



Wakil Kohsar/ AFP

A CLASH OF CONTAGIONS

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

JUNE 2021



Acknowledgements

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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global humanitarian crisis of unprecedented magnitude but its health and non-health effects have been far from uniform across the world. In more than 40 countries where Mercy Corps' team of 5,600 humanitarians work, the pandemic has undermined hard-won development gains. Indeed, the pandemic's full range of secondary impacts are yet to be seen but they will outlast disease spread. Especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, communities face a multitude of compounding challenges, some of which emerged during the pandemic and others which pre-existed but have worsened as a result of COVID-19. Recognizing the need to better understand the relationship between the pandemic and conflict, Mercy Corps' Research and Learning Team and Crisis Analytics Team jointly undertook this year-long study.

Our aim was to investigate, document, and analyze how the spread of COVID-19 has shaped conflict, insecurity, and instability. This report is a culmination of that effort. It not only showcases the nuanced findings of our rigorous, evidence-based research in Afghanistan, Colombia and Nigeria, but it also offers recommendations to donors, policymakers, and practitioners.

Our hope is that readers will heed the warning signs that emerge from the direct testimonies of communities in the pages that follow to devise, fund, and implement conflict-sensitive humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding responses to enable an equitable and sustainable pandemic recovery.

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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.

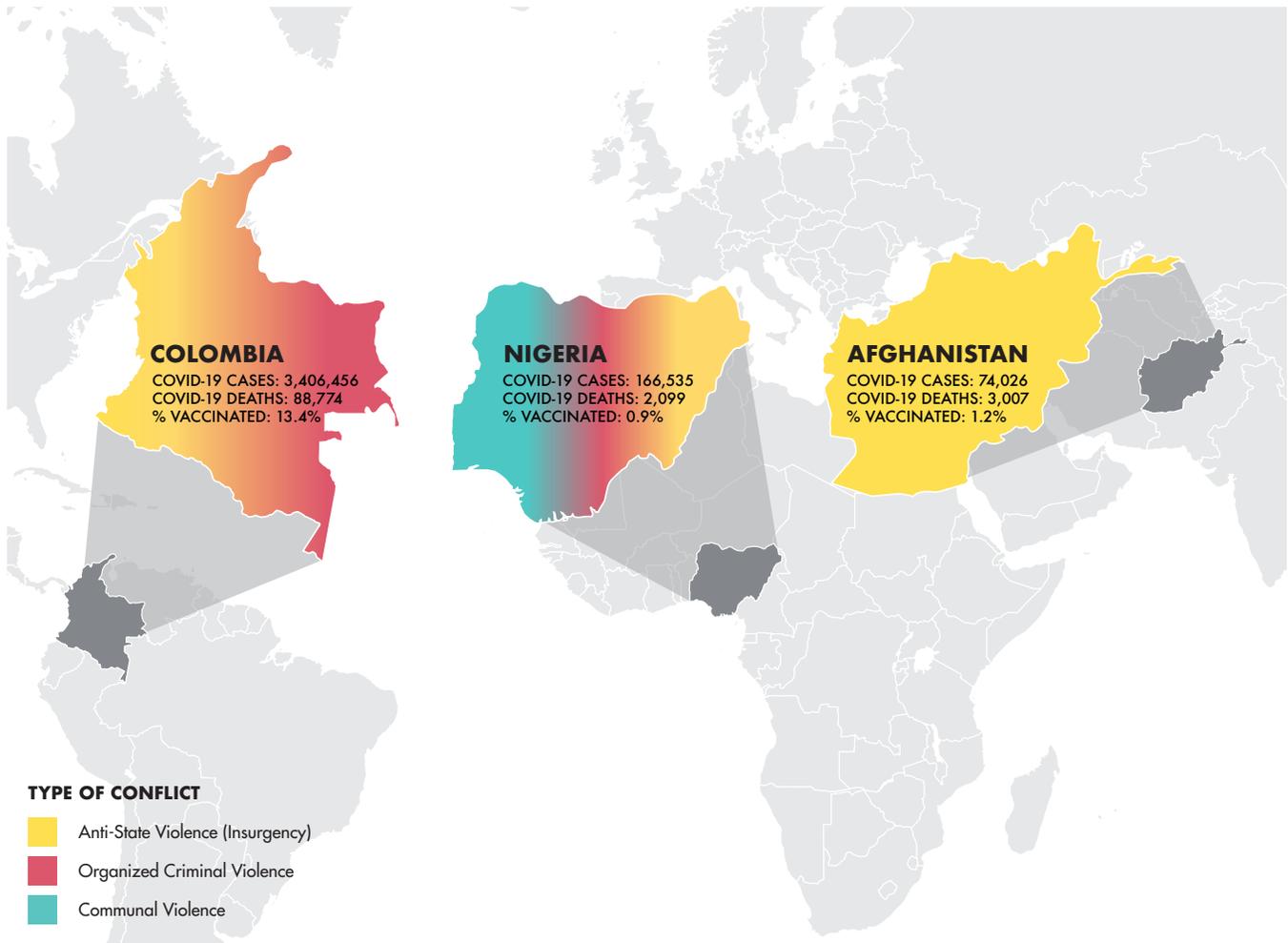


Figure 1. Case studies: conflict types and COVID-19 status (as of June 1, 2021)⁹

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

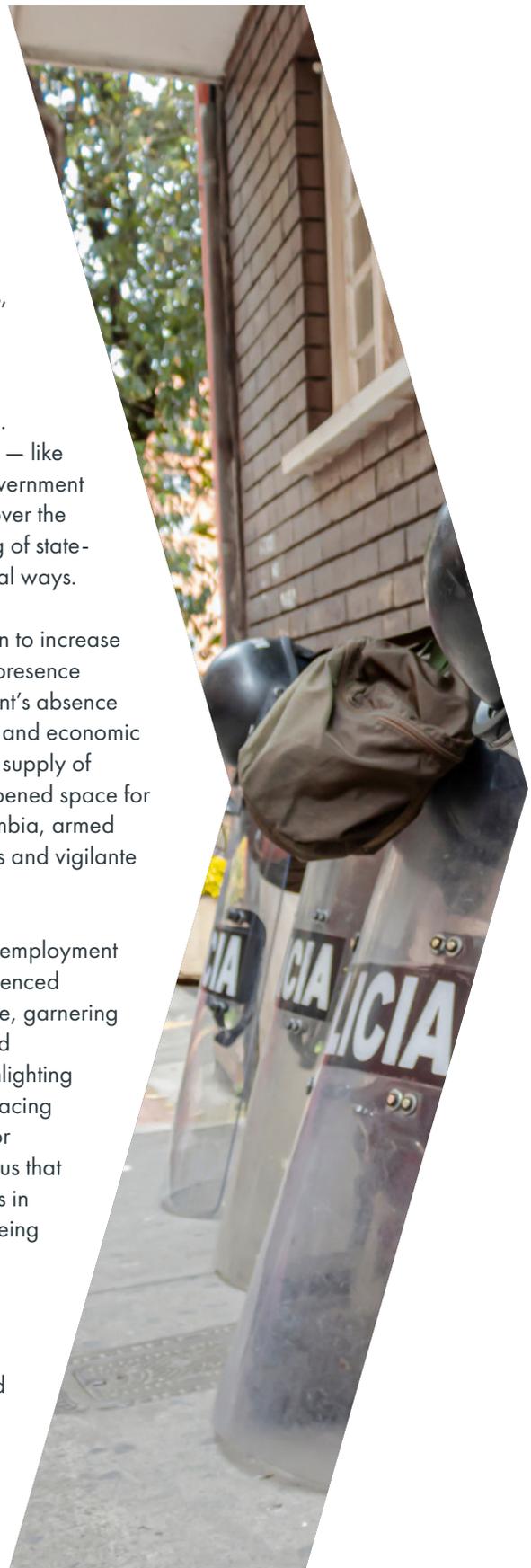
Compounding this mistrust has been the diminished presence of government, particularly in rural areas. Declining tax revenues, movement restrictions for local officials, and the need to funnel resources into public health have forced authorities to cut public services, such as education and social assistance, 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.

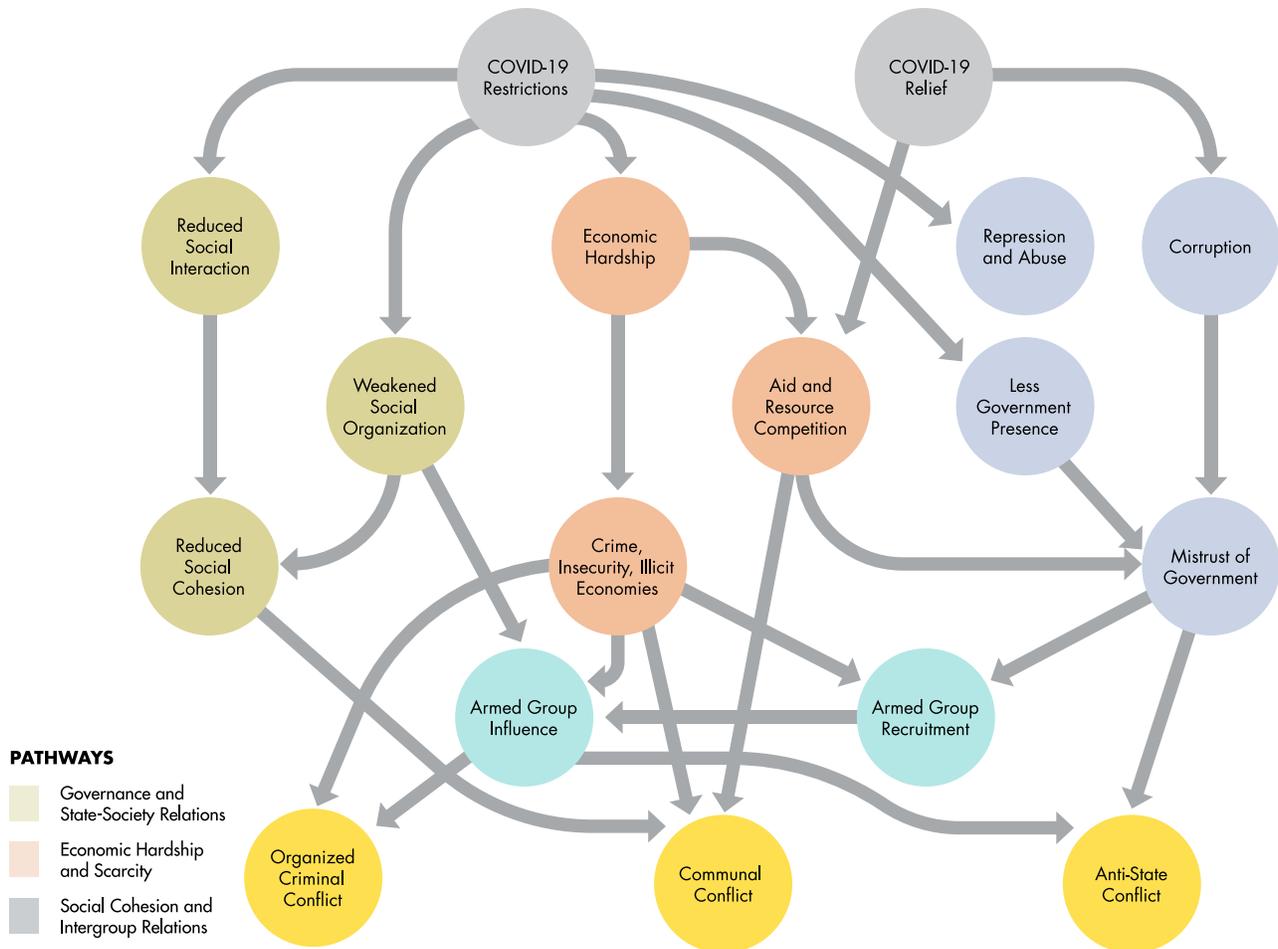


Figure 2: Pathways linking the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, and violence

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.”*

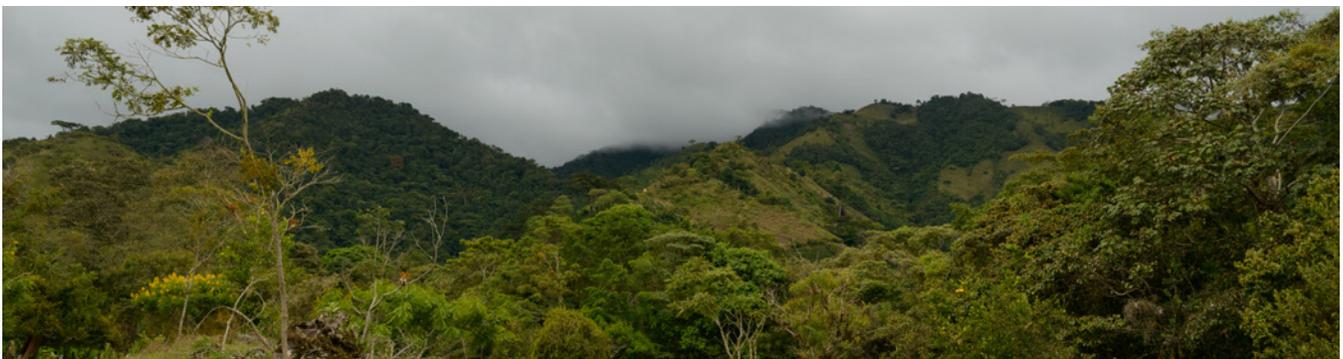
— Workshop participant, Kabul, Afghanistan

› *“[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; Singhatheh 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.



“LIVING WITH TWO WORRISOME PANDEMICS”

**How the COVID-19
Pandemic is Shaping
Conflict in Nigeria**

Key Findings and Implications

Drawing on workshops and interviews with 242 individuals in four states (Adamawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Plateau) plus Abuja, we find that the COVID-19 pandemic has **exacerbated pre-existing conflict dynamics** through three pathways:

- › **Increasing insecurity and armed group activities:** COVID-19 lockdowns, border closures, and movement restrictions contributed to pervasive insecurity by intensifying widespread economic hardship and intensifying gaps in security provision.
 - Both of these dynamics have strengthened and emboldened armed groups, fueling kidnappings and other attacks.
- › **Intensifying youth grievances and sparking social unrest:** The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the growth of youth-led online activism and stoked pre-existing grievances about unjust governance, which supported the emergence of the EndSARS protests.
 - These protests showcased the potential for youth-led activism to be a positive form of civic engagement, but also highlighted how mass mobilization has the potential to give rise to violent social unrest.
- › **Shifting patterns of social cohesion and conflict between and within identity groups:** COVID-19 lockdowns and movement restrictions shaped dynamics around resource scarcity, social cohesion, and identity-based conflict in multiple ways.
 - Lockdowns and movement restrictions generally reduced inter-group conflict by strengthening social cohesion and reducing many types of disputes about the use of scarce resources.
 - The end of lockdowns led to an increase in inter-group conflict and violence by reducing the perception that COVID-19 was a shared external threat and by reintroducing intense resource competition.
 - Within smaller, homogenous groups such as communities and families, lockdowns led to an increase in conflict by straining bonds of social support, reducing trust, and increasing intra-group disputes.

These findings have implications for how policymakers, donors, and practitioners should design and implement future responses to COVID-19 and other shocks in Nigeria:

- › Future COVID-19 restrictions should be coupled with **investments in economic support, security provision, and programs that build social cohesion**. Decisions to relax lockdowns should be combined with efforts to **bolster COVID-19 prevention behaviors and vaccine acceptance** as well as programs that **support livelihoods and strengthen dispute resolution mechanisms**.
- › Responses to COVID-19 and other shocks should **integrate good governance principles** to help improve effectiveness of service delivery and build trust between communities and government actors.
 - Such efforts should support and protect Nigeria's burgeoning **online civic spaces** by promoting digital civic engagement and by **countering attempts to either curtail or weaponize social media**.
- › Responses to COVID-19 and other shocks in Nigeria should draw on **local knowledge and creativity** by incorporating inclusive community engagement into program design and implementation.

