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A CLASH OF CONTAGIONS

The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict in Nigeria, Colombia and Afghanistan

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INTRODUCTION

Comparative Findings and Overarching Recommendations

Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters



Key Findings

COVID-19, and responses to it, are exacerbating drivers of conflict by:

- › diminishing trust in government leaders and institutions
- › increasing economic hardship and resource scarcity
- › disrupting — indeed often eroding — social cohesion

Armed groups, criminal networks, political entrepreneurs, and other disruptive actors have capitalized on the pandemic to expand their spheres of influence, which has the potential to generate future conflict and violence.

Key Recommendations

Donors, policymakers, and practitioners should:

- › integrate conflict prevention into COVID-19 response and adopt a holistic approach to pandemic recovery
- › expand and direct foreign assistance to support peacebuilding activities
- › reduce inequality, and prevent democratic backsliding
- › consult directly with local communities
- › prioritize research on the pandemic's secondary impacts and apply lessons-learned

Introduction

Comparative Findings and Overarching Recommendations

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, the number of armed conflicts had reached a 30-year global high.¹ What has become the deadliest pandemic in a century has threatened to intensify these trends. The impact of COVID-19 on public health, combined with the economic and social strain caused by efforts to contain it, have expanded risks to peace and security (Inks and Lichtenheld 2020). As many wealthy countries rapidly inoculate their populations against the virus, it will be years before vaccines are widely available in the most violence-plagued countries.² In the meantime, national and international responses to COVID-19 will likely continue to influence political and socioeconomic dynamics in these places — with potentially profound implications for conflict and instability.

This study is part of an ongoing effort by Mercy Corps to understand the impact of COVID-19 on conflict in order to help governments, donors, policymakers, and practitioners respond effectively. These impacts are far from uniform: the virus, and public health responses, have affected different countries and populations to different degrees and in different ways. While a growing number of studies have sought to unpack the relationship between COVID-19 and conflict, they tend to rely only on anecdotal evidence or focus exclusively on one outcome: violence. Yet one key lesson from research on the impact of external shocks on conflict — from natural disasters to other health crises — is that their effects can take time to develop and may not be reflected in immediate surges in fighting.³ The secondary impacts of COVID-19 may emerge gradually or have a lagging effect on conflict. We must therefore consider the potential impact of the pandemic on conflict drivers and processes, not just outcomes such as violence. This is particularly important because efforts that have been critical to containing COVID-19 and limiting its casualties — such as lockdowns, social distancing, and border closures — may have helped curb violence in the short-term, while inadvertently laying the groundwork for longer-term conflict.

Dr. Adam Lichtenheld served as lead author of this chapter.

1 According to data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (<https://ucdp.uu.se/>).

2 Of the 20 countries that experienced the highest levels of violent conflict in 2020, 18 are projected to not have achieved widespread vaccination of their populations against COVID-19 until the start of 2023 or later (Mercy Corps 2021).

3 Research regarding the impact of exogenous shocks on conflict largely focus on the onset of conflict, rather than on the duration or intensity of ongoing conflicts (Burke et al. 2009; Brückner and Ciccone 2010; Ghimire and Ferreira 2016; Hsiang et al. 2013). Better understanding the impact of these shocks - including pandemics - on ongoing conflict is crucial because the factors that explain conflict onset and duration are different (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Collier et al. 2004; Fearon 2004).

Such reverberations could further compound the pandemic's toll. Wars and armed conflicts have devastating and persistent economic, social, and human consequences, from stymied development (Gates et al. 2015) to an increased risk of mass killing and other atrocities (Harff 2003; Valentino 2004; Straus 2015).⁴

To account for the possible effects of COVID-19 on overall conflict dynamics, Mercy Corps conducted an in-depth, qualitative study involving more than 600 individuals in three conflict-affected countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, and Nigeria. It is still too early to grasp COVID-19's full impact, and we should be wary of drawing premature conclusions. But given the time that has elapsed since the pandemic began, and with an unprecedented global vaccination campaign underway, this research is both urgent and timely. Studies have shown that international assistance can help reduce the risk of conflict in the wake of external shocks (Savun and Tirone 2012).

To that end, a more holistic assessment of the pandemic's impact thus far can help identify leverage points for humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding interventions. It can also flag vulnerabilities that could enable further disease spread and hinder public health responses, informing vaccine delivery and other measures needed to ultimately end the pandemic.

Focusing only on short-term changes in violent incidents overlooks the complex ways in which the pandemic is interacting with and affecting some of the underlying drivers of conflict that could give rise to violence in the future. Understanding how communities are experiencing and perceiving local political, economic, and security conditions during the pandemic is essential for effectively diagnosing and addressing the secondary impacts of COVID-19.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Emerging Trends and Evidence Gaps

Since the early days of the pandemic, analysts and practitioners have offered mostly negative forecasts of its impact on peace and stability.⁵ Studies of prior health crises' effect on conflict provide reason for pessimism. Research on Ebola, malaria, and HIV/AIDS suggests that higher prevalence of these diseases are associated with increases in civil violence and human rights abuses (Cervellati et al. 2017; González Cepero et al. 2020; González-Torres and Esposito 2016; Kahl 2006; Peterson and Shellman 2006). There is also evidence of a vicious feedback loop: as conflict and violence weakens state institutions, it results in further disease spread and more feeble public health responses (Flecknoe et al. 2018; Gayer et al. 2007; Wise and Barry 2017).

Global data on violence during COVID-19 paints a more complicated and mixed picture, however. The total number of incidents of political violence worldwide has declined during the pandemic (ACLED 2021), but there has been an increase in other types of violence, including mob violence (Pavlik 2020), criminal violence (Bunker 2020; Muggah 2020; Saviano 2020), and gender-based violence (Peterman and O'Donnell 2020). Violence has thus actually increased in more states than it has decreased (ACLED 2021; Amnesty International 2021; Bloem and Salemi 2021; Mehrl and Thurner 2020).⁶

⁴ One study of 45 African countries found that GDP growth is three percent lower in countries that have experienced armed conflicts, and the effect increases over time (IMF 2019). See also Dahlum et al. 2019; Mercier et al. 2016; Hendrix and Brinkman 2013.

⁵ They have projected that economic fallout (due to increased unemployment and plunging commodity prices); declines in state capacity and legitimacy (due to falling public revenues and lackluster health responses); discord over containment measures; and a drop in international aid would increase the risk of conflict and insecurity (Blanc and Brown 2020; Garrigues 2020; ICG 2020; Moyer and Kaplan 2020; Mustasilta 2020; Sisk 2020).

