together to resolve conflicts; and support community crisis management capabilities, including via remote training tools.

- Humanitarian and development-focused agencies should include peacebuilding and conflict prevention experts in COVID-19 coordination mechanisms. They should work with peacebuilders who are rooted in their communities, as they can play an important role as trusted messengers and mediators.

- Reprioritisation of funding and programming should allow for existing peacebuilding initiatives addressing drivers of violence and conflict to continue, as they can contribute to minimising and mitigating the risk that conflicts will be exacerbated by COVID-19.

Notes

1 The Helpdesk on Human Security and Humanitarian Action is a technical support facility providing expert advice and support to Sida and Swedish embassy staff on a range of issues related to conflict sensitivity, peacebuilding and effective humanitarian action. It is managed by Saferworld, working with swisspeace, the Global Emergencies Group, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and Stockholm Policy Group.

2 See Part 2: Democracy, human rights and governance sub-section.

3 Oxfam (2020) have produced a 'COVID-19 and Conflict Sensitivity guide', including suggested questions to include in conflict analysis. Broader guidance on designing conflict analysis can also be found here in Saferworld (2015), 'Conflict sensitivity: Saferworld's approach', June.

4 Such as the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in South Sudan.

5 CARE (2020), 'Gender Implications of COVID-19 Outbreaks in Development and Humanitarian Settings', March.

6 De Waal A (2020), 'COVID-19 in Africa: Know your Epidemic, Act on its Politics', LSE, 31 March.

7 Andersen J, Johannesen N, Rijkers B (2020), 'Elite Capture of Foreign Aid: Evidence from Offshore Bank Accounts', Policy Research Working Paper 9150, World Bank, February.

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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

With Madagascar's health system under strain from the COVID-19 pandemic and schools shuttered for the foreseeable future, the health, education, and overall wellbeing of the Malagasy people are increasingly at risk.
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