Nigeria



Adeyinka Yusuf/iStock

Background

Throughout the past year, Nigeria has been in the midst of a crisis that is defined by insecurity and violence, grievances about governance, economic hardship, hunger, and strain on natural resources. These challenges pre-dated the COVID-19 pandemic, but have intensified over the past year, coinciding with Nigeria's attempts to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Conflict Patterns Prior to COVID-19

There are many types of conflict and violence within Nigeria that predate the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these types of conflict are characterized by different actors, patterns of conflict, and types of violence (The Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution 2018, ACAPS 2020, Idowu 2020, Search for Common Ground 2020).¹ These include:

- › The eleven year-long insurgency by ISWAP and JAS, and counter-insurgency by military and vigilante groups in Northeast (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2015, Suleiman and Aminul Karim 2015, International Crisis Group 2019, Allen 2019, Amao 2020)



¹ In addition to these large regional conflicts that span multiple LGAs and states, there are numerous other localized violent conflicts that emerge out of disputes and tensions both between and within communities, and between communities and the government (The Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution 2018).

Dr. Ryan Sheely and Kamran Hakimian served as lead authors of this chapter.

The report title is based on a quote from a civil society leader: "In the true sense, community members are least concerned about the COVID pandemic, because they are living with two worrisome pandemics that have led to mass displacements of the local populations" (Civil Society Leader-Katsina).

- › Inter-communal conflict across multiple dimensions including ethnicity, religion (Muslim/Christian), livelihood (herder/farmer), and indigene/settler status in North Central, Northeast, and Northwest (Krause 2016, International Crisis Group 2017, Dion and Kemakolam 2018, Chukwuma 2020, Vinson 2020, Lichtenheld 2021).²
- › Large-scale organized crime, gang violence, and banditry, including kidnapping for ransom. Criminal violence and banditry are widespread throughout the country, but are especially prominent in Northwest, North Central, Southeast, and South-South. Gang violence is prevalent in many urban areas, with noteworthy pockets in cities and towns in Adamawa, Plateau, and Bauchi States among others (Lar 2019, Barnett 2020, Campbell and McCaslin 2020, International Crisis Group 2020, Haruna 2020).³
- › Militancy and insurgency surrounding oil production in South-South (Niger Delta) (Alozie 2020, Campbell 2020, Wodu 2020)
- › A separatist movement by Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Southeast (Abada et al 2020, Akwagyiram 2021, Campbell 2021, Craig 2021)

COVID-19 Spread and Response in Nigeria

Nigeria officially recorded its index case of COVID-19 on February 28, 2020. The first death from COVID-19 in the country was reported less than one month later, on March 23. Since that time, there have been 166,518 officially reported COVID-19 cases and 2,099 deaths country-wide as of June 1, 2021, accounting for the 4th highest number of cases and the 5th highest number of deaths in sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1). Nationwide, there have been two distinct waves of infection: a first wave starting in March/April 2020 and peaking in late June/early July and a second wave starting in early December and peaking in late January 2021 (JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data 2021). COVID-19 vaccination started in March 2021; as of June 1, 2021, 0.95% of the population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine (JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data 2021).

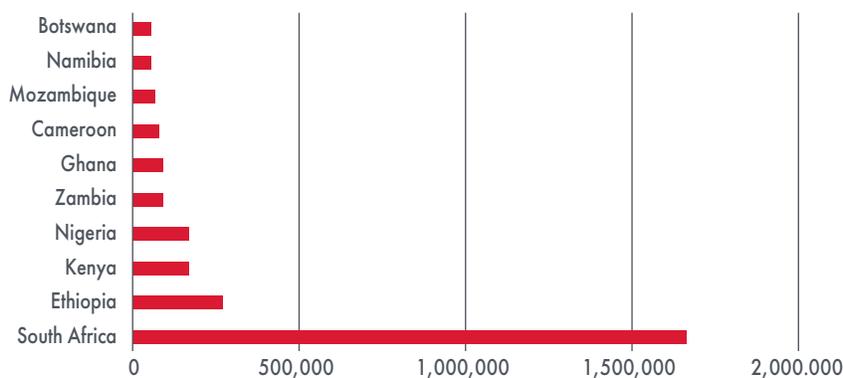


Figure 1. Top 10 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with the Highest Number of COVID-19 Cases, as of June 1, 2021. Data source: JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data

A majority of the cases that have been reported to date are from four states/territories, which are each home to one of Nigeria's ten largest cities: Lagos, FCT (Abuja), Plateau, and Kaduna (NCDC 2021). Epidemiological research indicates that officially reported statistics on positive cases and deaths may severely undercount the actual extent of the spread and lethality of the disease, making it very difficult to compile an accurate picture of COVID-19 spread in Nigeria.⁴

² In the North Central region, there are also protests and social unrest related to the ban of a Shia group, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) (Tangaza 2015, Mawani 2020).
³ Some urban gangs, such as Sara Suka in Bauchi and Plateau states and Yan Shilla in Adamawa State have also been connected to patterns of patronage, political violence, and election interference supported by politicians (Haruna and Jumba 2011, Owonikoko and Momodu 2020).
⁴ A February 2021 study by Nigeria's Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) collected blood samples from a representative sample of households in four states (Lagos, Enugu, Nasarawa, and Gombe) and used antibody testing to construct an alternative estimate of COVID-19 prevalence. For Lagos, the study found a 23% prevalence of antibodies, suggesting that the official estimate of cases could be substantially lower than the actual prevalence (Akinwotu 2021, Center for International Health, Education, and



Adeyinka Yusuf/iStock

Nigeria's public health response to the threat of COVID-19 has largely followed the pattern of the spread of the disease across states and over time. The initial response from both federal and state governments was swift in March and April 2020. The federal government and most state governments created inter-agency COVID-19 Task Forces to monitor the situation and implement restrictions. While the specific set of restrictions varied from state to state, every state-level response included a mix of lockdowns, curfews, and closures of international and state borders, as well as restrictions on market activity, religious worship, and other large gatherings (Dan-Nwafor et al 2020).

Lockdowns and restrictions have been introduced in three waves, broadly tracking with the key moments in the spread of the disease: 1) a first round of restrictions from late March to early May 2020, corresponding to the global declaration of the pandemic and the first cases and deaths in Nigeria, 2) a second round of restrictions in June 2020, corresponding to first wave of increasing cases, 3) targeted restrictions during and after the Christmas holidays, corresponding to the second wave of increasing cases in November 2020, and 4) new restrictions in May 2021, which were driven by concerns about the spread of new variants of the coronavirus.

Methodology

The purpose of the research that we present in this chapter is to uncover the nature and extent of linkages between the COVID-19 pandemic and violent conflict in Nigeria. In particular, we sought to answer the following research questions:

- › How have COVID-19 and associated response measures changed the drivers of conflict in Nigeria?
- › In what ways have individuals' lived experiences of conflict been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- › To what extent is there variation in the impact of COVID-19 across different types of conflict within Nigeria?

Biosecurity 2021).

To answer these questions, we focused on four states (Adamawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Plateau), plus the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja.⁵ These case study locations were selected to ensure variation across a sample of three of the major types of violent conflict that predated the COVID-19 pandemic (the ISWAP and JAS insurgencies, intercommunal conflict, and banditry and kidnapping), as well as the widespread social unrest that emerged in late 2020 in conjunction with the EndSARS protests and looting of warehouses storing government food relief (known as “palliatives”).

The primary sources of data for this study are a set of 40 participatory systems mapping workshops (with an average of 5 participants per workshop) and 18 semi-structured interviews with a total of 238 individuals in 29 communities in the four states and one territory included in the research. We complement these in-depth qualitative data sources with additional data, including relevant conflict datasets, secondary sources, expert interviews, and workshops with team members from Mercy Corps’ Nigeria office.

Within each community, we sought to identify a diverse set of research participants. In general, we actively sought a balanced participation of male and female participants, and substantial representation of both youth and adults (Table 1). Depending on the demographic makeup of each community, we also sought a sample of participants which included the range of identity and population groups present (religious groups, ethnicities; livelihoods; socio-economic status).

	Youth	Adult	Age not specified	Totals
Female	40 (16.8%)	52 (21.8%)	40 (16.8%)	40 (16.8%)
Male	58 (24.4%)	63 (26.5%)	1 (0.4%)	122 (51.3%)
Gender not specified	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	20 (8.4%)	22 (9.2%)
Totals	99 (41.6%)	116 (41.6%)	23 (9.7%)	238 (100.0%)

Table 1. Breakdown of Research Participants, by Age and Gender

The purpose of these two types of data collection were to gather in-depth information about how communities experienced and perceived local political, economic, and security conditions during the pandemic. In the workshops, facilitators guided the participants through a process of identifying the most important drivers of conflict in their community during the pandemic period and collaboratively drawing a map of the causes and consequences of these dynamics. The semi-structured interviews also focused on identifying the causes and consequences of conflict in the participants’ community during the pandemic period, but placed a greater emphasis on probing for broader contextual details and illustrative narratives.

These methods have the advantage of recording detailed accounts of local understandings of the connections between the COVID-19 and pandemic, which may be overlooked by other types of research approaches that focus on short-term trends in violent incidents or surveys of citizen perceptions. At the same time, a limitation of these methods is that they represent

⁵ As part of SPARC (Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises), Mercy Corps and consortium partners are investigating the connections between COVID-19, conflict, economic and environmental shocks, and rural livelihoods in Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan. This research, which is being implemented through repeated qualitative interviews with pastoralists and farmers in each country, will lead to various publications in the coming year which will further build on select themes discussed in this report. Throughout this report, we note relevant overlaps with preliminary findings and planned publications from SPARC. See Mayhew et al 2021 for a summary of initial findings about the connections between COVID-19 and conflict dynamics in Kaduna, Plateau, Adamawa, Kogi, and Benue States, which most closely corresponds to this chapter’s discussion of Pathway 3.



Mercy Corps

the experiences and perspectives of a relatively small number of individuals from a fraction of the communities and states in Nigeria. We addressed this limitation by intentionally sampling a diverse set of locations and individuals within those communities. While this approach makes it possible to start identifying overarching similarities and differences that cut across localities, the findings presented here should be thought of as a working set of hypotheses that should be further tested and refined using a wide range of data sources in a broader set of contexts across Nigeria.

We analyzed the workshop and interview data using a set of methods based on systems analysis and process tracing, with the aim of assessing whether there are systematic pathways connecting the COVID-19 pandemic to conflict and violence, both directly and through influencing other conflict drivers and dynamics.⁶

Analysis of the data from community workshops and interviews reveals a wide diversity of local understandings and experiences of conflict and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Our dataset includes hundreds of locally-specific factors that drive conflict and promote peace, which we organized into 11 broad categories (Figure 2). These categories include perceptions about COVID-19 spread and response, manifestations of violence and instability, and a number of social, economic, and political drivers of conflict.



⁶ For more detail on this analytic approach and how it was deployed in this case study, see [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix D](#).

Findings: Pathways Linking COVID-19 and Conflict in Nigeria

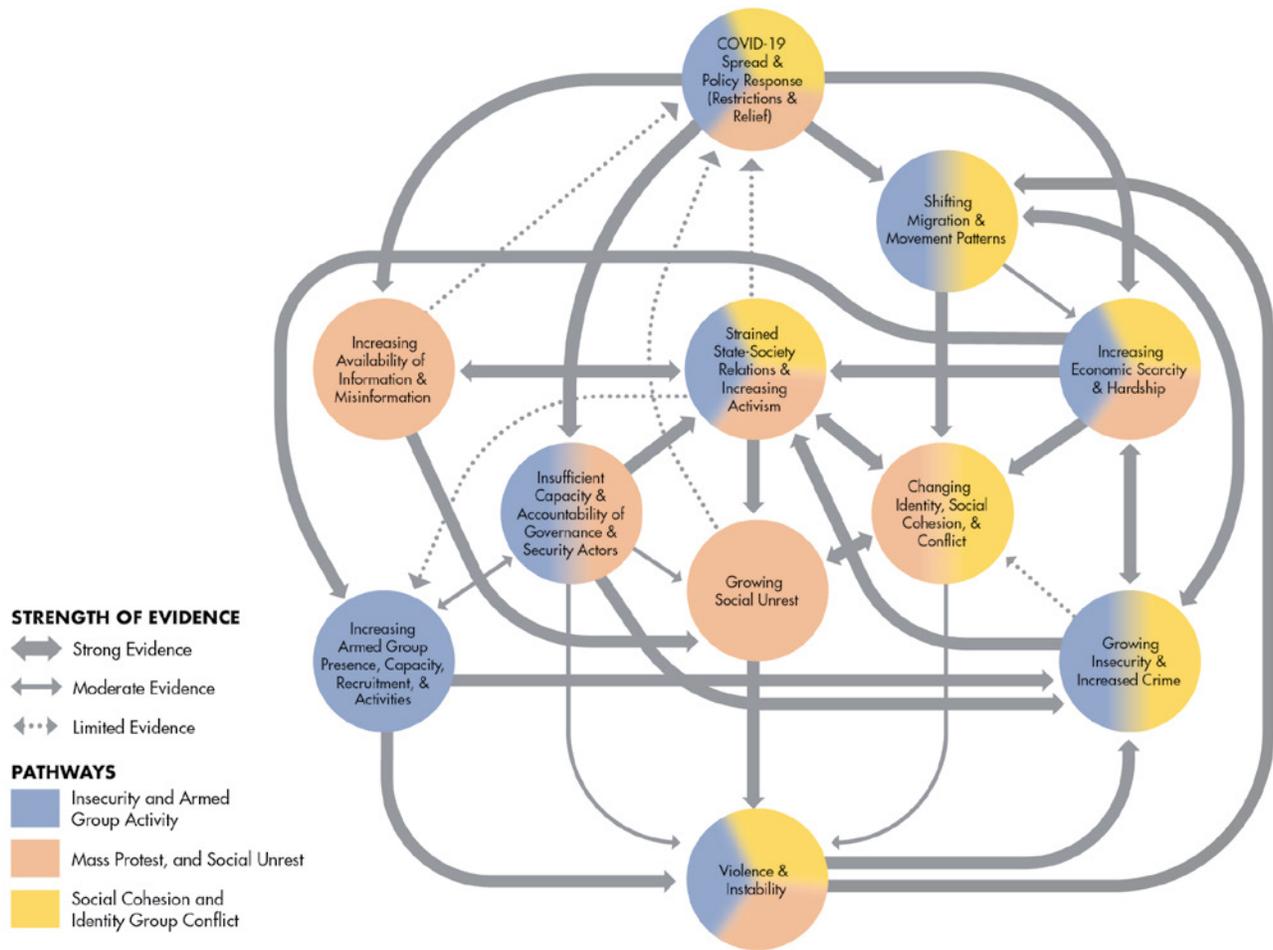


Figure 2. Summary of Connections between COVID-19 and Conflict in Nigeria

Our analysis reveals a complex conflict system that is characterized by an overwhelming number of direct and indirect connections, which shape conflict through three broad pathways:⁷

1. Increasing insecurity and armed group activities
2. Intensifying youth grievances and social unrest
3. Shifting patterns of social cohesion and conflict between and within identity groups.

None of these three pathways were created or caused solely by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, specific elements of the COVID-19 response (lockdowns, border closures, and the distribution of palliative food aid) aggravated multiple drivers of conflict and reinforced pre-existing patterns of behavior by the government, armed groups, and community members.

⁷ Each of these pathways can be thought of as a set of hypothesized causal mechanisms that explain how chains of cause and effect relationships between the individual elements within the broader conflict system shape patterns of behavior over time (Homer and Oliva 2001, Beach and Pedersen 2019). We assess the strength of evidence for each causal link within the broader system map by evaluating the level of reliability and corroboration of the accounts in the data and the extent to which the patterns in the data are corroborated by other sources of theory and evidence from Nigeria and other relevant contexts. This set of findings builds on previous Mercy Corps research that explores how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped governance and conflict dynamics in Borno State (Sheely and Sloan 2020). For a more detailed description of the analytic approach and a summary of the evidence underpinning each pathway, see [Appendix D](#).