⁶ "Political violence" generally refers to organized violence that is carried out to achieve political goals. Here it includes battles between state and non-state actors (e.g., government security forces versus insurgent groups) or between non-state actors (e.g., intercommunal violence or violence between different insurgencies); attacks on civilians by these actors; remote violence (e.g., bombings), and violent demonstrations/riots (Raleigh et al. 2010).

Counting Violent Incidents Yields Incomplete Conflict Picture

Although existing research has highlighted important conflict trends, it suffers from two important weaknesses. First, it relies on data that mostly draws from media reports. Thus any reductions in violent events may actually be due to less reporting on them, either because the media's attention has been diverted to COVID-19 or because its presence has been limited by pandemic-related travel restrictions (Mehrl and Thurner 2020). Second, existing research focuses on certain manifestations of conflict — namely, violence. A narrow view based on counting current incidents of violence may mask the complex ways in which the pandemic is interacting with and affecting some of the underlying drivers of conflict that could give rise to violence in the future.⁷

Indeed, other research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a detrimental effect on factors that can serve as root causes, proximate triggers, and accelerants of conflict — including weak governance, economic deprivation, and social inequality (Search for Common Ground 2021). In some countries, state responses to the virus have reduced public trust. Heavy-handed enforcement of quarantines, repressive crackdowns on protests against food shortages and lockdowns, and corruption by officials tasked with managing COVID-19 relief have all eroded government legitimacy (de Bruijne and Bisson 2020; Canales et al. 2020; Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2020; Weiss 2020). Rumors, conspiracy theories, and misinformation about the origins of the virus and state responses have further galvanized anti-government sentiment and fed into the politicization of the pandemic (Rothwell and Desai 2020; Siwakoti et al. 2021). Some governments have exploited COVID-19 to infringe on human rights, expand state surveillance, and limit election processes (Amnesty International 2021; Brown et al. 2020; de Bruijne and Bisson 2020; De Waal 2020), which have been shown to heighten the risk of political violence (Bell et al. 2013; Cingaranelli et al. 2019; Hegre et al. 2001; Young 2013).

In addition to aggravating potential political drivers of conflict, there is evidence of the pandemic's effect on possible economic and social drivers. The COVID-19-induced economic downturn has compounded food insecurity and increased global extreme poverty⁸ for the first time in two decades (FSIN 2021; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2021; World Bank 2020b), amplifying the risk of collective violence (Heslin 2020; Koren and Bagozzi 2016). Economies have contracted, local and international value chains have been disrupted, and private sector investment in fragile countries has decreased (CRS 2021; IFC 2020; IMF 2020; World Bank 2020a). Pandemic-related lockdowns have escalated humanitarian needs in conflict-affected settings, while at the same time restricting humanitarian access and aid delivery (Brubaker et al. 2021). And pre-existing social inequalities have been reinforced by COVID-19, further marginalizing disadvantaged groups by disproportionately impacting their health, livelihoods, and access to services in a time of heightened scarcity and need (Jefferson et al. 2021).

Methodology

This study uses in-depth case studies of three countries — Afghanistan, Colombia, and Nigeria — to investigate and analyze how COVID-19 and measures to contain it have shaped factors that contribute to peace and conflict since March 2020. We cover three types of conflict: anti-state conflict (insurgencies); communal conflict (violence between and within different groups in society); and organized criminal conflict (violence perpetrated by gangs, drug cartels, and other illicit groups). The case study countries were selected to ensure regional diversity and maximize variation in the type, intensity, and scope of conflict; the fragility of state-society relations; and the intensity of virus transmission and public health responses. Figure 1 summarizes where our cases fit along these dimensions, and provides a snapshot of COVID-19 spread and response in each country.

For each case study, we took a systems approach. As Herbert and Marquette (2021) observe, in conflict-affected situations, “pandemics and their responses...become absorbed into the logic of conflict” and as a result, there is a need to approach these subjects “as complex systems, rather than mono-causal issues.” A systems approach seeks to capture the dynamic relationships and causalities between different conflict factors (CDA 2017). In doing so, it enables a more holistic understanding of conflict and the direct and indirect pathways through which COVID-19 may be influencing the factors that cause, contribute to, or discourage conflict and violence. It is also useful for donors, policymakers, and practitioners to identify different leverage points for change that can alter multiple components of the conflict system.

89 Community Workshops with 518 Participants

- 26 in 8 districts in 4 provinces in Afghanistan
- 23 in 18 municipalities in Colombia
- 40 in 29 communities in 4 states in Nigeria

91 Key Informant Interviews

- Including community and traditional leaders, government officials, members of civil society organizations, humanitarian and development practitioners, conflict analysts, and other subject matter experts

In each country, the research team created a targeting framework to maximize the diversity of research participants (by gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status) from a diverse set of sites (urban/rural, border/interior locations, demographic makeup, and types of pre-pandemic conflict dynamics). Mercy Corps convened participatory workshops with participants in each site and conducted key informant interviews. Drawing on this data, we developed conflict systems maps and used thematic analysis and process tracing to identify the nature and extent of COVID-conflict pathways within and across cases (see the [methodological appendix](#) for more details). The research team treated data collection and analysis as an iterative process subject to continuous refinement, and incorporated data from other primary and secondary sources to triangulate the findings. Our approach is predicated on the idea that understanding how communities are experiencing and perceiving local political, economic, and security conditions during the pandemic is essential for effectively diagnosing and addressing the secondary impacts of COVID-19, including on conflict and instability.

The findings presented in this chapter are a synthesis of the evidence across the three case studies, based on a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in how COVID-19 has affected the conflict system in each country. These effects vary by context, but since the analysis focuses on general patterns, it does not fully represent those detailed in the individual case studies. Each case study provides an in-depth and nuanced analysis of the complex and multifaceted ways in which the pandemic is interacting with, and has affected, conflict dynamics. This report is based on three country contexts and may not be representative of how the pandemic is shaping conflict dynamics across the globe. Nevertheless, our findings point to similar concerning trends across the three very distinct cases. We also cite evidence from other comparative studies to bolster our conclusions.