Pre-Existing Dynamics: Economic Hardship and Governance Gaps

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic hardship and grievances about governance were both important underlying causes of armed group recruitment. Economic hardship allows armed groups to recruit new members, either by directly offering compensation or simply by offering a livelihood opportunity and sense of purpose to unemployed and under-employed youth. Grievances about governance shape armed group recruitment by creating a mix of anger and frustration with injustice and a lack of political voice that armed groups can use to attract new recruits (Mercy Corps 2015, Mercy Corps 2016). Grievances about governance are also intensified by economic hardship, which can fuel political grievances and mistrust.⁹

Both of these channels for recruitment increase the capacity of armed groups, leading to increased attacks against civilians and state security forces (Torbjörnsson and Jonsson 2017, Allen 2019). A consistent tempo of attacks by armed groups and counter-attacks by state security forces in turn intensifies community-level perceptions of insecurity (Suleiman and Karim 2015, Verjee and Kwaja 2020). In addition to fueling further cycles of grievances and armed group recruitment, perceptions around insecurity also drive a number of individual and collective attempts by communities to provide security themselves, both through purchasing/making small arms and light weapons (SALW) and by creating vigilante groups that aim to fill gaps in protection and law enforcement at the local level (Ibrahim and Bala 2018, Felbab-Brown 2020).



Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

COVID-19 Response, Economic Hardship, and Armed Group Recruitment

The federal and state government response to COVID-19 in Nigeria intensified pre-existing dynamics connecting economic hardship, grievances about governance, and armed group activity (Figure 3).

COVID-19 lockdowns, movement restrictions, and border closures led to a sharp increase in economic hardship across Nigeria. The International Food Policy Research Institute estimated a 38% drop in GDP and an 18% decline in agri-food GDP in Nigeria during the five-week lockdown period from late March to early April 2020 (Thurlow 2020). The impact of lockdowns and movement restrictions on economic activity was also visible in the overall performance of the economy. By the third quarter of 2020, the GDP had contracted for the second consecutive quarter, and with the oil sector hit hard, the country slipped into a recession (Al Jazeera 2020). Further, Mercy Corps' COVID-19 Rapid Assessment conducted by the Rural Resilience Activity in 2020 found that many households experienced large decreases in their income. For instance, on average, in Adamawa state, weekly household income reduced by more than half (N9,400 or USD 23.80), and average household debt increased by roughly a quarter (N5,800 or USD 14.70).¹⁰ Similarly, in The World Bank's National Longitudinal Phone Survey, 67 percent of households reported a decrease in their income and 69 percent of households have been affected by food insecurity (World Bank 2020). The combination of income loss and decreased access to food and consumer goods — driven by decreased trade due to insecurity and border restrictions, and the lockdown's effect on production — has led to substantial price inflation and increased household food insecurity (Oluocha 2021, Osa-Brown & Olurounbi 2021).

⁹ Similarly, an impact evaluation of a Mercy Corps vocational education and cash transfer program in Afghanistan argues that perceptions of government commitment and capacity were the most important part of how economic interventions shaped youths' support for armed groups (Lyall et al 2020). This fits with broader research findings by Mercy Corps that youth grievances and perceptions of injustice play a larger role than unemployment in shaping support for violence (Mercy Corps 2015).

¹⁰ These figures are based on the COVID-19 rapid market assessment conducted by Mercy Corps' Rural Resilience Activity team in August 2020.

Across all of our research sites, interviewees described COVID-19 as a catastrophic economic event for a substantial number of households, and none more so than the working poor, who had very few assets. Petty traders and small businesses often also could not weather the economic shock of the COVID-19 lockdown and other restrictions. In these cases, small-business entrepreneurs found themselves unable to earn a living. Rural areas suffered significant economic setbacks as well, due to the closure of markets, bans on movement (and trade) across national and state borders, and an inability to travel to farms.¹¹ A constant refrain from the data was having ‘no viable options or alternatives’ for livelihood, and widespread desperation to provide for one’s self and one’s family.

Community members frequently highlighted the disastrous economic consequences of various aspects of the COVID-19 response and the ways in which these drove recruitment into armed groups and ongoing cycles of attacks.¹² For example, economic insecurity allowed banditry gangs to recruit in Katsina State, positioning themselves an economic outlet of last resort for desperate households recently pummeled by the disruption of trade routes across international and state borders, increases in the price of goods, closures of local markets and businesses, and job losses for large portions of the population.¹³ Increasing insecurity due to kidnapping, theft, and bandit attacks further depressed economic activity by reducing the ability of people to engage in farming or trade.¹⁴

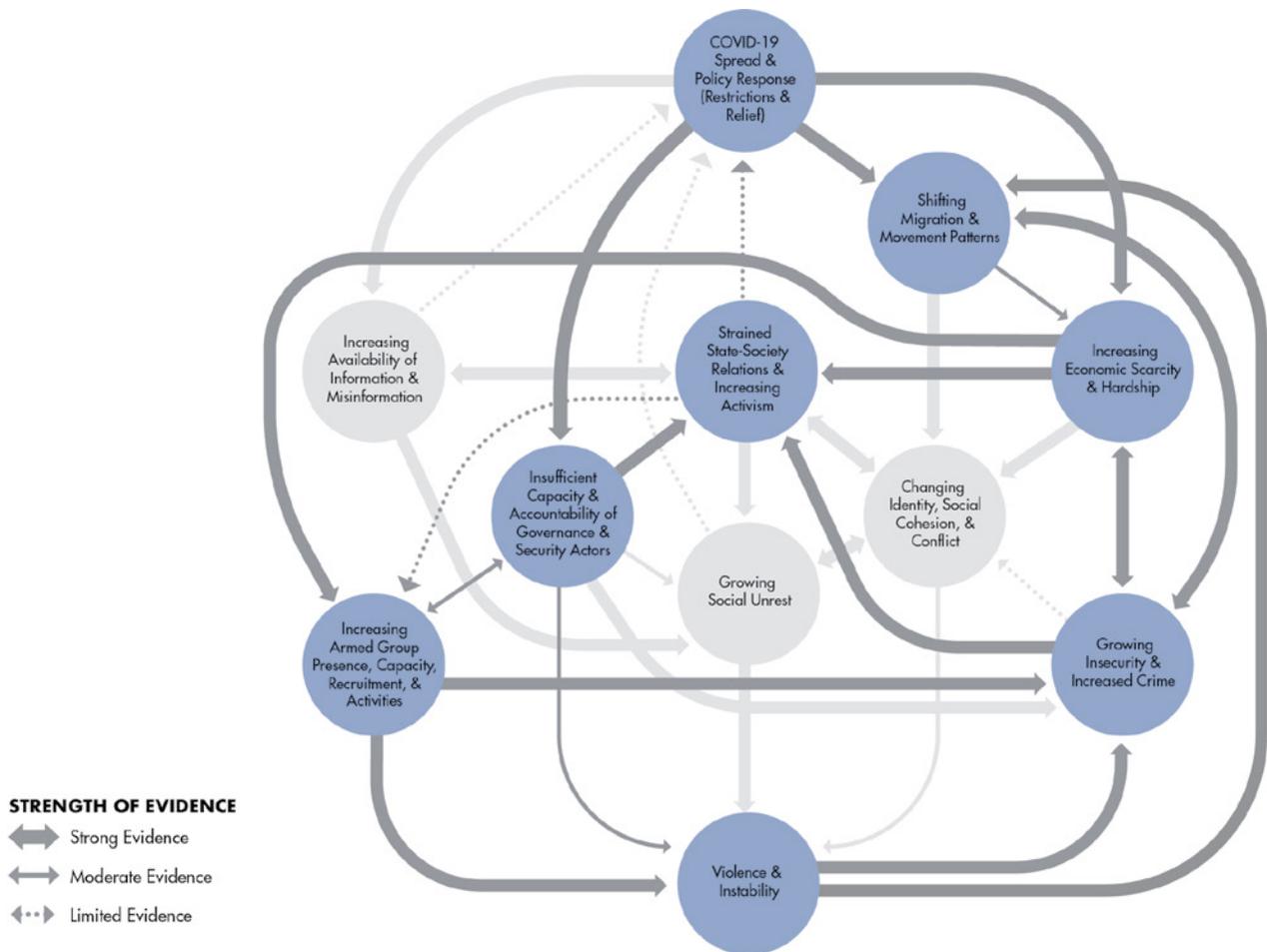


Figure 3. Pathway 1- Insecurity and Armed Groups

11 Forthcoming research from SPARC will investigate longer-term impacts of COVID restrictions (and other shocks) on livelihoods and market system resilience.
 12 Female Workshop 9- Adamawa, Female Workshop 6-Adamawa
 13 Male Workshop #1- Katsina; Female Workshop 2- Katsina; Civil Society Leader- Katsina; Female Youth Workshop 11- Katsina; Female Youth Workshop 4
 14 Male Workshop #1- Katsina; Male Youth Workshop 4- Katsina; Female Youth Workshop 10- Katsina



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COVID-related losses of income and insecurity increased the willingness of previously unaffiliated individuals to support armed groups. Interviewees described a rise in indirect modes of support for AOGs in Adamawa State and for banditry gangs in Katsina State. Indirect support for armed groups included serving as informants to help armed groups plan attacks, providing supplies and food, and smuggling supplies and illicit goods across state/international borders and through checkpoints.¹⁵

Male workshop participants in Katsina described a cycle of economic hardship, insecurity, and armed group recruitment during the pandemic, saying:

› *“On the side of informants for the bandits we are seeing more informants living within our communities. Some are caught and even killed. Also, those herders that have been disposed of their livestock by the bandits, realizing they have nothing more to survive on, sometimes decide for their children to join the bandits, so they can at least get something back for their families”.*¹⁶

These additional sources of personnel, information, and supplies led to shifts in strategies and tactics for armed groups. In Katsina, increased personnel and informants allowed banditry gangs to expand targeted attacks on villages and kidnapping for ransom, while maintaining and consolidating control over territories outside of the reach of state security forces.¹⁷ A group of male workshop participants in Katsina described this dynamic, saying:

”There were changes in bandit tactics as the pandemic period allowed them sufficient time to strategize and plan worse attacks. They recruited informants from the community who supplied them the information they need in these localities and they also used women to supply them with weapons through the borders as they cross over with food items such as rice.”¹⁸

This increase in the severity of banditry attacks during the pandemic period was also associated with the use of kidnapping as a tool for forced recruitment. A group of female workshop participants described this pattern, saying:

”The bandits kidnap boys and refuse to return (them) to use them as bandits. They train them and convert them to bandits. They sometimes recruit forcefully by kidnapping those who are able to pay ransom for the release of their relative who has been a hostage. They’ll collect the money from them, and exchange them with the first hostage. They also kidnap women to use as their cook for them and pay the husbands some huge amounts of money as payment for keeping the women with them.”¹⁹



Mercy Corps

In Adamawa, respondents described a reduction in AOG attacks on villages and a shift towards kidnappings and targeted attacks on security forces.²⁰ Workshop participants in Adamawa described how intelligence from informants facilitated attacks on security forces, saying:

”During the pandemic, Boko Haram intelligence on our community facilitated the attacks on security personnel while they were out socializing. Their ammunition was collected in the process. This follows their pattern of disarming our security personnel.”²¹

18 Male Workshop 1- Katsina

19 Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina

20 Community members describe this as a shift from a pattern of increasing attacks on villages immediately prior to the pandemic. As we describe below, this shift in the patterns of AOG attacks is driven in part by the strong security response within the state. These patterns are described in numerous interviews and workshops, including Male Youth Workshop 3-Adamawa, Male Workshop 5- Adamawa, Female Workshop 6-Adamawa, Female Workshop 4-Adamawa, Religious Leader 1- Adamawa, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa, Male Workshop 3- Adamawa

21 Male Youth Workshop 3-Adamawa

Enforcement of COVID-19 Restrictions and Insecurity

These patterns of rising armed group attacks and kidnappings have contributed to a growing sense of insecurity and fear, which community members generally described as worsening since the beginning of the pandemic (Figure 4).²² There was a 69% increase in the number of violent events nationwide (including attacks, abductions and forced disappearance, sexual violence, explosions and remote violence, and mob violence) in 2020 compared to 2019 (ACLED 2021). Cases of kidnapping more than doubled in 2020, with more than half of recorded cases taking place in northern and central Nigeria (Ayandele and Goos 2021).



Figure 4. Violent Events in Nigeria 2019-2020.
Data Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

This rising sense of insecurity was reported even in communities outside of areas where AOGs and banditry gangs are active. In urban areas, rising insecurity was driven largely by increases in theft and robbery, both by individuals, and also increasingly by a variety of other organizations, including cults, criminal gangs, and loosely organized “group robberies.”²³

The COVID-19 response had an impact on insecurity by altering the presence, activity, and capacity of government security actors and vigilante groups (Table 3). Across communities, respondents noted the involvement of government security

²² Male Workshop 1- Katsina, Female Workshop 10-Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 3-Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1-Adamawa
²³ Male Workshop 4- Abuja, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau, Female Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Youth Urban Male Workshop 3- Plateau

	Abuja	Adamawa	Kaduna	Katsina	Plateau
Government Security Forces-Military and Police (Increase/Decrease)	 (Increase)	 (Increase)	 (Increase)	 (Decrease)	 (Increase)
Vigilante Groups		 	 	 	 
Vigilante Groups-Formalization and Collaboration with Government Security Forces					



Urban areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts



Urban areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references



Rural areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts



Rural areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references

Table 3. Types of Security Actors Identified In Interview/Workshop Data, By State and Urban/Rural Locations²⁴

actors in enforcing lockdowns and other COVID-19 restrictions.²⁵ Because this new role for government security actors was not typically accompanied by increases in personnel or resources, existing security actors were shifted into COVID-19 enforcement from other types of tasks. As a result, the process of enforcing COVID-19 restrictions intensified an uneven pattern of state presence and capacity that was present before the pandemic, which in turn shaped the strategic decisions of armed groups and community grievances about the government.

In localities where community members reported an increase in the presence and visibility of state security forces (Adamawa State, Abuja and urban areas in Plateau and Kaduna States), this surge in government presence was typically linked to a reduction in attacks by armed groups and an increase in perceptions of security.²⁶ However, community members also reported that increases in the presence of government security forces were also often accompanied by corresponding increases in heavy-handedness by security actors, which fueled grievances about governance. These grievances in turn created a fertile ground for recruitment by armed groups, as well as participation in online and in-person activism and protests.²⁷

In communities where government presence remained limited or decreased (primarily in Katsina State), community members reported that government preoccupation with enforcing COVID-19 restrictions was accompanied by reduced effort and attention to protecting communities against rising crime and violence. The absence of government security forces in many rural areas led to increased attacks by armed groups on villages, which further intensified community grievances about government performance, fueling further cycles of armed group recruitment. As a group of male community members in Katsina state put it:

24 This table summarizes the patterns in types of government and non-government security actors described within our qualitative dataset and is not meant to be an exhaustive or representative ranking of the presence of each of these actors within each state.

25 Female Workshop 3- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

26 Male Youth Civil Society Leader- Kaduna

27 For a more detailed description of the linkage between enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions, grievances against the government, and participation in protests, see the discussion of Pathway 2 below.

“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.”²⁸

Increasing insecurity and uneven capacity of state security forces during the pandemic period also led to the creation and expansion of vigilante groups and other forms of organized community self-protection. Vigilante group presence and activity is widespread across the study area, both in rural communities in Adamawa and Katsina directly impacted by AOGs, as well as in urban communities in these states and in Jos and Kaduna.²⁹ In communities where vigilante groups had not been active before the pandemic, community members described the creation of new vigilante groups.³⁰ In other communities with a longer history of vigilante groups and community security provision, community members described improvements in vigilante group training, professionalization, equipment, and morale.³¹ In both cases, these pandemic-era expansions in vigilante group presence and capacity were described as being supported by a mix of community contributions and support from/coordination with state security forces.³²



Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters

While increases in vigilante group presence and capacity during the pandemic period were widespread across our study area, the role that vigilantes played in shaping conflict, violence, and insecurity varied substantially across communities. In many communities, increased vigilante presence and capacity was associated with reported reductions in violent attacks by armed groups and increases in perception of the level of security by community members.³³ However, other communities reported systematic patterns of heavy-handedness and indiscriminate violence by vigilante groups, including violent extrajudicial punishments (“jungle justice”), extortion of community members, and prejudicial profiling and harassment of youth or members of particular ethnic groups as bandits or insurgents.³⁴ Youth workshop participants in Plateau State described this duality of vigilante forces, saying:

“There was an increase in criminal activities across ethnic and religious divides, which created more support from the police force to the vigilante group to intensify patrol and restrict people from movement outside their communities. Some vigilantes use that to oppress and extort community people while most helped prevent crime and were attacked by criminals and injured.”³⁵

28 Male Workshop 1-Katsina

29 Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Male Herder Workshop- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 6- Katsina, Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau

30 Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Female Civil Society Leader- Katsina

31 Male Workshop 1- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina

32 Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Male Workshop 7- Katsina, Community Youth Leader-Kaduna

33 Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Female Civil Society Leader- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 11- Katsina

34 Fulani Chief- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau

35 Youth Urban Workshop 3- Plateau

Variation in the presence of norms and institutions that promote accountability and inclusion accounts for differences in the ability of communities and state actors to constrain the behaviors of vigilante groups and state security actors.³⁶ For example, in one community in Adamawa State, the military responded to patterns of heavy-handed law enforcement by state security forces by creating a new accountability mechanism that allowed community members to voice complaints. Community members described that this new institution helped them to feel more secure and increased their trust in security actors.³⁷

Respondents noted a diverse array of motivations for recruitment into vigilante groups, ranging from a sense of public-spirited altruism, to frustration with the government, to vengeance against armed groups, to a desire for income and status.³⁸ Localized institutions for recruiting, training, and compensating members of vigilante groups can strongly influence which types of motivations predominate within a given group. Transparent and accountable recruitment can increase the extent to which newfound vigilante group capacity is used in the interest of public security.³⁹

Pathway 2: Youth Activism, Mass Protest, and Social Unrest

Within the communities included in this study, dynamics related to the COVID-19 response, online activism, and youth grievances are most prominent in urban communities in and around Abuja (FCT), Jos (Plateau State), Kaduna (Kaduna State), and Yola (Adamawa State). Most discussions of these dynamics within our study area focused on the EndSARS protests that took place around the country in October 2020 and the concurrent raids on warehouses where government palliatives were being stored (Agbedo et al 2020, Effoduh 2020, Ogunmodede 2020). These discussions highlighted two closely related types of phenomenon (which sometimes took place at the same time): 1) peaceful mass protests and 2) social unrest characterized by violent demonstrations, violent intervention against protests (either by security forces or counter-protestors), and/or other instances of rioting and looting. In addition to the EndSARS protests and palliative warehouse raids, interviewees also reported a number of smaller-scale instances of activism, protest, and social unrest that took place during the pandemic period (Table 4).



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36 Collaboration between government security forces and vigilante groups does not on its own appear to have led to increased restraint by either type of actor. In fact, in some cases, government security actors would co-opt community vigilantes, leading them to re-inforce predatory and discriminatory behavior towards communities.

37 Community Workshop 5- Adamawa

38 Male Youth Workshop 3- Katsina, Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 11- Kasina, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna

39 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Male Workshop 7- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 5- Katsina

	Abuja	Adamawa	Kaduna	Katsina	Plateau
Online Activism					
Palliative Looting					
EndSARS Protests					
Protests Against Insecurity					
Gender / GBV Protests					
Protests About Governance					
Local Protests (Other)					
Urban areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts Urban areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references		Rural areas exhibiting patterns with multiple corroborating accounts Rural areas exhibiting patterns with only one account or multiple weaker references			

Table 4. Types of Activism, Protest, and Social Unrest Identified In Interview/Workshop Data, By State and Urban/Rural Locations⁴⁰

Pre-Existing Dynamics: Technology, Youth Grievances, and Activism

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and youth-led activism were both important underlying causes of public protests and social unrest.⁴¹ Over the past ten years, the level of access to ICTs such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets has increased substantially in Nigeria, which has led to corresponding increases in the use of internet, text messaging, and social media apps (Ogbuabor et al 2017).⁴² This spike in internet access is particularly pronounced among young people. As of 2019, 70% of Nigerians aged 18 – 35 years old had access to the internet, compared with 56% of those aged 36 to 60 (NOI Polls 2019).⁴³ This in turn has led to the emergence of a cadre of youth activists and youth-led civil society organizations (so-called “clicktivists” and “hashtag activists”) that use social media as a tool to voice political grievances and organize protest actions (Mateos and Erro 2020, Uwalka 2020a, Uwalka 2020b).

40 This table summarizes the patterns in types of activism, protest, and social unrest described within our qualitative dataset and is not meant to be an exhaustive or representative ranking of the importance or frequency of each of these activities within each state.

41 The discussion of the role of online activism in organizing protest movements primarily focuses on the period from 2010 to present. Nigeria has a much longer history of mass protest and activism that stretches back to resistance against colonial authorities and pro-independence movements of the colonial era. Post-independence Nigeria has also undergone forms of collective action like strikes, boycotts, large-scale protests and movements, and mass demonstrations (often led by youth movements, social activists, and labor unions) to air grievances against state repression and consequences of governance shortcomings (Odion-Akhaine 2009; Hari 2014). By the 2000s, organized labor and unions have been integral to protest movements against the government (Hari 2014). Unions like the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) organized significant movements against government actions and policies. Between 1999 and 2018, ASUU organized a strike every year except 2000, 2004, and 2012 (Akeredolu 2020). Apart from such nationwide, large-scale movements, there have also been smaller, perhaps more regional protests in the Niger Delta region and in the North (like the 2006 protests by Muslims in Borno) that did not always have claims with broad appeals (Hill and Asthana, 2006).

42 Text messaging includes both Short Message Services (SMSs) on mobile providers and messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Skype. Social media includes platforms that allow users to connect with or follow one another, and to share content either publicly or to their individual connections, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

43 The same survey indicates that in 2019 67% of men had access to the internet, compared to 55% of women (NOI Polls 2019). This survey does not provide analysis about the extent to which this gender disparity in internet access differs across age groups.

Increased access to information and online activism facilitated by ICTs shape state-society relations in Nigeria through three mechanisms.⁴⁴ First, the use of ICTs increases the information about politics and government performance that are available to both ordinary citizens and activists (Ogbuabor et al 2017). This works both by increasing access to a wider array of news sources (such as blogs and online magazines) and allowing individuals to access direct firsthand accounts of news events from elsewhere in the country (and in the world) through social media posts or WhatsApp Groups. Increased information about government performance can be used as a tool to hold politicians and government agencies accountable, but when accountability mechanisms are not functioning, this information can also increase anger and frustration (Dambo et al 2020).

Second, increases in access to and use of ICTs shape state-society relations by providing an avenue for voice and political expression for youth when other modes of political participation are curtailed through exclusionary rules and norms (Uwalaka 2020a, Dambo et al 2020). The use of hashtags as a focal point of activism allows individuals to align themselves with social movements, raise visibility for an issue or grievance, and build transnational alliances (Pasierb 2020, Olutokunbo et al 2015). Online-based hashtag activism has been a central part of a number of social movements in Nigeria, including #OccupyNigeria (2012), #OpenNASS (2013), #BringBackOurGirls (2014), and #NoiTooYoungtoRun (2016) (Olutokunbo et al 2015, Uwalaka and Watkins 2019, Uwalaka 2020a).⁴⁵

The 2020 #EndSARS protests themselves have their origins in a pre-pandemic online activism campaign that originally started in December 2017 (Dambo et al 2020).

Third, growth of ICTs shapes state-society relations by making it easier for activists, civil society organizations, and other political actors to coordinate offline protests (Uwalaka 2020a). The use of social media and text messaging makes it possible for activists from different parts of the country (and the world) to coordinate strategies, plan protest events, and quickly mobilize protest participants (Olutokunbo et al 2015).

A number of prominent examples of digital activism in Nigeria (such as #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackOurGirls, and the first wave of #EndSARS campaigns in 2017) have paired online messaging with public protest activities.⁴⁶ In these cases, activists used a mix of private text messages and public social media posts to coordinate and mobilize protest actions (Pasierb 2020, Uwalaka 2018, Uwalaka and Watkins 2019, Uwalaka 2020a). While these cases demonstrate the latent capacity of activists to use ICTs as a tool for demanding accountability and organizing protests, most prior examples of hybrid online/offline activism in Nigeria have not been accompanied by broader social unrest characterized by violent demonstrations or counter-protest activities or large-scale looting or rioting.⁴⁷



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44 Recent research by Mercy Corps in Nigeria has documented how the growth of access to smartphones and the internet has also led to increased opportunities to “weaponize” ICTs (especially social media) through the spread of misinformation (any content that is false or incorrect, regardless of intent), disinformation (the spread of deliberately misleading or biased information), and online hate speech (Mercy Corps 2019, Proctor Forthcoming). See Appendix D for a brief discussion of the alternative hypothesis that misinformation, disinformation, and online hate speech are the key mechanisms underpinning social unrest during the pandemic period in Nigeria. In addition, mechanisms related to the weaponization of ICTs and social media are also relevant to Pathway 1 (the use of disinformation by armed groups as a recruitment tool) and Pathway 3 (misinformation and online hate speech fueling identity-based conflict) and are discussed in more detail in those sections and in [Appendix D](#).

45 #OccupyNigeria was a series of protests in 2012 in response to the fuel subsidy removal. #BringBackOurGirls was a global advocacy campaign shaped by Nigerian activists that called for government action to secure the release of schoolgirls kidnapped by JAS from Chibok (Borno State) in 2014. #OpenNASS was a digital campaign calling on the National Assembly to be more transparent with its budget. #NoiTooYoungtoRun was an online protest in support of amending the Nigerian constitution to allow younger people to run for political office.

46 #OccupyNigeria was the earliest large-scale example of using online activism to mobilize in-person protests, and has been described as the “first successful large-scale action in Nigeria since the Aba Women’s Riot of 1929” (Uwalaka et al., 2018). During #OccupyNigeria protests, a broad cross-section of the population took part in the occupation of public spaces in Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port-Harcourt, and other urban centers (Kew and Kwaja 2018). A survey about the protests found that 90% of those surveyed used Facebook to communicate about the Occupy Nigeria protests (Uwalaka et al 2018).

47 Mercy Corps research on digital conflict risks finds that while online activists have not typically used social media to organize violent social unrest, other influencers have spread misinformation and disinformation aimed at mobilizing supporters and catalyzing acts of violence (Proctor Forthcoming).

COVID-19 Lockdown, Palliative Distribution, and Online Activism

Several key elements of the pandemic period in Nigeria shaped and intensified these dynamics around ICTs, youth political grievances, and protests/social unrest (Figure 5). During the COVID-19 lockdown and movement restrictions, use of smartphones, text messaging, and social media all increased. Market analysis finds mobile phone users increased by 10.0% during 2020, internet users by 22.1%, and social media users by 22.2%, comparing January 2021 and January 2020. This rate was substantially higher than the previous year-on-year increase between 2019 and 2020, especially for internet users, which grew only 2.6% during 2019 compared to 22.1% during 2020 (Hootsuite & We Are Social 2020; Hootsuite & We Are Social 2021).⁴⁸



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This increase in internet usage was particularly pronounced among young people in urban areas. While some workshop participants explicitly described a desire to continue civic and political engagement during the lockdown as a rationale for increased internet and social media use, others described a variety of idiosyncratic individual motivations for increasing internet and social media use, including alleviating boredom, maintaining social connections, and shifting studies and businesses online during the pandemic.⁴⁹

However, regardless of the intention behind increased social media use during the lockdown, there was widespread acknowledgement that this had the unintended effect of increasing awareness of civil and political rights and human rights, in part by providing news of political movements and protests around Nigeria and elsewhere in the world.⁵⁰ Similarly, community members also noted that increases in the use of social media and text messaging platforms made it easier to share information and learn about government service delivery shortcomings. A group of female youth workshop participants in Kaduna described this dynamic, saying:

› *“Several social media handles were used to disseminate critical information, complaints on a range of issues, and activism. Most prominently was Twitter. People used social media to express their concerns and grievances more. People that were previously not on social media quickly joined the bandwagon.”⁵¹*

At the same time, the government’s pandemic response generated a number of grievances, which were then documented, shared, and amplified through increasingly active digital communities and networks. Research participants reported that the increased role of government security actors in enforcing COVID-19 restrictions led to instances in which checkpoints or enforcement of mask mandates were used as opportunities to demand a bribe from community members.⁵²

48 This trend is corroborated in many sources in our interviews and workshops, including Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Urban Workshop 1-Plateau, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Male Workshop 4- Abuja.

49 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Urban Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 3- Abuja, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna

50 Male Workshop 4- Abuja, Female Workshop 2- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa

51 Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna

52 Male Youth Leader 2- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 3- Katsina, Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1- Abuja

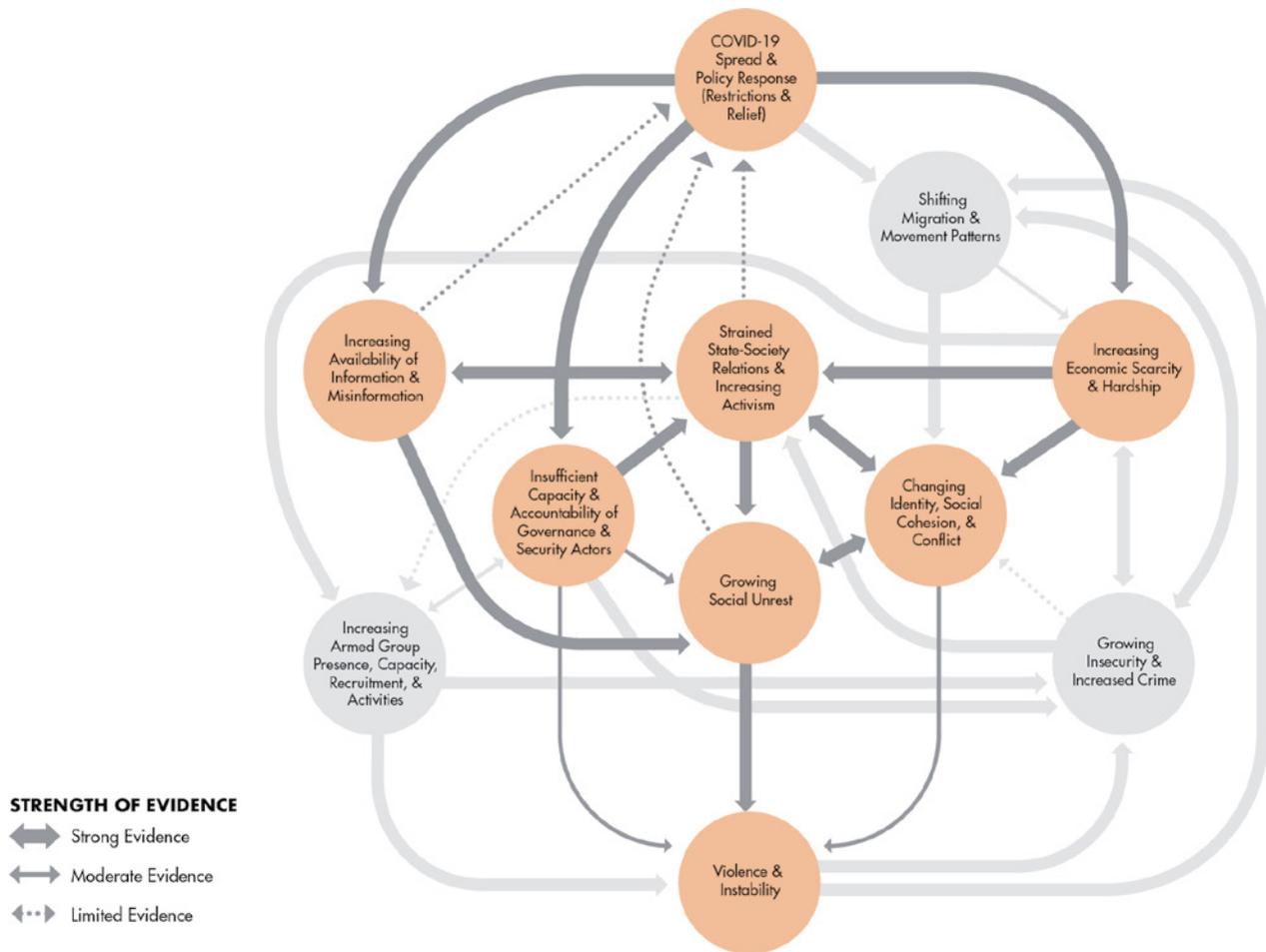


Figure 5. Pathway 2- Youth Grievances, Mass Protest, and Social Unrest

In addition, community members reported substantial shortages and delays in the government’s planned distribution of palliative food aid to individuals adversely impacted by COVID-19.⁵³ Community members attributed gaps in palliative distribution as evidence of partisan politics, ethno-religious favoritism, or self-interest by state and local government officials.⁵⁴ A group of female youth workshop participants summarized this type of narrative around palliative distribution, saying:

”The greed of government officials led to the hoarding of palliatives which were distributed to every state by the federal government to reduce the sufferings of the masses during the lockdown. However, the state government officials saw it as an opportunity to reserve food items to use during their political campaigns and rallies and to sell a part of it and distribute it to only their close friends and families.”