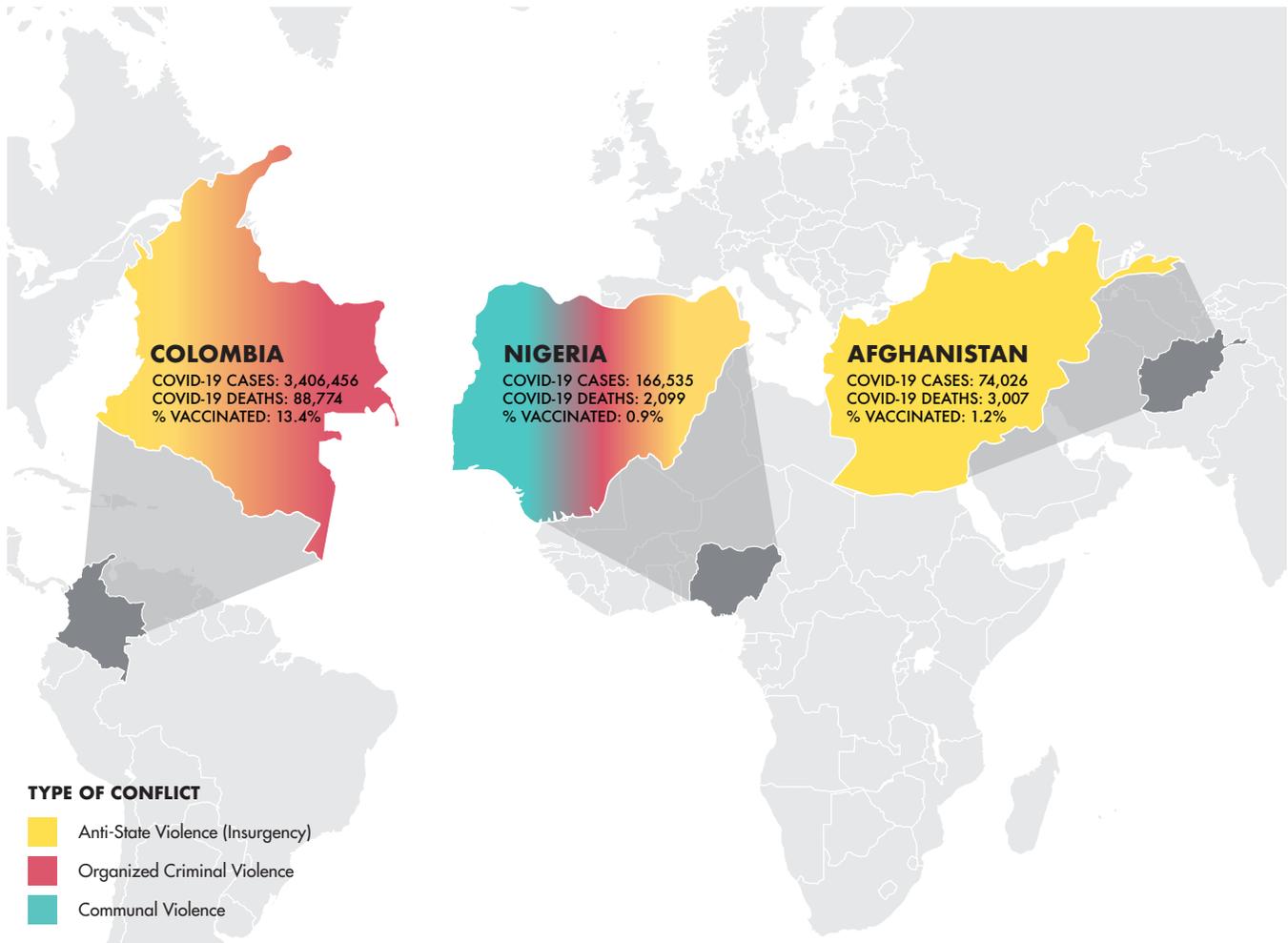


Figure 1. Case studies: conflict types and COVID-19 status (as of June 1, 2021)⁹

Comparative Findings

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing drivers of conflict.

The pandemic has aggravated some of the pre-existing drivers of conflict in all three case study countries by:

1. Diminishing trust in government leaders and institutions;
2. Increasing economic hardship and intensifying resource competition;
3. Eroding social cohesion by stoking tensions within families, communities, and between different groups in society.

Each of these three interrelated pathways — which are described in more detail below — focus on the political, economic, and social consequences of the pandemic. In some cases, these consequences led to escalations in violence, particularly criminal violence and social unrest in response to governments’ handling of COVID-19. In other instances, they discouraged collective mobilization and reduced opportunities for anti-state or communal violence in the short-term even as they strained relations between state and society and widened socio-economic inequalities — potentially setting the stage for more conflict in the long-term. Thus even in places where violence has not increased during the pandemic, conflict risks have worsened.

⁹ Figures are based on reported COVID-19 cases, deaths, and vaccinations according to the World Health Organization (<https://covid19.who.int/>).

› *“It is like when something has been hidden, buried, and it rained and water ran through until eventually water unearths it. And that is what happened; COVID made our country’s real problems visible.”*

— Community leader, Colombia

› *“COVID is not a cause, it is a trigger event that set the spark for protest and large-scale contentious action, and government’s insensitivity to what people were going through on a daily basis.”*

— Workshop participant, Nigeria

Measures to contain COVID-19 have impacted peace and conflict dynamics more noticeably than disease spread.

In some parts of Afghanistan, Colombia, and Nigeria, the severity of COVID-19 transmission remains uncertain due to minimal testing, unreliable data, and a lack of community-level reporting. Yet the epidemiological impact of the pandemic — on excess mortality or competition over health services — appears to have had less of an effect on conflict dynamics than states’ and communities’ responses to it. This could reflect the success of some of these measures, such as lockdowns and social distancing, for public health. Or it could indicate the greater visibility of their secondary impacts, as more people have observed shuttered businesses and pauses in government services than overflowing hospitals. But while COVID-19 has posed a greater health threat to some countries and populations than others, its secondary impacts have been more evenly distributed.

Across all three case studies, and across different regions within those countries, many measures designed to combat the pandemic — necessary and life-saving as they may have been — have had deleterious effects on state-society relations and economic livelihoods. The pandemic initially had a positive effect on social relations and civil society in some places, but it was largely short-lived. In Nigeria, the threat of COVID-19 temporarily united communities and helped galvanize collective action to demand better governance. Over time, however, the economic ramifications and other disruptions stemming from the pandemic response have weakened cohesion within and between communities. In Afghanistan and Colombia, the pandemic has increased household and community tensions and hindered social organization, as fear of contracting the virus, restrictions on organized gatherings, and differing adherence to those restrictions have limited or soured social interactions.

› *“After the spread of COVID-19 and lockdown, poverty and unemployment have doubled in the area, and during this period, the government didn’t help people, which caused conflict between the government and the people.”*

— Workshop participant, Takhar, Afghanistan



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The pandemic has been a boon for armed groups, and a liability for governments.