These perceptions about the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions and palliative distribution reinforced existing narratives and grievances held by youth about quality of governance. Rather than remaining localized, these examples of perceived lapses during the COVID-19 response affected almost everyone in the country to some degree, and were shared nationwide through social media and text messaging platforms by activists, civil society organizations, and average citizens.⁵⁵ These grievances were shared alongside other examples of perceived governance shortcomings happening at the same time and fueled mounting feelings of frustration and anger among many youth.⁵⁶

Protests During a Pandemic: From Online Organizing to Mass Demonstrations

The government’s implementation of the COVID-19 lockdown and palliative rollout intensified existing mechanisms linking online activism, youth political grievances, and protest activity.

As a result, when a decentralized network of activists used the #EndSARS hashtag to speak out against police killings of young men in Rivers and Delta states in early October 2020, both the online messaging around the hashtag and the in-person demonstrations in major cities became a focal point for broader grievances, anger, and activism that had taken place online during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.⁵⁷ As one interviewee put it:

”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 that is what made it so bad.”⁵⁸

While previous online advocacy campaigns in Nigeria have also translated into public protests, the mass protests associated with EndSARS surpassed these in terms of size, duration, and spread across regional, ethnic, and religious divisions. Nationwide, there were a total of at least 179 peaceful protest events during October 2020. Within the locations included in this study, there were a total of 20 recorded peaceful protests during this time frame (Table 2). Peaceful protests made up a majority (66%) of all recorded protest activity during the height of EndSARS activity, indicating that overall, the EndSARS movement was a form of positive civic engagement.

	States Included in Sample (Abuja, Adamawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Plateau)	Nationwide
Total Recorded Protest and Social Unrest Events, October 2020	41	270
Peaceful Protests	20	179
Protests with Intervention and Excessive Force	12	39
Violent Demonstrations	5	33
Looting/Rioting	4	19

Table 5. Summary Statistics on Protests and Social Unrest in Nigeria, October 2020.
Data Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

55 Male Youth Workshop 3- Abuja, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna, Male Youth Civil Society Leader-Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa

56 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Youth Urban Workshop-Plateau

57 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna

58 Mercy Corps Nigeria Internal Workshop 2



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Beyond the size and scope of protests, the EndSARS movement also demonstrated the potential to activate new identities around youth and gender, strengthening the profile and resources of a decentralized set of organizations and networks led by young men and women (Ogunmodede 2021). Coalitions of women from various cross-sections of society played an important role in organizing protests, drawing on their online networks and resources to articulate and voice how they were being impacted by police brutality, insecurity, and broader gender inequalities, including increasing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) during the pandemic (Dark 2020).⁵⁹

A group of young women participating in a workshop in Kaduna summarized the dynamics around increasing women's participation in activism in their community, saying:

› *“Women heard more about SARS brutality, harassment, and killing on social media and the increase in this news resulted in the increased role of a female activist in mobilization for a social cause. Women are more aware of their rights and this increased women's motivation to engage in protests regardless of being hurt, beaten, or stomped. This also led to an increase in women's participation in the EndSARS protest and palliative looting and this is the first protest that female youths participated in our community. Women were involved in more community decisions beyond what they normally do. For women that didn't have a support system, the pandemic made them realize that they need to get out and do something to support themselves. The situation made them strong. The norm of the society made women to be seen as weak, but women used the pandemic to dispel that norm. As the saying goes, ‘what a man can do, a woman can do best.’”⁶⁰*

⁵⁹ The Feminist Coalition played an especially important role in fundraising and raising the profile of the EndSARS protests globally (Nwankwor and Nkereuwem 2020, Maclean 2021). Local-level instances of this kind of women's leadership are described in numerous interviews and workshops including Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1-Adamawa, Female Youth Workshop 1-Abuja, Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 2- Adamawa

⁶⁰ Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna

The increased salience of youth and gender as identities for mobilizing collective action allowed organizers and protesters in many communities to build coalitions and social cohesion across ethnic and religious lines.⁶¹ A youth community leader in Kaduna State described this increase in youth cohesion across group divides, saying:

› *“Since these EndSARS campaigns were largely youth-led, at first with minimal political influences, this allowed youths from all religions to speak in one voice to share stories of sufferings. The events of the pandemic were the trigger to these shared experiences.”⁶²*

The decentralized nature of the EndSARS movement led the online activism and in-person protests to extend beyond the initial set of grievances related to police brutality to a broader demand for change in the quality, accountability, and inclusivity of governance institutions and processes.⁶³ For example, male youth workshop participants in Adamawa State described this dynamic, saying:

› *“Furthermore, the creation of pages on Facebook to report gender-based violence online increased access to media led to mass movement and following of new trends on activism in the country and community and gave rise to house-to-house gender-based violence campaigns conducted by community members.”⁶⁴*



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Social Unrest Alongside Peaceful Protests: Looting and Violent Demonstrations

The EndSARS protests in October 2020 also differed from past instances of activism in the extent to which peaceful protests were accompanied by pockets of social unrest and violence. Nationwide, the largely peaceful wave of mass protests were also accompanied by intervention and excessive force against protestors (14% of all events), violence by protestors or counter-protestors (12% of all events), and looting, rioting, and property damage (7% of all events), including looting of food from palliative warehouses and attacks on houses and businesses owned by state and local politicians and government officials (ACLED 2021).

The EndSARS protest movement grew rapidly through social media and was led by a decentralized and loosely networked structure of the key activists and coalitions organizing the protests. While protest organizers used their online platforms to share tactics for nonviolent resistance with protesters, the rapid growth of the mass protests attracted individuals and groups with a diverse array of motivations and commitments to nonviolent action. This decentralized structure helps to explain how the largely peaceful EndSARS protests fed into broader incidents of social unrest such as looting palliative warehouses and other attacks on people and property. Community accounts of the raids on palliative warehouses reflect this diversity of motivations. Many workshop participants viewed the raids as another way to express the grievances raised during the EndSARS protests and to exercise their rights by claiming a public good that had been denied to them through corruption.⁶⁵

61 Male Youth Workshop 2- Adamawa, Community Youth Leader- Kaduna, Male Workshop 4-Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Community Leader-Urban-Plateau

62 Community Youth Leader-Kadun

63 Urban Community Leader- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

64 Male Youth Workshop 2- Adamawa

65 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau, Youth Urban Workshop-Plateau, Male CSO Leaders-Kaduna, Male Youth Civil Society Leader- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop

A female civil society leader in Jos described this interpretation of the palliative warehouse raids:

”The government’s insensitivity to the plights of the community-made her pay little to no attention that the palliative items are well distributed to the right people. For this community, the government does not bother about our wellbeing. They have never brought any form of relief or support to the development of the community. The people only heard that palliatives were shared in certain areas and to some close allies of government officials, the distribution was based on who you know in government. The people were denied palliatives that were meant to relieve them of the hunger and hardship caused by the lockdown.”⁶⁶

Community members also noted that like the protests, the raids on palliative warehouses involve cohesion and collective action by youths across ethnic and religious divides.⁶⁷



Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters

However, other community members presented a contrasting view that the palliative warehouse raids were evidence that the protests had been “hijacked by hoodlums.”⁶⁸ A participant in a workshop in Jos described this view linking social unrest and criminality, saying:

”After the burgling of government warehouses, criminal elements extended the burgling to private stores and warehouses. This necessitated the imposition of a three-day curfew by the government to curtail criminal activities. Many youths went into destroying warehouses and government offices as a way of expressing their anger towards bad governance. They have legalized criminality as a right and they find pleasure in doing so. As a result, there has been an increase in the rate of kidnapping since the protest.”⁶⁹

4- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 1- Kaduna, Community Youth Leader-Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 1- Adamawa, Male Workshop 4- Abuja, Community Tribal Leader-Abuja, Male Workshop 5- Adamawa, Male Workshop 7- Adamawa, Male Youth Workshop 3-Abuja

66 Female Urban Civil Society Leader- Plateau

67 Urban Community Leader- Plateau, Male Youth Urban Workshop 3- Plateau, Male Workshop 3- Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau

68 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau, Male Youth Leader 2- Plateau, Female Workshop 3- Plateau, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

69 Male Youth Urban Workshop 1- Plateau

The violence and social unrest that accompanied the EndSARS protests can be also explained in part by the use of excessive force to respond to largely peaceful protests. While the killing of 12 protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos was the highest profile example of violence by government (or government-aligned) actors in response to the protests, community members reported that police and vigilantes in many other communities utilized excessive force to respond to peaceful protests (Amnesty International 2020).⁷⁰

Pathway 3: Social Cohesion and Conflict Between and Within Identity Groups

Divisions between **identity groups** are important drivers of violent conflicts in the four states in our sample, including ethnicity, religion, livelihoods practices (farmer/herder), and indigene/settler status (recognition of a group as “original” inhabitants of an area or newcomers from another part of the country). The salience of each type of division varies across our study locations (Table 6).⁷¹ Scarcity and movement patterns are also relevant to understanding how the COVID-19 response shaped conflict within groups such as communities and families and related tensions, disputes, and violence across age and gender divides.

	Rural	Urban	Abuja	Adamawa	Kaduna	Katsina	Plateau
Herder-Farmer	x			x	x	x	x
Indigene-Settler	x	x		x	x		x
Ethnic	x	x	x		x	x	x
Religious		x	x		x		x

Table 6. Salient Dimensions of Identity Group Conflict Identified In Interview/Workshop Data, By State and Urban/Rural Locations⁷²

Pre-Existing Dynamics: Scarcity, Movement, and Social Cohesion

The social cohesion and identity group conflict pathway is driven by a set of pre-COVID mechanisms that link economic scarcity and hardship, movement patterns, and multiple dimensions of identity, cohesion, and conflict (Figure 6). Many inter-group conflicts in Nigeria are shaped by competition over scarce resources, such as conflict over access to grazing land and routes (herder/farmer conflicts), access to property titles, schools, and public jobs (indigene/settler conflicts), and access to government-provided public goods and services (religious and ethnic conflicts) (Akov 2017, Lichtenheld 2021). Scarcity and competition can lead to an increased number of tensions and disputes between members of a group, which can be exacerbated when movement and migration patterns increase the number of individuals and groups competing for access to the same resources (International Crisis Group 2017, International Crisis Group 2020).

⁷² This table summarizes the patterns in dimensions of intergroup conflict described within our qualitative dataset and is not meant to be an exhaustive or representative ranking of the importance of each of these social cleavages within each state.

The extent to which disputes over access to scarce resources escalate into conflicts is shaped by the level of social cohesion in a given locality, which is characterized by a number of underlying factors including trust, a shared sense of identity and purpose, and a willingness to participate and cooperate across salient social divisions (Kim et al 2020).⁷³ The absence of trust and norms of collective action and participation can reduce the willingness and ability of group members to work together to develop solutions to disputes over the use of scarce resources (Taylor and Singleton 1993). In addition, a lack of trust and shared purpose can increase fear and uncertainty between groups, which can in turn increase the likelihood of security dilemmas that escalate disputes into armed confrontations (Lake and Rothchild 1996, Lichtenheld 2021).

Finally, a number of mechanisms related to governance also shape the extent to which inter-group disputes and conflicts escalate into violence. Group-based favoritism and clientelism in the distribution of public goods and services can create and exacerbate horizontal inequalities and can fuel inter-group grievances around bias and prejudice (Stewart 2008, Cederman et al 2011).⁷⁴ These grievances can also increase mistrust in government security and justice actors, particularly among marginalized groups, which can reduce their willingness to rely on the government to help resolve disputes and enforce agreements.⁷⁵ Finally, pervasive insecurity also contributes to the likelihood that inter-group disputes escalate to violence by increasing individual ownership of small arms and the prevalence of local vigilantes and armed groups (Lichtenheld 2021).



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COVID-19 Lockdown and Shifting Patterns of Cohesion and Conflict Between Identity Groups

For inter-group conflicts, the fear of the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 during the lockdown period helped to temporarily increase social cohesion by creating a sense of “mutual vulnerability” to a common threat (Figure 6). This helped to ease the escalation of inter-group conflicts by reducing the extent to which the motivations and intentions of the other group were the most prominent threat (Lichtenheld 2021).⁷⁶ A participant in a community workshop in Plateau State described how this dynamic led to reduced violence in previously existing conflict between Irigwe farmers and Fulani herders, saying:

› *“There was heightened fear in the minds of people during the lockdown as a result of the fear of COVID. People naturally stopped attacking and killing themselves during the lockdown. They are 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.”⁷⁷*

⁷³ These dimensions correspond to a definition of 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).

⁷⁴ Male Workshop 7- Katsina

⁷⁵ Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Community Youth Leader-Kaduna

⁷⁶ Data collected by SPARC in 2020 supports this finding that lockdown periods led to increased social cohesion and reduced time and resources for intergroup conflict (due to a need to re-allocate time and resources to livelihood coping and adaptation). Forthcoming research from SPARC will explore these dynamics further.