Insurgents, gangs, and criminal organizations have largely benefitted from the pandemic, while governments have faltered. In all three countries — where at least a third of the population lived below the national poverty line before 2020 — unemployment, market disruptions, and school closures caused by COVID-related lockdowns and movement restrictions have contributed to increased crime, instability, and socio-economic vulnerability, particularly among youth. A decline in state revenues and diversion of public resources towards fighting the virus has also diminished the presence of governments and its provision of services, from education to security. In Colombia and Nigeria, along with a variety of other countries, growing dissatisfaction with state actors is evidenced by a marked increase in anti-government protests during the pandemic (ACLEDD 2021; Carothers and Press 2020). Some have been direct reactions to lockdowns and other containment measures. Others have been a continuation or escalation of social movements that predated the pandemic (ACLEDD 2021). While the intensity and top-down nature of public health measures differ across cases, there is a pervasive feeling that governments have not done enough to blunt the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

Different armed groups — from rebels to cartels to violent extremist organizations — have exploited these vulnerabilities and increased their influence by promising protection, luring recruits and supporters through financial incentives, and expanding the illicit economies that they control. These challenges have proven particularly acute in areas where governance was weak and public trust in state institutions was low before the pandemic. The increase in criminality and armed group activity has undermined civil society organizations in Colombia and stoked grievances against government and community leaders in Afghanistan. In Nigeria, it has prompted the further growth of vigilante groups, which have both perpetrated violence and helped protect communities from it. The increased influence of armed groups has helped fuel violence and impunity in some communities, and increased the risk of instability.

The pandemic has contributed to an increase in criminality,¹⁰ prompting people to turn to insurgents and other armed groups for protection and employment in the illicit economies they control. By emboldening these groups and sowing insecurity, the rise in criminal violence due to COVID-19 has therefore raised the risk of anti-state and communal violence — illustrating the link between different types of conflict.



Jaime Saldarriaga/Reuters

Pathways Linking COVID-19 and Conflict

Pathway 1: Governance and State-Society Relations

State responses to COVID-19 have diminished public trust and confidence in government in each country. This has not only intensified a key driver of conflict — it has caused people to refuse to comply with public health measures (Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2020) and threatened uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine (Mercy Corps 2021). The pandemic has widened the trust deficit for different reasons. In Colombia, government effectiveness was significantly higher pre-pandemic than in Nigeria and Afghanistan (Worldwide Governance Indicators), but the country has also suffered from a much larger COVID-19 caseload (see Figure 1). Mistrust in Colombia is therefore primarily driven by the perceived inability of the state to contain the virus or to control the economic fallout. In Nigeria and Afghanistan, mistrust has been fueled by perceptions of corruption in COVID-related relief. These are not unique cases: reports from various countries have highlighted instances of government corruption, fraud, and waste surrounding COVID-19 relief efforts (Alsema 2020; Guensburg 2020). Group-based favoritism in the distribution of public goods can widen horizontal inequalities and fuel inter-group grievances around bias and prejudice, increasing the likelihood of civil war (Cederman et al 2011) and mass atrocities (Harff 2003).

› *“Most of the time people...request the government to solve their problems: economic hardship, unemployment, and security issues. But the government does not take action to address these issues. Hence, people’s trust is declining in the government. But with [COVID-19], this trust has further declined, because aid was not provided to the needy people due to fraud in the government.”*

— Workshop participant, Kandahar, Afghanistan

› *“The Government’s lack of willpower to curb the incessant attacks and kidnapping by bandits in the community has in many ways exposed her weaknesses. These attacks heightened during the pandemic period as the government diverted her attention and resources to curb the spread of the virus.”*

— Workshop participant, Katsina state, Nigeria

¹⁰ ACLED 2021; Bunker 2020; Muggah 2020; Saviano 2020

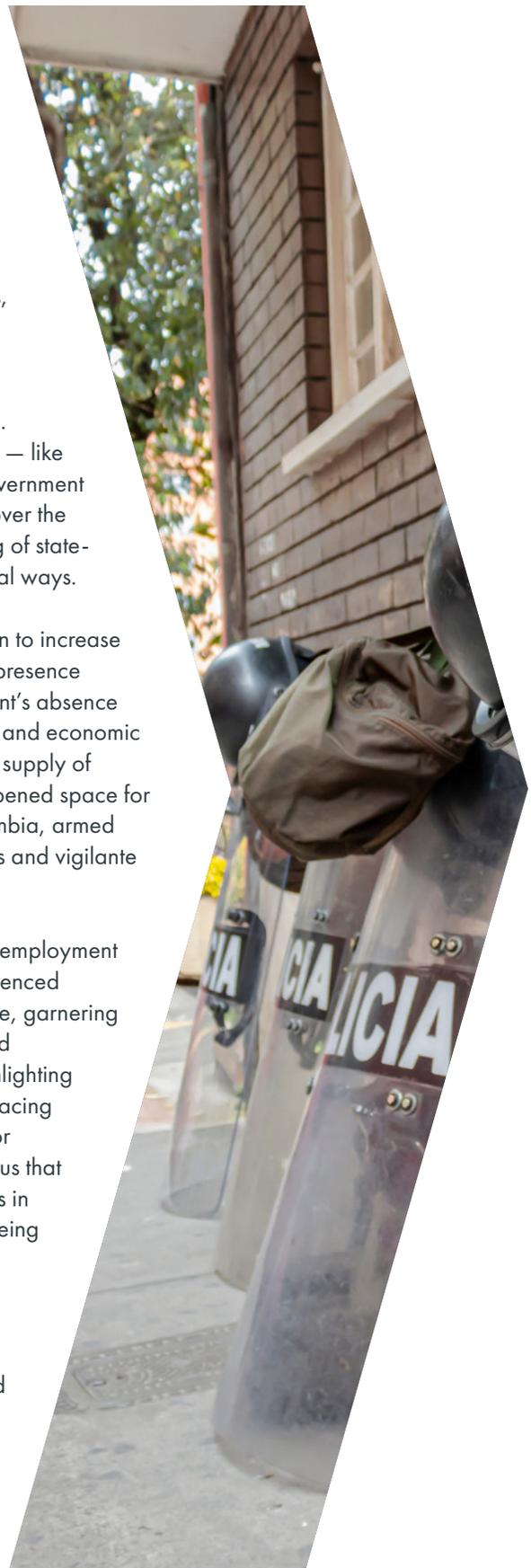
Compounding this mistrust has been the diminished presence of government, particularly in rural areas. Declining tax revenues, movement restrictions for local officials, and the need to funnel resources into public health have forced authorities to cut public services, such as education and social assistance, and curb their engagement with communities. In urban areas — particularly in Nigeria — the government has maintained its presence but sometimes imposed lockdowns or other pandemic measures with relatively little consultation or input from local communities. In some instances, the authorities have enforced these measures by deploying security forces, fanning public anger against the government for perceived injustices.

For some communities, these developments merely reinforced a pre-existing image of their governments as weak, ineffective, or repressive. Misinformation propagated through both traditional and social media — like a prominent rumor in Nigeria that COVID-19 was made up by the government to defraud foreign donors and justify imposing greater social control over the population — also helped feed these perceptions. The further rupturing of state-society relations during the pandemic has stoked conflict risks in several ways.