⁷⁷ Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau

An interviewee in Kaduna state similarly described how the impacts of the pandemic on food insecurity shaped patterns of conflict between Muslims and Christians, saying:

“Before the pandemic, religion has been at the crux of the conflicts in Kaduna State, but COVID-19 heralded the emergence of a common enemy called ‘hunger’. This common denominator allowed us to come together beyond religious differences. Presently, ‘the religion of hunger’ governs us here, as everyone worships food.”⁷⁸

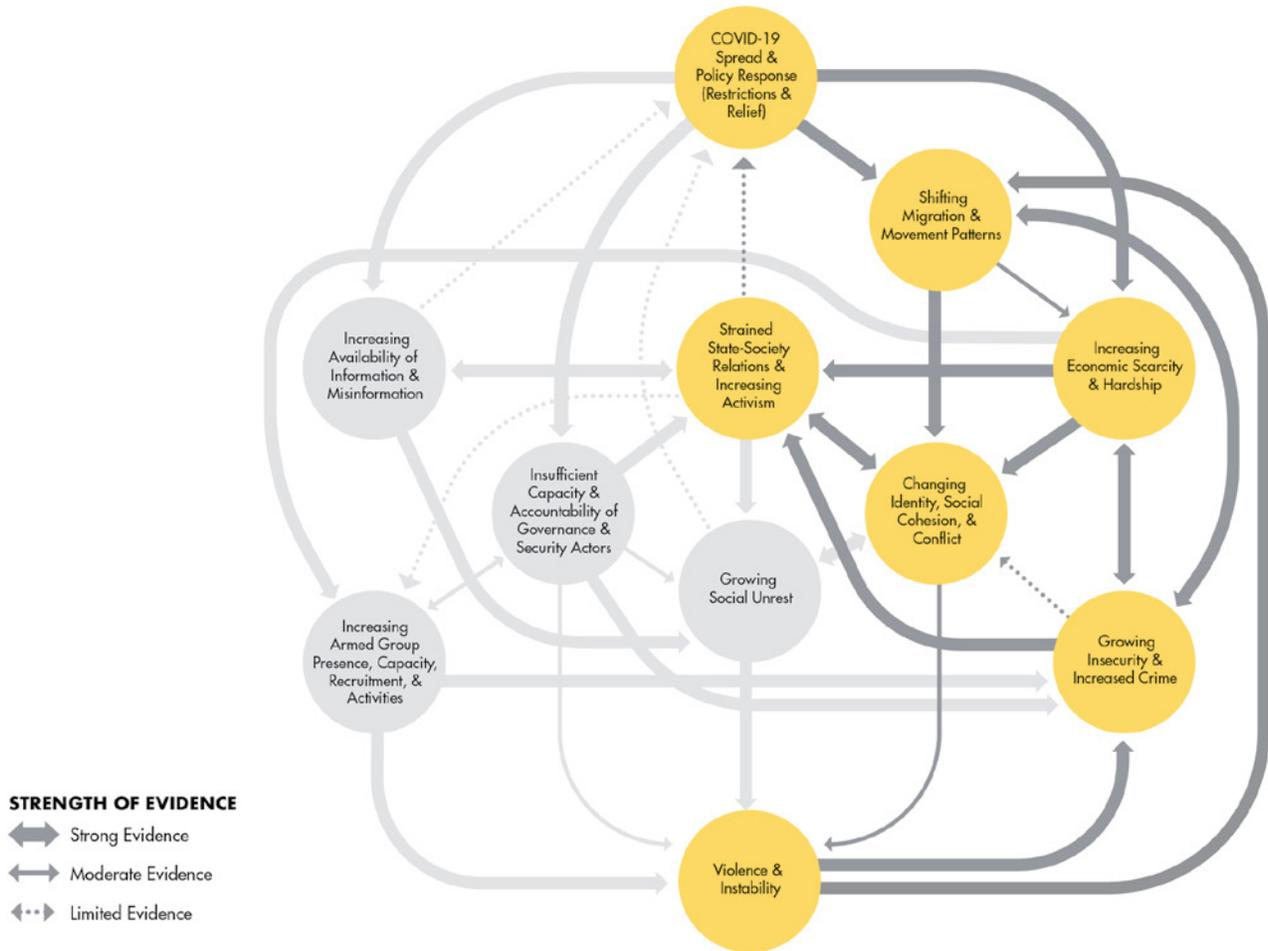


Figure 6. Pathway 3- Social Cohesion and Identity Group Conflict

This sense of mutual vulnerability during the lockdown period also helped to build social cohesion by creating a sense of shared purpose across group divisions.⁷⁹ In some communities, a shared identity marker (such as religion or language) helped to foster unity and cooperation across other divisions that had been salient in pre-pandemic conflict.⁸⁰ In others, the disruption of previously segregated market and trade activity forced trade and economic cooperation across group lines, which helped to foster positive interactions and build trust.⁸¹

78 Community Youth Leader-Kaduna

79 As described in the discussion of Pathway 2 above, participation in EndSARS protests and palliative warehouse rates united people across ethno-religious lines, but this was primarily focused on youth living in urban areas, and was less prominent in rural areas where protests were less common.

80 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, CSO Leader-Adamawa

81 Female Workshop 2- Plateau, Male Workshop 5-Adamawa, Male Herder Workshop 2- Plateau



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The impact of COVID-19 movement restrictions on resource competition and inter-group conflict is dependent on a number of local contextual factors, including the existing economic situation, the structure of identity cleavages, and the specific design and implementation of local restrictions. In some communities, the COVID-19 lockdown and related movement restrictions contributed to reducing intergroup conflict by limiting many of the types of negative interactions that exacerbate disputes driven by resource scarcity. This dynamic was especially pronounced for disputes and grievances that stem from attempts of two or more groups to access a shared resource simultaneously, such as property disputes over a given set of land (common in indigene-settler conflicts) or disagreements over the use of shared rangeland, forests, and water points (common in herder-farmer conflicts).⁸² In Plateau State, pastoralists had access to a large amount of grazing land during lockdown, which allowed them to avoid the area being used for farming. In these cases, relations between Fulani herders and Atyap farmers improved.⁸³ A religious leader in Kaduna described this dynamic, saying:

› *“During the pandemic, incidence of the lingering land dispute between the Kataf and Hausa groups that consistently led to violent conflict with fighting, killings, destruction of properties and displacement of community members drastically reduced due to the movement ban as farmlands are always the central point of most disagreements but during the lockdown, people could not visit their farms thereby reducing the conflict.”⁸⁴*

82 Village Head- Kaduna, Female Workshop 2- Plateau, Female Workshop 2- Plateau, Male Religious Leader- Kaduna, Male Workshop 5-Adamawa, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa

83 Male Civil Society Leader- Plateau; Female Workshop 2- Plateau

84 Male Religious Leader-Kaduna

Despite strong evidence that the shared public health threat and movement restrictions played a role in reducing intergroup conflict during the COVID-19 lockdowns, tensions and violence continued in some communities. The determining factor for this was whether the COVID-19 lockdown decreased or increased scarcity of a common resource. In Kaduna State, communities reported that competition for farmland and forests for logging increased, as the local restrictions allowed groups to access these areas for economic activity, while largely shutting down other economic avenues.⁸⁵ In this case, increased demand for land for farming and/or logging exacerbated existing conflict patterns between groups. Similarly, there was increased anger at pastoralists for cattle encroachment in cases where COVID-19 restrictions forced their movement patterns to go closer to farmland.⁸⁶

Lockdowns also did little to reduce disputes and tensions when one or more of the identity groups involved in a conflict refused to comply with the government’s movement restrictions.⁸⁷ Low compliance with lockdowns was driven by a number of factors, including inconsistent enforcement of restrictions, a lack of trust in the government, and the necessity of movement as an economic survival strategy, and the existence of cultural norms challenging the legitimacy of restricting movement.⁸⁸ This set of factors encouraging movement even in the midst of lockdown were particularly salient for pastoralists, and many reported cases of conflict during that period involved cases in which herders encroached onto farmland.⁸⁹ Lockdowns also did little to reduce violence when conflicts were in the midst of recurring cycles of attacks and revenge killings at the time when movement restrictions went into effect.⁹⁰ In these cases, the public health threat of COVID-19 was insufficient to create a sense of shared purpose that could overcome existing anger and fear.

The end of the COVID-19 lockdown led to a “rebound effect” in which intergroup conflict and violence re-emerged in many areas where it had been suppressed due to movement restrictions and increases in inter-group social cohesion. The end of lockdown simultaneously reversed both factors that had been dampening violent conflict by allowing a wider range of movement and sending the message that the public health threat of COVID-19 had diminished.⁹¹ In addition, the end of lockdown led to the intensification of some inter-group conflicts. In many communities, the economic hardship introduced by the lockdown was not immediately alleviated by the easing of restrictions, meaning that increasing interactions between groups were also accompanied by heightened scarcity and competition.⁹² In some communities, the end of lockdown led to new intergroup grievances, such as disputes that had 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 palliatives on ethnic or religious lines or ethnic profiling by security forces).⁹³

85 Female Workshop 2-Kaduna; Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna
 86 Female Workshop 2- Kaduna, 24_, Male Herder Workshop 1- Kaduna
 87 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Female Workshop 2- Plateau
 88 Male Workshop 7- Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 3- Katsina, Female Youth Workshop 4- Katsina, Female Workshop 4-Adamawa, Male Workshop 8- Adamawa
 89 Male Herder Workshop 1- Kaduna, Male Workshop 7- Katsina
 90 Female Workshop 2- Kaduna, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Female Workshop 8- Katsina
 91 Male Religious Leader-Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna
 92 Male Workshop 8- Kaduna, Female Workshop 4- Adamawa, Male Workshop 8- Adamawa, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa, CSO Leader- Adamawa, Female Workshop 2- Plateau
 93 Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Male Religious Leader-Kaduna, Female Workshop 2-Plateau, Female Workshop 10- Katsina, Youth Urban Workshop 2- Plateau



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Michael Madukwe/Mercy Corps

Movement Restrictions, Economic Hardship, and Conflict Within Communities and Families

The lockdown eroded social cohesion and increased conflict within identity groups, as well as within other small, homogeneous groups such as villages and families. These smaller groups were most likely to be confined together in lockdown, increasing the frequency of interactions and tensions between a more limited set of social contacts.⁹⁴ In the case of families, this density of interactions within close quarters often increased substantially due to multiple members of the household being out of work, schools being closed, and other family members returning from work in other states.⁹⁵

At the same time, the economic hardship caused by losses in jobs and incomes created intensified scarcity within groups and communities in a number of ways. Loss of sources of incomes during the pandemic period put additional pressure on obligations of economic support based on social connections within tight-knit groups, particularly in the absence of effective government social safety nets, which members may turn to for the purposes of extracting resources via social ties (family, tribe, ethnicity, religion). This led to increased within-group demands for sharing, increasing internal strain at the level of identity groups and families.⁹⁶ These requests were also more likely to be denied due to widespread scarcity (nearly everyone in a given social network was impacted in some way) alongside an unpredictable economic outlook (even relatively less-impacted individuals were uncertain about the duration of the lockdown and its impacts). In addition, the lockdown also interrupted many within-group bonding opportunities, such as religious services and general socializing, which further strained intra-group relationships.⁹⁷

94 Youth Male Civil Society Leader-Kaduna, Male Youth Workshop 2- Plateau

95 Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Youth Urban Workshop 2- Plateau

96 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau, Female Youth Workshop 2- Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 1- Plateau. Forthcoming research by SPARC further investigates the role that informal support within social networks plays in facilitating livelihood adaptation during COVID-19 in Nigeria and South Sudan.

97 Male Religious Leader-Kaduna, Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna

These increases in demands for support and decreases in trust-building activities within groups were accompanied by increased tensions and conflicts over how to allocate scarce resources. At the level of communities, this dynamic led to rising disputes and conflicts about how to target and allocate local food support. A civil society leader in Plateau State described this pattern, saying:

”People stopped assisting each other as one does not know when they will get access to go out to get food. That created hatred, especially between community members and leaders and this resulted in frustration. 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.”⁹⁸



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Within families, the convergence of movement restrictions, scarcity, and escalating tensions led to rising conflicts.⁹⁹ This set of dynamics challenged gender norms and roles within the household and was linked to rising rates of divorce and domestic violence against women and youth. Reported domestic violence spiked 56% nationwide in just the first two weeks of lockdown, reflecting an increase across all 24 states reporting (UN Women 2020).¹⁰⁰

Female workshop participants in Katsina described this pattern, saying that “Because culturally, the man is the sole provider of the family, these men couldn’t meet up with their responsibilities in their homes and this caused a lot of marital problems. For some, it led to divorce.”¹⁰¹ In a community in Kaduna states, male workshop participants corroborated this dynamic, saying:

”At the family level, due to the inability of the head of household to provide for his family which is a factor that has increased in strength, couples tend to disagree and argue more than before lockdown. This led to domestic violence which also has increased due to COVID 19 lockdown and some husbands beating their wives, which also led to divorce amongst families. This is important because our community is a peaceful settlement which houses different people. Before COVID we had a system that worked and a mechanism to organise and settle disputes.”¹⁰²

98 Female Civil Society Leader-Plateau

99 Male Farmer Workshop 1- Plateau, Male CSO Leaders- Kaduna

100 This figure is likely an underestimate due to lockdown further limiting the ability of survivors of violence to report incidents and seek assistance. The Lagos state government domestic and sexual violence response team reported a three-fold increase in gender-based violence incidents in the first month of the pandemic (Kemakola and Robertson 2020). In the three states (Lagos, Ogun, FCT) that were placed on full lockdown by the Federal Government, reports of domestic violence increased by 297% from March to April 2020. By contrast, three states (Benue, Ebonyi, Cross River) that were on less stringent lockdown measures had a 53% increase in number of cases, with Ebonyi (which the governor refused to place on lockdown) actually seeing a decrease from March to April (Young and Adib, 2020).

Similar accounts connecting increased GBV to the COVID lockdown were reported by media outlets and Nigeria-based organizations serving women (Fawole et al. 2021). These patterns were corroborated in a number of our interviews and workshops, including Female Workshop 3- Plateau, Female Workshop 2-Katsina, Female Workshop 10-Katsina, Male Youth Workshop 1- Plateau, Female Workshop 9- Adamawa.

101 Female Workshop 2- Katsina

102 Male Heder Workshop 1- Kaduna

A group of youth workshop participants in Plateau State further described dynamics related to decreasing social cohesion and increasing domestic violence in generational terms, saying:

”*The loss of jobs and livelihoods increased anger as a result of the inability of the youths to go about their normal business, due to the lockdown. Because of the inability of families to adequately cater for their needs, there is heightened anger within the family. This has caused a lot of divorces, triggered violence, and caused disharmony among family members. The situation has however improved when the lockdowns were relaxed because people have started picking their businesses back.*”¹⁰³

Increasing crime and insecurity is a final pathway through which economic hardship and scarcity led to eroding social cohesion and increasing conflict within identity groups. Because increases in robbery, theft, and kidnapping were happening alongside movement restrictions, individuals began to suspect their neighbors and family members of being thieves and informants for banditry gangs or AOGs.¹⁰⁴ This dynamic increased fear and mistrust, as described by a group of young women in Katsina:

”*The fear is born out of the fact that many people have joined the kidnapping enterprise either as active or passive members. The spy agents providing intelligence to the kidnappers have increased. People have less trust in even members of their families because in some cases your family member could be the one to providing tips on how to kidnap you.*”¹⁰⁵

This growth in mistrust and erosion of social cohesion was particularly pronounced with respect to youth. Adult community members highlighted narratives that attributed the rise in crime during the pandemic to a combination of “youth idleness”, “immorality”, and “social vices” such as drinking, drug use, gambling, and promiscuous sexual activity.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, in Adamawa, youth who were demobilized AOG members were viewed with mistrust as potential informants for insurgents and kidnappers.¹⁰⁷



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103 Male Youth Workshop 1- Plateau

104 Community Youth Leader-Kaduna, Female Youth Workshop 6- Katsina, Female Workshop 3- Plateau

105 Female Youth Workshop 6-Katsina

106 Male Herder Workshop 3- Kaduna, Female Workshop 4-Adamawa

107 Male Youth Workshop 3- Adamawa, Male Workshop 5- Adamawa

Conclusions and Policy Implications

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria was already in the midst of a crisis defined by persistent insecurity, violent conflict, grievances about governance, and economic hardship. The response to COVID-19 in Nigeria exacerbated these pre-existing drivers of conflict in three ways: by increasing insecurity and armed group activities, by intensifying youth grievances and sparking social unrest, and by shifting patterns of social cohesion and conflict between and within identity groups.

This case study has the following implications for policymakers and practitioners:

1. Restrictions designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, necessary and life-saving as they may have been, substantially intensified economic hardship and hunger, which placed tremendous strain on individuals, households, and communities. This, in turn, has exacerbated existing conflict drivers by:
 - › Driving collaboration with AOGs, banditry gangs, and other armed groups, thus further fueling insecurity,
 - › Fueling protest and social unrest by increasing demands for government aid and social protection, which were not met,
 - › Inflaming conflicts between and within communities by increasing resource scarcity and raising the stakes over disputes about competing claims to natural resources and government services, and
 - › Deepening long-term scarcity and hardship that will likely endure even after restrictions are lifted, intensifying grievances and disputes that emerged during lockdown.

In practice, future COVID-19 restrictions should be coupled with investments in economic support, security provision, and programs that build social cohesion. Similarly, decisions to relax lockdowns should be combined with efforts to bolster COVID-19 prevention behaviors and vaccine acceptance as well as programs that support livelihoods and strengthen dispute resolution mechanisms.

2. Gaps in the quality of governance increased the likelihood that economic hardship fed into the types of motivations, grievances, and tensions that have driven violent conflict in Nigeria before the pandemic. Some of the specific governance challenges that we identified include:
 - › Failure to incorporate community feedback into the design and implementation of COVID-19 restrictions and relief missed opportunities to identify potential unintended consequences of restrictions on conflict drivers.
 - › An absence of transparency and accountability within the implementation of restrictions and palliative food aid increased public mistrust in the intentions and motives of the government.
 - › In areas where the presence and capacity of government security actors decreased during the pandemic, communities were vulnerable to rising crime and attacks by armed groups and expressed an increased sense of abandonment and exclusion that intensified anti-government grievances.