First, it has provided armed groups with the opportunity and motivation to increase their activities and expand their influence. Even in places where state presence was limited before the pandemic, communities have felt the government’s absence more acutely during COVID-19 due to the heightened need for social and economic protection from the crisis. In other words, the pandemic decreased the supply of governance while simultaneously increasing demand for it. This has opened space for alternative actors — including drug cartels and paramilitaries in Colombia, armed opposition groups (AOGs) in Afghanistan, and banditry organizations and vigilante groups in Nigeria — to fill the void.

With policing and state security presence lacking, and increases in unemployment pushing people towards illicit activities, all three countries have experienced increases in crime and insecurity. Armed groups have taken advantage, garnering support among vulnerable communities in exchange for protection and financial assistance, or further turning people against the state by highlighting the government’s inability to provide these services. In addition to replacing key state functions, these groups have meted out violence to expand or consolidate their authority. A human rights defender in Colombia told us that “illegal [armed] groups took advantage of COVID to take up positions in the communities, carrying out so-called clean-ups [killings] and decreeing mandatory curfews.” This is consistent with other research, which finds that incidences of armed conflict have increased during COVID-19 in countries where armed actors exploited state weakness (Ide 2021).

Second, corruption, abuse, and a sense of abandonment has intensified grievances against the government. Such injustices are key motivators for people to engage in political violence (Mercy Corps 2015). In Afghanistan, job shortages created by the pandemic have encouraged the increased use of nepotistic and discriminatory hiring practices, particularly in the public sector. One respondent told us



Alejo Bernal/Shutterstock

that a member of his community became so frustrated after failing to obtain a government job that he responded by joining an AOG. In Nigeria, after rumors of the government's mismanagement of COVID-19 relief spread on social media, looting of relief supply warehouses ensued. In Colombia, pandemic-induced delays in the implementation of crop substitution schemes have made people lose faith in the state's rural reform initiatives and return to cultivating illicit crops. Colombia's need to scale down or halt some government programs has also stymied the implementation of the peace deal between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

While anti-government sentiment has surged in each country, it has provoked different responses. In Nigeria, it has sparked bouts of large-scale activism such as the EndSARS protests in late 2020. While most of these protests were peaceful, respondents also reported acts of violence by protestors, counter-protestors, and security actors. The rapid growth of information and communications technology before the pandemic, and increased use of text messaging and social media during lockdown — particularly by urban youth — enhanced people's awareness of civic and human rights, drew attention to government abuses, and provided a platform for activists to organize collective action. Unlike in Nigeria, civil society actors in Colombia struggled to adapt to virtual activism while enduring one of the world's longest lockdowns. They have also been targeted with violence by gangs, paramilitaries, and FARC dissidents and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) rebels seeking to expand their influence, a longstanding tactic employed by these groups to remove sources of resistance. The killing and displacement of community leaders has significantly weakened grassroots organizations and hindered reporting of human rights abuses in many Colombian communities, especially indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (Uribe et al. 2020). In Afghanistan, there has been even less activism, which is likely a result of having a weaker civil society and lower expectations of (and engagement with) the state prior to the pandemic.

Differences in societal responses to the pandemic, and the extent to which they have affected conflict dynamics, has been shaped by pre-existing features of the political and social landscape such as the strength of civil society and citizens' expectations of (and level of engagement with) the state.

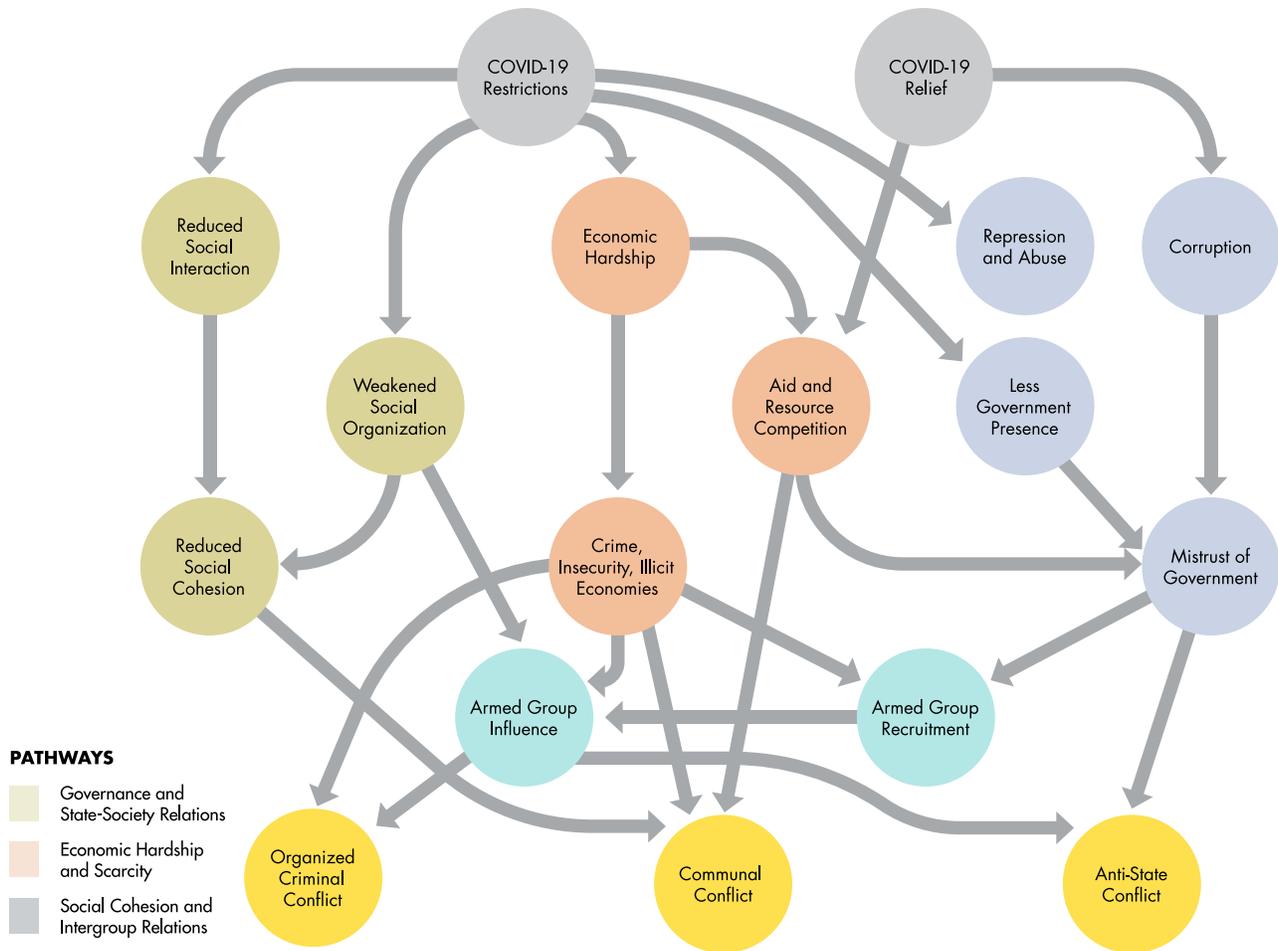


Figure 2: Pathways linking the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, and violence

Pathway 2: Economic Hardship and Scarcity

In each country, the shutdown of businesses and schools, border closures, movement restrictions, and declines in government services due to COVID-19 has pushed millions of people into poverty.¹¹ Reduced incomes, increased commodity prices, and disrupted supply chains have also severely increased food insecurity (World Bank 2021). Among our respondents, economic hardship was the most commonly-cited consequence of the pandemic. Livelihoods in emerging markets tend to require face-to-face contact and in-person work. This means that in our case study countries, people’s sources of income and employment were particularly likely to be affected by pandemic-related restrictions.

In Nigeria, movement restrictions directly infringed on pastoralists’ livelihoods and prevented farmers from reaching agricultural markets. In Colombia, the rapid decline in employment opportunities in urban areas led to a reversal in traditional migration patterns, as people returned to rural areas where lockdown measures were less strict and the economic impact was less severe. In Afghanistan — one of the poorest countries in the world pre-pandemic — communities have suffered not just from increased unemployment and local market disruptions, but also from the loss of emigration as an economic coping strategy.

Border closures forced tens of thousands of Afghans working in Iran, Pakistan, and other countries to return home. This resulted in a significant loss of income from remittances, along with the sudden presence of a large number of unemployed and disillusioned returnees. As one workshop participant explained, “upon the spread of COVID-19, everyone has been quarantined, including the people who were working in foreign countries...when the borders closed, the people couldn’t go to other countries to work, [which] increased unemployment in this area.” Many of these migrants, who tend to be young men, have had to cope with the abrupt loss of economic and social status as they went from being a provider to a drain on their families’ rapidly dwindling resources.

› *“We suffered from insecurity before the outbreak of COVID, but not to this extent... robbery, kidnapping, drug use, open [shooting] at night, and murders...since the outbreak of COVID, all of them reached their peak...and it still continues.”*

— Workshop participant, Kabul, Afghanistan

› *“[Illicit crops] were the only agricultural sector that did not stop. Crops continued, but they also offered an employment option that other businesses did not.”*

— Workshop participant, Catatumbo, Colombia

Increased scarcity has intensified key drivers of conflict in several ways. First, it has forced people to shift their livelihood strategies from licit to illicit activities. Respondents reported a marked increase in theft, robbery, and other petty crime, along with the number of people working in illicit economies such as coca production in Colombia, opium and methamphetamine trafficking in Afghanistan, and organized banditry in Nigeria. These illicit economies have remained stable during the pandemic. Not only has domestic and international demand for their products increased — as people seek outlets to cope with the psycho-social impact of COVID-19 — but those who operate these economies generally do not beholden themselves to public health restrictions mandated by the government. In Colombia and Afghanistan, drug trafficking and smuggling filled a widening employment gap that the formal economy could not. In Nigeria, kidnappings for ransom by banditry groups have surged during the pandemic, particularly in the northwest. Across all three countries, the rise in criminality has deepened insecurity and bolstered economies that are explicitly governed through violence. This has increased fear and uncertainty, encouraging “ingrouping”¹² and amplifying the risk of intercommunal conflict (Lichtenheld and Ogbudu 2021), while emboldening those armed groups that claim to offer protection from insecurity.

Second and related, greater economic vulnerability has made financial compensation for participating in violent organizations more attractive. While insurgents and criminal organizations have indirectly benefited from higher demand to work in the illicit economies they run or support, they have also sought to directly lure new recruits and collaborators.



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

¹² Ingrouping refers to the belief that one’s social identity is a source of strength, security, and even superiority, and that other groups are inferior and/or can be blamed for problems in society (Bonikowski 2016).

Across our case studies, respondents described a vicious cycle of economic hardship, insecurity, and armed group recruitment during the pandemic. For example, according to a workshop participant in Herat, Afghanistan, “previously our village was secure but since the pandemic started, most of our village youth have joined the Taliban and created panic in the villages and even in Herat city...The main reason for their joining is directly related to the lack of job resources and unemployment.”

› *“Recruitment of minors by armed groups intensified a lot since March. This is because at home there is no protection, there is no school, there are no teachers or leaders who can protect, nor is there army presence.”*

— Key informant, Colombia

› *“Some major changes have been witnessed in the tactics of the armed groups. People became jobless because of COVID-19 and lockdown; [the groups] used this to their advantage by encouraging people to join their groups. They have promised people that they will provide financial aid if they join.”*

— Workshop participant, Kandahar, Afghanistan

› *“Herders that have been disposed of their livestock by the bandits, realizing they have nothing more to survive on or to make reports to, sometimes decide for their children to join the bandits, so they can at least get something back for their families.”*

— Workshop participant, Katsina state, Nigeria

Some respondents suggested that it was not economic desperation per se that drove people to turn to armed groups. The loss of social status as a result of poverty and unemployment — and anti-government grievances inflamed by declines in public services and states’ failure to lend economic assistance — have also been motivating factors. Economic need and humiliation have prompted some returnees in Afghanistan to join AOGs, and communities noted a discernible shift in recruits enlisting more for financial reasons than for ideological ones. In Colombia, respondents reported a substantial increase in the recruitment of youth, including minors, by a range of armed groups during the pandemic — including gangs, drug cartels, paramilitaries, FARC dissidents and ELN rebels — a consequence of both school closures and families’ economic suffering. In Nigeria, increased participation in groups like the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Jama’u Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS), and banditry gangs primarily took the form of indirect support or collaboration, such as serving as informants or providing food and supplies. COVID-related losses of income and socio-economic status have therefore led individuals to support armed groups in a variety of ways other than directly taking up arms.