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Future responses to COVID-19 (and other unexpected shocks) in Nigeria should integrate participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability into the design and implementation of policies and programs. This will help to prevent these interventions from unintentionally activating conflict drivers, by improving effectiveness of service delivery and building trust between communities and government actors. Such efforts should support and protect Nigeria's burgeoning online civic spaces by using ICTs to promote digital civic engagement and by countering attempts to either curtail or weaponize social media.

3. Communities were able to counteract the pathways connecting COVID-19 to conflict through localized collective action and peacebuilding initiatives. For each pathway, local communities, civil society, government actors, and other stakeholders oftentimes come together to intervene in the dynamics linking the COVID-19 response to conflict, such as:
 - › Communities institutionalized vigilante groups in ways that effectively provide security within local areas, while also building in oversight mechanisms that help to ensure accountability and restraint.
 - › Young men and women used online platforms as an opportunity to take on a leadership role in civic engagement and community decision-making.
 - › Civil society organizations, activists, and community members used major shared events such as the lockdown and the EndSARS protests to galvanize a shared sense of purpose and identity across ethnic and religious divisions.
 - › Local leaders adapted grassroots dispute-resolution mechanisms to continue operating while reducing risk of disease transmission by using mobile phones, social distancing, and masks.

Local communities are uniquely positioned to identify exactly how the COVID-19 pandemic shapes conflict and to develop solutions that simultaneously reduce disease spread and mitigate its secondary impacts. Future COVID-19 responses in Nigeria should draw on local knowledge by incorporating community engagement into program design and implementation. Donors should promote local leadership of humanitarian and development aid projects by investing in creative community-led efforts to counter the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic hardship, insecurity, and conflict and providing direct funding to local organizations to help scale up strategies that are already working.

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Where possible, we sourced photos depicting life during the COVID-19 pandemic period in the areas of Nigeria that are the focus of this study: Abuja, Adamawa State, Katsina State, Kaduna State, and Plateau State. Many of the photographs in this chapter are from other states and/or from the years preceding the pandemic, but were chosen to help illustrate the broader themes, ideas, and places described by the individuals who participated in our research.



QUARANTINED IN THE CROSSFIRE

**How the COVID-19
Pandemic is Shaping
Conflict in Colombia**

Key Findings and Implications

Drawing on 23 participatory workshops and 25 semi-structured interviews, with a total of 138 participants from 18 municipalities, we find COVID-19 and response measures in Colombia discernibly exacerbated pre-existing drivers of conflict. We mapped three main pathways through which the pandemic affected violence and instability:

1. **The very measures imposed by the state to contain the virus significantly affected its ability to fulfill key functions, creating a void that illegal armed groups have exploited.** Security presence decreased in conflict-affected areas, human rights protection institutions became inaccessible to victims, crucial peace process programs were delayed, and schools were closed for months. In conflict-affected communities, the response to COVID-19 created an important window of opportunity for illegal armed groups to increase their presence and social control. In this context, and having lost school as a protective space, minors were increasingly recruited into illegal armed groups or the illicit economies they control.
2. **COVID-19 containment measures affected civil society and families, with increasing victimization and disruptions to important human rights work.** Women, girls and boys suffered more frequent abuse and sexual violence at home during the lockdown. Young victims of these violences often abandoned their household and became more vulnerable to recruitment into illegal armed groups. Civil society groups and their constituents have been largely unable to gather because of movement restrictions imposed by the state, illegal armed groups or their neighbors. As a result, important platforms for participation and advocacy were lost, and social leaders lost capacity to verify violations of human rights and accompany their victims.
3. **The pandemic increased insecurity through its detrimental impact on economic hardship and the growing reliance on illicit economies dominated by illegal armed groups.** Unemployment in urban areas and increasing difficulties for agricultural livelihoods cornered many into illicit economies, which went largely without disruption from COVID-19 responses. Youth and vulnerable households had to increasingly turn to the coca value chain. Many who had begun illicit crop substitution schemes re-sowed coca fields, faced with lack of progress with the PNIS state program.

The findings from Colombia demonstrate that conflict is not immune to pandemic shocks and that public health responses cannot be disassociated from existing challenges and drivers of insecurity. States must consider the differentiated impacts that measures such as lockdowns, social distancing and movement restrictions will have in conflict-affected areas, so that mitigating measures can be taken in parallel. Bold and holistic responses are necessary to prevent one crisis from feeding the other.



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

Colombia

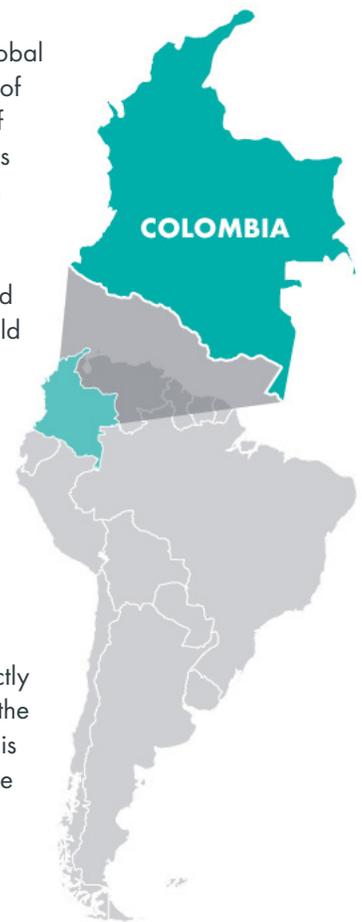


Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

Colombia has been facing compounded crises in recent years. The country has faced the global COVID-19 pandemic in the midst of challenges with ongoing insecurity and armed conflict, of delayed implementation of the crucial peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla, and major structural socio-economic challenges. The country has been hard hit by the pandemic, with one of the highest infection rates and death tolls in Latin America, despite having implemented stringent and prolonged containment measures.

Globally and nationally, the impacts on instability, conflict and violence of the pandemic and responses to the public health crisis are only beginning to be understood (Inks and Lichtenheld 2020, Pardo Calderón et al, 2020). This study is part of an ongoing effort by Mercy Corps to understand the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to regular analysis in all its countries of operation, Mercy Corps has conducted research to examine and map out the diverse ways in which COVID-19 may be impacting conflict. This case study presents findings from research conducted in Colombia as part of a larger effort to analyze conflict dynamics stemming from the COVID-19 crisis.

Emerging data from the three cases suggests that these effects are far from uniform: the virus and public health responses have affected different countries and populations to different degrees and in different ways. There is little evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has directly created or triggered new armed conflicts. Rather, our findings indicate that the responses to the pandemic have intensified and exacerbated pre-existing causes of conflict and instability. It is the impact of state and societal responses to the pandemic, not the public health effects of the virus itself, that has been intensifying conflict drivers.



Daniel Herrera Kelly served as the lead author for this chapter.



Mercy Corps

In Colombia, the array of measures, including lockdown, has directly resulted in a dramatic economic crisis and highly significant changes to state capacity, diminishing state presence and service provision. These two impacts of the public health response have in turn deepened, through diverse and often interlinked causal mechanisms, pre-existing drivers of conflict and violence. Containment measures decreased state security presence, leaving major governance voids in remote areas, which have been swiftly filled by illegal armed groups (IAGs).¹ Movement restrictions constrained the operations of civilian institutions, hindering human rights protection mechanisms for victims and progress with the 2016 peace accord. School closures negated crucial protection for minors who have been increasingly exposed to recruitment into illegal armed groups and illicit economies. The prolonged lockdown weakened civil society and fueled an increase in gender-based violence (and child abuse). The economic crisis had a profound impact on livelihood strategies, pushing many vulnerable Colombians to turn to illicit crops to survive. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic and public health responses did not transform the nature of conflict drivers, but they deepened critical pre-existing vulnerabilities.

› *This 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.*

— A social leader, Cauca²

1 We use illegal armed group (or IAG) as the generic term to describe all non-state armed groups operating in the country, regardless of their political, criminal, or paramilitary nature.
2 19 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca

Background

Timeline of Key Events in the Pandemic in Colombia

Despite enacting prolonged and stringent containment measures, Colombia has been severely affected by the pandemic. With a population estimated at 50 million, as of June 1, 2021, the country reported 3.43 million COVID-19 cases and 89,297 confirmed deaths — 175 per 100,000 inhabitants. The staggering death toll places Colombia as the fourth hardest-hit country in Latin America, behind Brazil, Peru and Mexico (Ritchie et al., 2020). Colombia's first coronavirus case was reported officially on March 6, 2020, although there is speculation that the first death may have been weeks earlier on February 15 (Reuters, 2020).

On March 17, 2020, the Colombian government declared a state of emergency to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak and mandated a *national quarantine* (or lockdown). While the initial decree was for a 19-day lockdown, the quarantine was renewed several times, lasting over five months — until September 1, 2020 (IMF, 2021). All but essential workers were mandated to work from home, including public officials (Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2020). Following a new wave of cases, curfews were mandated in larger cities where intensive care units were near (or over) capacity in January 2021 (IMF, 2021).

Restrictions on international and inter/intra-regional mobility were also severe. The country enacted stringent border restrictions throughout 2020 and into 2021. From March 2020, international arrivals were mandated to quarantine for two weeks, while entry into the country was banned to non-citizens and non-residents (Cobb, 2020). Colombia allowed limited international air travel from September 19, 2020, while land and sea border restrictions remain in place until June 1, 2021 (IMF, 2021). For months, Colombia had a policy, which local governments could adapt, of alternating mobility rights for essential activities (such as purchasing food or going to the bank), depending on the last number on citizens' ID (Guerrero, 2020).

Schools were closed on March 16, 2020 and re-opened partially on September 14, 2020 — after a six-month closure (UNESCO, 2021). Since then, schools have been operating under a hybrid on-site and online model (*modelo de alternancia*), but only in those regions where the epidemiological data was considered sufficiently low-risk (Medellín Aranguren, 2021). During the time schools were physically closed, pupils were expected to continue their education online, or by following tailored programming on the radio and television. To compensate for the closure, the program that provides nutritional complements to children in all public schools (PAE, in its Spanish acronym) was allowed three routes to adapt: distributions of items to cook at home, ready meals, and a food voucher (Cerdán-Infantes et al., 2020, p. 25).

The experience of COVID-19 restrictions varied significantly within the country. The areas in which we collected data are regions where state presence is weak, and governance is determined by a complex and highly localized interaction between state policies (including municipal and departmental levels), local community self-organizing, and control exerted by illegal armed groups. The response to COVID-19 is no exception. The communities we studied in Catatumbo and Cauca have experienced lockdowns, movement restrictions, quarantines, and limitations on economic activities that emanated from state directives described above, but also from rules imposed by illegal armed groups and from autonomous citizen self-organization to contain the virus. Our workshops and interviews evidence widespread concern that local public health services, poorly equipped and concentrated in urban centers, would be overwhelmed rapidly should the virus spread. In this context, both illegal armed groups and communities sought to self-protect and played important roles in the response. This dynamic is critical to understand the impact that the pandemic had in conflict-affected communities, as we describe in detail below.

Conflict in Cauca and Catatumbo pre-COVID

In the last four years, the drivers of instability in Colombia have been in flux. The Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace accord in 2016, after several failed attempts in the last decades. The peace accord brought a negotiated end to the longest internal armed conflict in Latin America, establishing a six-point framework for: (1) socio-economic transformation in rural communities, (2) wider political participation, (3) disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of FARC members, (4) addressing drug trafficking, (5) acknowledging and compensating victims — the sixth point is implementation of the above issues.

The conflict has become more fragmented as illegal armed groups that are still operational have adjusted to successive processes of demobilization. Already in 2006, the demobilization of some paramilitary groups shifted the balance of power in conflict-affected regions. This shifting scenario became more complex since 2017 and the demobilization of FARC. The pandemic coincides with a period which already entails substantial reconfiguration of power relations among illegal armed groups who were not part of the peace process (e.g. the ELN and EPL) or who abandoned it (FARC dissidents), paramilitary organizations (Gaitanistas and Gabos), and drug trafficking cartels. In the past four years, the myriad guerrillas, drug cartels, paramilitary groups, and criminal bands (BACRIM) have sought to fill voids left in previously FARC-controlled territory (CINEP, 2018, 2019; ICG, 2017, 2019; Morales & Salom, 2020).

The competition over control of territory, communities' social life, and the rents from the drug economy has resulted in violence towards security forces, among illegal armed groups, and against civilians. Social leaders engaged in a wide range of issues have suffered increasing levels of violence since 2017 in both Cauca and Catatumbo (ACLED, 2021, pp. 21 – 23; CINEP, 2018; ICG, 2020). The drug trafficking economy, rooted in the cultivation of coca,³ continues fuelling conflict. Via a mixed approach of forced eradication and consensual substitution of illicit crops, Colombia's land surface dedicated to coca decreased in 2019 for the first time in decades (UNODC & SIMCI, 2020). However, the coca value chain has become increasingly concentrated, with areas like Catatumbo and Cauca actually increasing their total hectares of coca fields. In these areas, the killings of social leaders and beneficiaries of crop substitution programs are common, especially amidst territorial disputes, as are rights violations by security forces seeking to forcefully eradicate fields (Arenas & Vargas, 2020; ICG, 2021).

In addition, the spillover effects of the Venezuelan crisis have deepened insecurity, especially in the border region of Catatumbo. As of January 2021, Colombia hosted 1.7 million Venezuelans refugees (UNHCR, 2021). Because of mass displacement and state fragility in Venezuela, the border offers opportunities to generate income for illegal armed groups through the control of routes for the drug trade, oil and gasoline smuggling, and people trafficking. The potential for generating rent has led to fierce competition among Colombian illegal armed groups, but also with Venezuelan actors (Morales & Salom, 2020). Venezuelan civilians on both sides face stark choices: coping with a severe political and economic crisis or becoming refugees in Colombia, where they lose social protection and have few livelihood opportunities. Amidst increasing vulnerability, Venezuelans are becoming more susceptible to instrumentalization (taking up non-fighting roles) and recruitment by illegal armed groups (Valencia et al., 2020). Despite being granted Temporary Protected Status in March 2021, the vulnerabilities Venezuelans and their host communities face remain numerous.

3 Coca is an ancestral crop in South America and a natural stimulant. From its leaves, cocaine can be extracted through chemical processes and, to stymie drug production, its cultivation has become illegal in Colombia and several other countries.



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

Methodology

In this report, we focus on understanding what causal relations and linkages exist between COVID-19 and conflict in Cauca and Catatumbo. Our data collection focused on identifying a diverse set of communities and respondents. We looked for variation across gender, age, ethnic identity (indigenous and Afro-Colombian) of participants, and identified respondents in communities that presented diverse combinations of characteristics: rural and urban, degrees of control exerted by illegal armed groups, prevalence of illicit crops and economies, and cross-border dynamics. The study draws on 23 participatory workshops and 25 semi-structured interviews, with a total of 138 participants (56 male, 82 female) from 18 municipalities. Data collection was conducted from December 2020 to February 2021.

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data, based on systems analysis and process tracing to identify pathways and connections that link COVID-19 with conflict and violence, either directly or indirectly. As relevant, we also reviewed secondary literature and existing databases to complement our data and to triangulate and further contextualize our findings.



Figure 1. Map of Colombia with Cauca and Catatumbo highlighted

Findings: links between COVID-19 restrictions and conflict drivers

Restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have had fundamental impacts that in turn deepened drivers of conflict and instability in Cauca and Catatumbo. First, social distancing measures such as lockdowns, work-from-home directives and movement restrictions have severely diminished the state's presence and capacity, particularly in rural areas. Second, the prolonged restrictions on movement and social gatherings have affected civil society cohesion and family relations. Third, like in most countries, COVID-19 containment measures have resulted in dire economic hardship and impacted trade, consumption, and people's ability to work, especially for those who rely on informal livelihoods. The byproducts of COVID-19 responses on the state, patterns of social interaction, and the economy are at the heart of the three key pathways that connect the pandemic and instability. These direct impacts have affected the operation of illegal armed groups, social and family cohesion, and communities' reliance on illicit economies.