Third, increased scarcity has intensified competition over pandemic aid and natural resources, namely land and water. This dynamic has been more prominent in Afghanistan and Nigeria, where clashes over resource use were an important driver of communal conflict before the pandemic. In Nigeria, pandemic movement restrictions have forced herders to change their migration patterns. With fewer grazing routes, herders have sometimes encroached on farmland, which has become more valuable in light of COVID-related food insecurity. The resulting disputes have sparked cycles of violence between farmers and herders, deepening conflicts that have plagued Nigeria for years, particularly in the Middle Belt. In Afghanistan, too, shifting migration patterns due to the pandemic have increased the number of individuals and groups vying for access to the same resources. People described more frequent clashes between returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and host communities over land and water. As one workshop participant in Herat explained, “since the start of the pandemic, conflicts around [land] have increased. When the migrants came to this area, they grabbed the government lands. And the government couldn’t prevent them.” A respondent in Kandahar concurred: “people started selling their lands and occupying other tribes’ lands...which created so many tensions in this village. The disputes started a long time ago, but since the pandemic it has been worse.”

Tensions between tribes, and between internally displaced populations and host communities, have also increased as they compete for domestic and international pandemic relief. In some cases, increased resource competition has coincided with diminished access to dispute resolution mechanisms — because of lockdowns or the retreat of state institutions — resulting in outbreaks of violence between individuals and communities. Elsewhere, peace has endured but appears increasingly fragile as resource shortages, dwindling incomes, and limited economic prospects persist. In Colombia, the pandemic has curtailed the involvement of civil society organizations in key advocacy platforms for the peace process, such as the Comité Territorial de Justicia Transicional and Mesas de Víctimas del Municipio, diminishing their influence. This is consistent with other research showing that COVID-19 has helped undercut peace negotiations and stalled the implementation of formal peace processes in multiple countries (Ero 2021).

› *“Previously, there were many gatherings in the village and CDC [Community Development Committee] office, but they have decreased now. Even we do not have any councils nowadays...Most of the problems used to be solved in meetings and councils, but since there is no meeting, none of the problems and conflicts are solved.”*

— Workshop participant, Kabul, Afghanistan

› *“Before COVID, we had a system that worked and a mechanism to organize and settle disputes.”*

— Workshop participant, Kaduna state, Nigeria

Pathway 3: Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations

There have been competing claims about the impact of the pandemic on social cohesion.¹³ Some researchers contend that COVID-19 has brought different groups together and united them against a shared threat (Beaujouan et al. 2020; Quarcoo and Kleinfeld 2020). Other studies suggest that the pandemic has increased social tensions and made people feel less connected to each other (Carothers and O’Donohue 2020; UNDP 2020). We find that some communities experienced an initial boost in social cohesion, but that it has deteriorated over time.

Early in the pandemic, particularly in Nigeria, COVID-19 had a pacifying effect on social relations. Most notably, lockdowns, movement restrictions, and social distancing decreased contact between conflicting groups. Communities that would normally interact with each other, such as farmers and herders in northern Nigeria, no longer were, reducing the risk of altercations or armed clashes. Some communities in Afghanistan and Colombia experienced a similar initial lull in violent episodes. These effects were especially pronounced for conflicts that stemmed from attempts by two or more groups to access a shared resource simultaneously, such as disputes over a specific piece of land or disagreements over the use of shared rangeland or water points. At the same time, in Nigeria, COVID-19 and its consequences presented a collective danger and few segments of society were spared. This created a sense of mutual vulnerability that temporarily enhanced intergroup cohesion.

› *“As a result of the fear of COVID-19, people stopped attacking and killing [others] during the lockdown. They were saying ‘why will I kill someone while there is something invisible that can kill and no one is safe, they then started showing some love towards each other.’”*

— Key informant, Plateau state, Nigeria

¹³ We define social cohesion as “a sense of shared purpose and trust among members of a given group or locality and the willingness of those group members to engage and cooperate with each other to survive and prosper” (Kim et al 2020).



Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters

These effects did not last long. In Nigeria, the end of lockdown immediately reversed the factors that had been dampening intergroup conflict, both by permitting free movement and by sending the message that the threat of COVID-19 had diminished. Since the lifting of pandemic restrictions did not necessarily alleviate their political and economic consequences, it meant that different groups and communities were starting to interact again at a time of heightened scarcity and competition. Some conflicts erupted over disputes that started during lockdown (pastoralists taking advantage of lockdown to graze their cattle on farmland) or narratives about identity-based favoritism in government responses (such as targeting relief assistance on ethnic or religious lines). According to a Afghan respondent in Kandahar, “in the aid distribution, people were selected through favoritism...People were asked which ethnic group they were from during aid distribution, and help was provided on an ethnic basis. Those people got aid who did not need aid at all.”

In Colombia and Afghanistan, pandemic restrictions had a deleterious effect on social relations. Community leaders and organizations in Colombia were unable to meet due to the country’s prolonged lockdown. In Afghanistan, lockdowns and movement restrictions curbed family visits and attendance at funerals, weddings, and religious services. Pandemic responses also divided households, tribes, and ethnic groups and created new points of contention over differing attitudes and behaviors around COVID-19. According to one respondent in Kandahar, “Social cohesion was reduced due to coronavirus. They [authorities] said people should not go to mosques to prevent the spread of coronavirus. The imams said that people should come to the mosques, and if anyone did not show up, he would be one of the infidels...And this caused conflicts among the people; a group of people supported the imams of the mosques and others did not go to the mosques to save their lives.” Differing attitudes about, and responses towards, COVID-19 also widened divisions between groups, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities.

Indeed, while a lack of social interaction may have temporarily prevented conflict between certain tribes or communities, over time this lack of interaction became a source of strain and significantly hindered social bonding in all three countries. It also helped engender tensions and conflicts within families and groups. Increased time spent at home, and multiple members of the household being out of work or school, escalated tensions over how to survive and adapt in the face of mounting economic and

social hardships. These hardships, and the strategies needed to cope with them, often challenged gender norms and roles within households and was linked to rising rates of domestic violence against women and youth — part of a larger global uptick in the COVID-19 era that the U.N. has dubbed “the silent pandemic” (Andrews et al. 2021; UN Women 2020).¹⁴

Such violence influenced broader conflict dynamics in two ways. First, it created new “micro-cleavages” that eroded pre-existing bases for social cooperation (revolving around families and communities) and opened up new lines of conflict. Second, it prompted some women and youth who had been victims of violence to abandon their homes, increasing their vulnerability to recruitment by gangs and other armed groups. In Colombia, workshop participants noted that girls were increasingly being recruited, often as forced sexual companions. These testimonies are not unique. Research by international organizations points to an uptick in high-risk coping mechanisms among women and children, along with an increase in human trafficking, child labor, and sexual exploitation as criminal organizations capitalize on vulnerable communities’ growing desperation during the pandemic (Human Rights Watch 2021; ILO and UNICEF 2021; Singhatteh 2021; UNODC 2021).



Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

”People stopped assisting each other....This brought about a reduction in unity between people — people were scared to give out what they have, as one does not know when the lockdown will end.”

— Civil society leader, Plateau state, Nigeria

”Social cohesion is reduced due to the coronavirus; people no longer go to [mosque] to pray, decreased gatherings among the villagers, and lack of participation in ceremonies such as weddings, engagements, and funerals...With the outbreak of coronavirus, most of our traditions have changed.”

— Workshop participant, Kandahar, Afghanistan

As with families, the economic consequences of the pandemic strained relations within tribal, ethnic, and religious groups by compromising their obligations of financial support based on social ties. In the absence of effective government social safety nets, many groups and communities depend on their own members to share resources and lend assistance (Kim et al. 2020). The pandemic increased within-group demands for sharing, but such requests were also more likely to be denied due to widespread scarcity. With nearly everyone in a given social network having been negatively affected, and given the unpredictable economic outlook, fewer people have been in a position to offer help. By undermining norms of reciprocity and creating openings for disagreements over social and economic challenges posed by the pandemic, COVID-19 has helped erode social cohesion — a key factor for ensuring peace (Lichtenheld et al. 2021; Olawole et al. forthcoming).

¹⁴ To the extent that increases in gender-based violence indicates or contributes to gender inequality, it has direct implications for political violence, as countries with lower gender equality face a higher risk of armed conflict (Caprioli 2005; Hudson et al. 2012).

Recommendations

The findings of this report should serve as early warning signs of the potential for future violence and unrest due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For much of the world, an end to the pandemic is not in sight — and the non-health effects, including these potential risks of conflict, will outlast it. This is why governments, donors and policymakers should invest in and strengthen conflict prevention *now*. Coordinated, strategic, multisectoral collaboration among governments, civil society organizations, international donors and NGOs, and the private sector will be key.

Accordingly, Mercy Corps offers the following set of overarching recommendations to donors, policymakers, and practitioners:

1. **Integrate conflict prevention into COVID-19 response and adopt a holistic approach to pandemic recovery:** Our research underscores the importance of moving away from a reactive approach to conflict that primarily focuses on treating its symptoms, including violence, towards a preventive approach that seeks to ameliorate the drivers of conflict before they precipitate violence and prioritizes peacebuilding. The three pathways linking COVID-19 and conflict outlined in this report represent potential levers to mitigate the secondary effects of the pandemic and prevent future conflict. Interventions aimed at addressing them must complement each other in order to:
 - a. Build trust between communities and governments, which will be key to preventing disease spread and repairing strained state-society relations exploited by non-state armed groups during the pandemic;
 - b. Reduce resource scarcity and support jobs and livelihoods that help communities recover from the economic shocks of the pandemic in ways that build resilience to future shocks and stresses;
 - c. Strengthen social cohesion within and between communities by countering narratives that heighten conflict, fortify grassroots dispute-resolution mechanisms weakened during the pandemic, and promote collaborative approaches to natural resource management and community development in order to bring people together to cooperatively address shared challenges.
2. **Expand and direct foreign assistance to support peacebuilding, reduce inequality, and prevent democratic backsliding:** Donor assistance for the global COVID-19 response has not kept pace with need, especially in addressing the non-health effects of the pandemic.¹⁵ To address this gap, we urge donors to:
 - a. Robustly fund humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programs in tandem. Addressing COVID-19's exacerbating impacts on the underlying drivers of conflict will require investments in the areas of conflict stabilization, complex crises mitigation, atrocities prevention, democracy promotion, and human rights protection. It will also require consistent investments in conflict-sensitive humanitarian response and long-term development to reduce socioeconomic inequalities magnified by the pandemic, improve the livelihoods of those most hard hit by COVID-19, and spur equitable economic growth.
 - b. Eschew siloed approaches to violence prevention that focus on particular types of violence or particular kinds of armed groups. Instead donors should support responses that cover a much wider spectrum of crime and conflict in a given context. This will be crucial to not only deterring recruitment, especially of youth, but also preventing an uptick in one type of conflict (e.g. criminality) evolving into and engendering another (e.g. insurgency).

¹⁵ Throughout 2020 and 2021, for example, the U.S. Congress passed six emergency COVID-19 relief bills, totaling roughly \$5.4 trillion. Only a tiny fraction of that relief - about one third of one percent (approximately \$19 billion) - was provided to global assistance activities, and the vast majority of that was for vaccine distribution, medical relief, and support for U.S. citizens abroad.

- c. Tailor disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs to target a wide range of individuals who joined different kinds of armed groups during the pandemic and support them to build productive livelihoods outside of the illicit economy. Many DDR and related programs focus only on former rebels and members of extremist organizations. However, as we document in this report, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed many people into criminal organizations, from local gangs to human trafficking rings who also need to be demobilized.
3. **Consult and meaningfully engage with local communities:** Our research demonstrates that during COVID-19 local communities have felt a deep sense of abandonment by their governments, which in turn is exacerbating drivers of conflict by deepening political and economic grievances. To mitigate insecurity, reduce fragility, and support conflict prevention, donors, governments, and international organizations should:
- a. Engage local communities directly through inclusive community engagement and participatory peacebuilding approaches to consult with those who have been most adversely affected by worsening security conditions;
 - b. Support and enable the leadership and meaningful engagement of locally trusted civil society organizations alongside academic institutions and relevant private sector enterprises to ensure contextually situated pandemic recovery, conflict prevention, and resilient systems.
4. **Prioritize research on the COVID-19 pandemic’s impacts and apply lessons learned to conflict prevention and pandemic preparedness:** Our research highlights the importance of rigorous, evidence-based investigation and documentation of how COVID-19, and efforts to contain it, are interacting with conflict and instability. Donors should fund further in-depth, multi-method, comparative research. Scholars should work with practitioners to build on our study to better understand how the pandemic is affecting conflict systems in different countries, including the immediate and long term impacts, as well as to assess the effectiveness of conflict prevention approaches to expand the evidence base on how best to mitigate these risks. Lessons-learned from future research should be integrated into policy planning, program design, and donor engagement. Both general and context-specific insights should also inform the continued rollout of vaccines and other public health responses to COVID-19 as Mercy Corps has consistently argued (Hill et al. 2021).

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Where possible, we sourced photos depicting life during the COVID-19 pandemic period in Nigeria, Colombia, and Afghanistan, with a focus on the specific regions where we collected data in each country. Many of the photographs in this chapter are from other countries, from other regions of each country, and/or from the years preceding the pandemic. These photos were chosen to help illustrate the broader themes, ideas, people, and places described by the individuals who participated in our research.

CONTACT

RYAN SHEELY

Director of Research-Conflict and Governance | Research and Learning
rsheely@mercycorps.org

JIM ARBOGAST

Senior Director | Crisis Analytics
arbogast@mercycorps.org

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45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842

[mercycorps.org](https://www.mercycorps.org)