Pathway 1: State presence, illegal armed group activity and insecurity

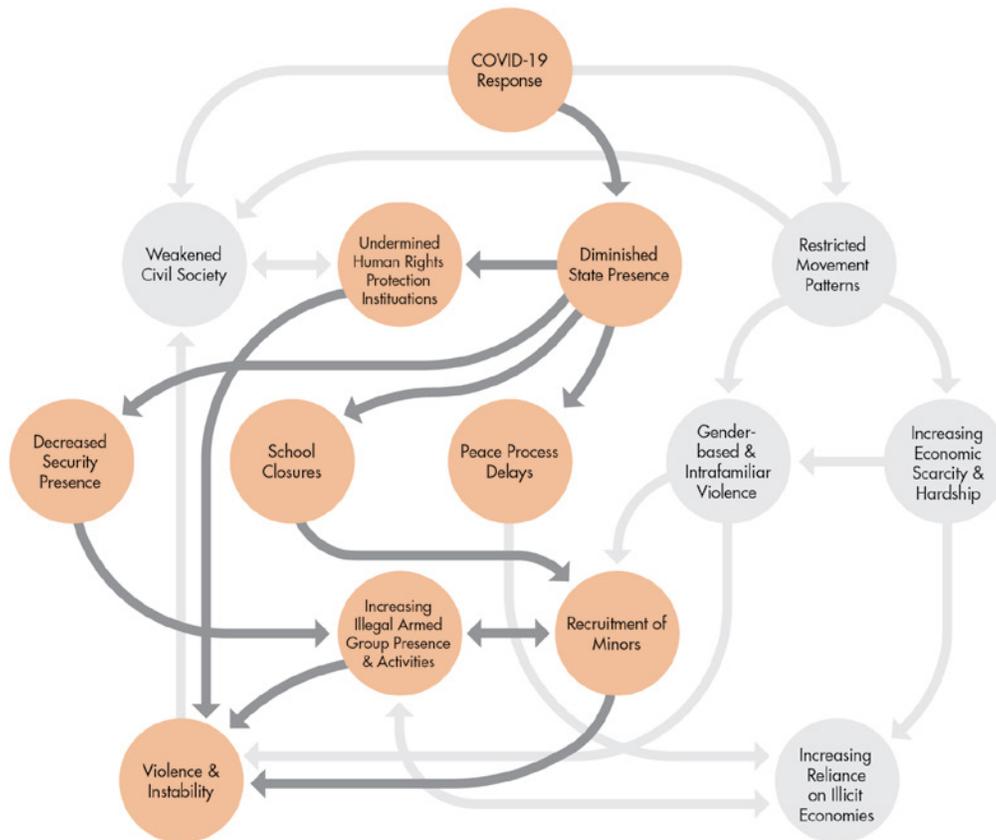


Figure 2. System map linking COVID-19 and Conflict drivers. In red, Pathway 1 factors.

COVID-19 restrictions impacted insecurity by exacerbating the presence, activities and control by illegal armed groups. Changes in the presence of the state have deepened governance voids, which at times pre-dated the pandemic but often were a result of the diminished presence of the state in remote areas during the pandemic. These increasingly ungoverned spaces have been exploited by an array of illegal armed groups operating in Cauca and Catatumbo, including criminal, insurgent and paramilitary actors who each operate in their own distinct ways. This section focuses on shared patterns identified through our data which link the influence of these actors and responses to COVID-19. The patterns present some geographic variation and are prominent in rural areas, but were observed in both Cauca and Catatumbo.



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

COVID-19 and strained presence and capacity of governance actors

The responses to COVID-19 have directly impacted the presence and operation of governance actors. The very measures imposed by the state to contain the virus significantly affected its ability to fulfill key functions. The Colombian state was constrained in its capacity to provide security, civilian services, and ensure institutional presence in remote areas — each of these affected conflict dynamics differently. Communities described four major effects of diminished state presence and capacity that relate to conflict and instability.



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

The first consequence of weakened state presence was diminished capacity to ensure the security of remote areas. In the municipalities we researched, imbalances in the presence of security forces were common pre-COVID-19, but were exacerbated by the pandemic. For instance, participants from El Carmen and Patía, among others, felt that security presence has been a constant deficit, regardless of the pandemic's impact.⁴ For example, a workshop participant from El Carmen described that the area "is controlled by the ELN and state security presence has always been intermittent. El Carmen historically has been at the heart of the conflict [...] Now, even though the urban center is somewhat spared, the rural area is the epicenter of combat."⁵

More widely, the overwhelming sense across our focus areas was that state security presence had further reduced specifically as a consequence of the pandemic.⁶ Community members observed that even conflictive actions, such as forced eradication of illicit crops, have been put largely on standby in their towns.⁷ While for a minority the absence of security forces signaled a respite from frequent clashes between the army and illegal armed groups,⁸ for most participants the withdrawal of military forces is understood to have provided greater operational space for illegal armed groups. For example, in El Tambo a workshop participant noted: "This presence [of IAGs] is associated with the absence of the National Army, who also went into lockdown. There were reports of contagion among their battalions and, because of it, they didn't play their role."⁹ The apparent withdrawal of security forces from these remote communities is seen to have created a window of opportunity for illegal armed groups to act more freely and with impunity. For instance, a resident from Teorama indicated that:

》 *"Illegal armed groups have strengthened their power. It is not even through the use of force, but because of the void left by the state, who withdrew forces and actions to avoid infections among its troops. This prevented an escalation of violence, but also left communities unprotected from possible human rights violations."¹⁰*

4 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

5 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

6 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors;

7 W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo

8 W1 - Female, Catatumbo

9

10 W1 - Female, Catatumbo



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COVID-19 restrictions also had tangible impacts on an already precarious institutional civilian presence. With stay-at-home orders and movement restrictions, Colombian state officials put activities in remote communities on pause, at least until late 2020.¹¹ Respondents in our study felt that the state’s institutional presence had decreased during the pandemic, even though they are located in areas with historical deficits in this regard.¹² Public servants across sectors were unable to deploy, engage with communities in person and accept members of the public at their premises for many months. Many state programs and services (for instance, local infrastructure improvements, social protection programs, or technical assistance to agricultural producers) turned to virtual platforms. Citizens from remote communities struggled to access services and to navigate their requirements and bureaucracy without in-person assistance.¹³

The second impact of diminished state presence stems from these constraints on civilian institutions, which severely disrupted human rights reporting and protection mechanisms.¹⁴ Community members who have been victimized during the period of the pandemic have faced significant obstacles to reach institutions and file reports. Our respondents felt particularly impacted by the effects of the Human Rights Ombuds Office and the Victim’s Unit having to work virtually, cancelling their visits to communities.¹⁵ Colombians from remote communities faced difficulties understanding, navigating and making use of virtual means of reporting and seeking protection from instances of victimization.¹⁶ Virtual attention was the only support route available for months. As some institutions reopened to in-person attention, movement restrictions (by either state, illegal armed groups or community committees) continued to make it challenging for victims of human rights violations to physically reach

11 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo

12 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors;

13 W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo;

14 W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

15 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo

16 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca/ W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

institutions, when they eventually did open to the public.¹⁷ Civil society leaders, who often play a crucial role accompanying victims and supporting them to navigate state human rights institutions, have also seen their capacity to reach victims decreased with restrictions to move freely.¹⁸ For example, female social leaders from Popayán told us in a workshop: “With the lockdown it was difficult to advise and accompany victims. It became a challenge.” [...] “Victims would go to their representatives [secretarías o enlaces de víctimas], but without working offices, they don’t know enough about attention routes.”¹⁹

As a result, community members and experts with whom Mercy Corps spoke believe that major increases to human rights violations are going under- or unreported.²⁰ The lack of reports undermined effective mechanisms for the protection of communities, such as early warnings by the *Defensoría*²¹ and protection protocols for threatened social leaders via the Protection Unit.²² The absence of these state officials from remote communities together with the strengthened presence of illegal armed groups, to which we turn below, made it riskier and much more difficult to seek protection. Community members described in our interviews and workshops how neighbors have been threatened and killed for seeking state protection, as available attention mechanisms are not immediate enough to mitigate risks.²³ A participant in Tibú described it poignantly:

» *“The presence in our communities of armed groups makes it difficult to report cases of human rights violations, in many cases communities do not report or ask for support because the perpetrator of violence is closer than protection institutions and out of fear they do not report.”²⁴*

With minimal protection in vulnerable communities, many social leaders and community members became internally displaced to survive. As this respondent from El Tarra explained: “What is most serious is that there is no way to seek government protection, one ends up displacing to avoid problems, and from there one tries to help the communities.”²⁵

17 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca
18 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo
19 W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca
20 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca
21 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo
22 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca
23 I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca
24 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo
25 W21 - Mixed, Cauca



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

The third key knock-on effect of diminished state presence has been the interruption or delay to crucial reforms mandated by the 2016 peace accords between FARC and the Colombian state. The Colombian peace process had been mired by slow implementation prior to the pandemic,²⁶ so now many community members believe that the institutions responsible are using COVID-19 as an excuse to justify delays which predate the public health crisis.²⁷ The advent of social distancing restrictions due to the pandemic deepened this crisis, with delays and disruptions becoming systematic.²⁸ As a workshop participant from Sardinata told us:

”There were already problems with delays and poor execution, but the pandemic worsened them. Public officials did not come back to communities out of fear of infection and that meant activities stopped being implemented. It was not until the end of 2020 that some institutions started to have some presence again.”²⁹

The most commonly referenced explanation is that COVID-19 movement restrictions prevented public officials from working in the field and substantially slowed the implementation of key programs, namely local development funds (PDET, in its Spanish acronym) and the illicit crop substitution scheme (PNIS, in its Spanish acronym).³⁰



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

The impact of these disruptions, however, varies from one program to another. While both are described as experiencing severe disruptions during the pandemic, respondents are more positive about the progress with PDET projects.³¹ It is likely that the difference is because these funds are de-centralized and municipalities play a key role in implementation, often leveraging municipal development funds.³² PDET activities may have therefore been less impacted by movement restrictions. Substitution of illicit crops via PNIS, however, is seen as progressing particularly slowly or not at all. Combined with a context of economic crisis, increased presence of armed groups, and decreased state security presence, PNIS shortfalls have made many families withdraw from the program and re-sow coca, a dynamic that is further detailed below in Pathway 3.³³

The fourth major consequence of weakened state capacity on drivers of instability and vulnerability is the suspension of in-person education. School constituted a crucial protective space for children, especially from recruitment by illegal armed

26 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

27 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

28 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca

29 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo

30 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

31 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo

32 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca

33 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca



Blue Sky/Shutterstock

groups. To prevent the spread of the virus, in-person schooling was suspended and replaced with virtual education. Not attending school in person in remote areas with substantial illegal armed group presence entails losing an all-important protective space and supervision from teachers and other adult staff.³⁴ In addition, across our research areas, connectivity is a significant barrier: many families lack the means to access the internet (a laptop, tablet, or phone), they struggle to afford data packages, and internet infrastructure is poor or disrupted intentionally. As participants from Sardinata cogently noted:

”Many children in the rural areas, even in the urban center, have not been able to progress with their studies because of poor connectivity; they don’t have a computer and in some areas there is no signal. [...] “Armed actors use devices that block the signal in some zones.”³⁵

The impossibility to study online has resulted in mass school dropouts, particularly of the most socio-economically vulnerable children.³⁶ Our respondents saw this educational crisis as a crucial driver of child recruitment, to which we turn below.

Feeding mistrust: the impacts of perceived state abandonment

Altogether, these impacts of the response to COVID-19 on state security presence, protection mechanisms and service provision have undermined trust in government further among Colombians. Civilian state institutions have traditionally been largely absent or constrained to urban centers in Cauca and Catatumbo. It is plausible that communities largely felt the absence of the state more acutely. The pandemic was a moment of crisis with greater need for social protection but to which the Colombian state was not able to respond effectively.

34 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors /W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo

35 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

36 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

Nationally, 30% of Colombians are estimated to have received some form of relief from new COVID-specific programs (Warren et al., 2020a, p. 20). In our focus areas, some community members reported receiving food distributions from departmental and municipal governments or international agencies.³⁷ However, many respondents described these efforts as insufficient (lasting at most a couple of weeks)³⁸ and often perceived that relief was being distributed following political or clientelar interests.³⁹ A resident from Popayán complained: “Food items [mercados] purchased at a departmental level started to be distributed along political lines. That means that they would be given to the candidates who were going to win in the cities. It is really cowardly, one can’t play with people’s needs.”⁴⁰ Others lamented not having sufficient knowledge or support to request available humanitarian relief through virtual means, such as the Ingreso Solidario cash transfer program.⁴¹ Respondents who were also victims of the internal armed conflict lamented that victims enrolled in the *Familias en Accion* program were not eligible for these exceptional COVID-19 distributions.⁴² In many cases, respondents declared having received no relief.⁴³



Rob Ahrens/Shutterstock

Communities expressed a deepening sense of abandonment due to inadequate state provisions and a lack of protection from violent actors. The absence or ineffectiveness of security forces reported in our data is fueling a perception, in the worst cases, that state security forces and institutions are in collusion with illegal armed groups to permit their activities,⁴⁴ that illegal armed groups control or have co-opted local government,⁴⁵ and that the coca economy finances those getting to power.⁴⁶ In some of our interviews and workshops, the absence of security forces was seen to have increased the grassroots legitimacy of illegal armed groups, who frequently replaced key state functions and were able to deliver services to gain trust of the community.⁴⁷ The perception of abandonment by the state⁴⁸ makes the threats by illegal armed groups and the appeal of involvement with them (in the coca economy or via direct recruitment) even greater.⁴⁹

Filling the void: illegal armed group presence, competition and control in remote communities

Shifting power dynamics and competition between illegal armed groups are not new and pre-date COVID-19, but the pandemic has exacerbated this driver of instability. Colombians have coexisted with these ebbs and flows of insurgent groups and drug trafficking cartels for decades, especially since the 2016 accord in areas traditionally held by FARC. For instance, in

37 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo
 38 I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo
 39 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca
 40 I20 - Male expert, Cauca
 41 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca
 42 I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca
 43 I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca
 44 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca
 45 W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo
 46 W19 - Mixed, Cauca
 47 W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo;
 48 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca
 49 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo;

Sardinata, Teorama, Patía and Buenos Aires, a power vacuum had already originated from the demobilization of the FARC and so is not a COVID-generated phenomenon.⁵⁰ However, even in those municipalities, respondents perceived that the presence and control exerted by illegal armed groups had grown over the course of the pandemic. A resident of Buenos Aires told us:

› *“This [IAG control] has increased, with massacres, not only of social leaders, also of youth. [...] Movement restrictions, curfews help with lockdown because one can’t be outside, but these groups take advantage of this period. For example, distributing leaflets, threatening, sending audios to male and female leaders and many have left the community. We’ve seen selective murders.”⁵¹*

Across research sites, community members were concerned that the control these groups were able to exert had increased as COVID-19 responses provided a window of opportunity. Many lament that security improvements post peace-agreements have been fading.⁵²

Increased control by illegal armed groups was an incremental process, deepened progressively by the evolution of responses to the pandemic. Our respondents perceived that in the initial period of the pandemic, illegal armed groups were concerned with the risks of mass COVID-19 contagion. These actors were initially cautious and focused on self-caring. In areas like El Tarra, it appears that caution led illegal armed groups to self-isolate and reduce their activities.⁵³ Generally, participants understand this initial approach to the risk posed by the virus as a self-interested mitigation tactic, to prevent disease among their ranks or illicit crop workers.⁵⁴ Combined with a reduced state security presence, this initial period of the pandemic provided some respite in communities used to frequent armed clashes, such as around Teorama, where a workshop participant explained:

› *“There was also a decrease in the actions taken by IAGs. So, faced by the exit of troops from the area, there were no clashes. In reality, it seems that both sides were more worried about COVID-19 than about attacking each other... they had a common enemy, a more powerful one.”⁵⁵*

50 I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

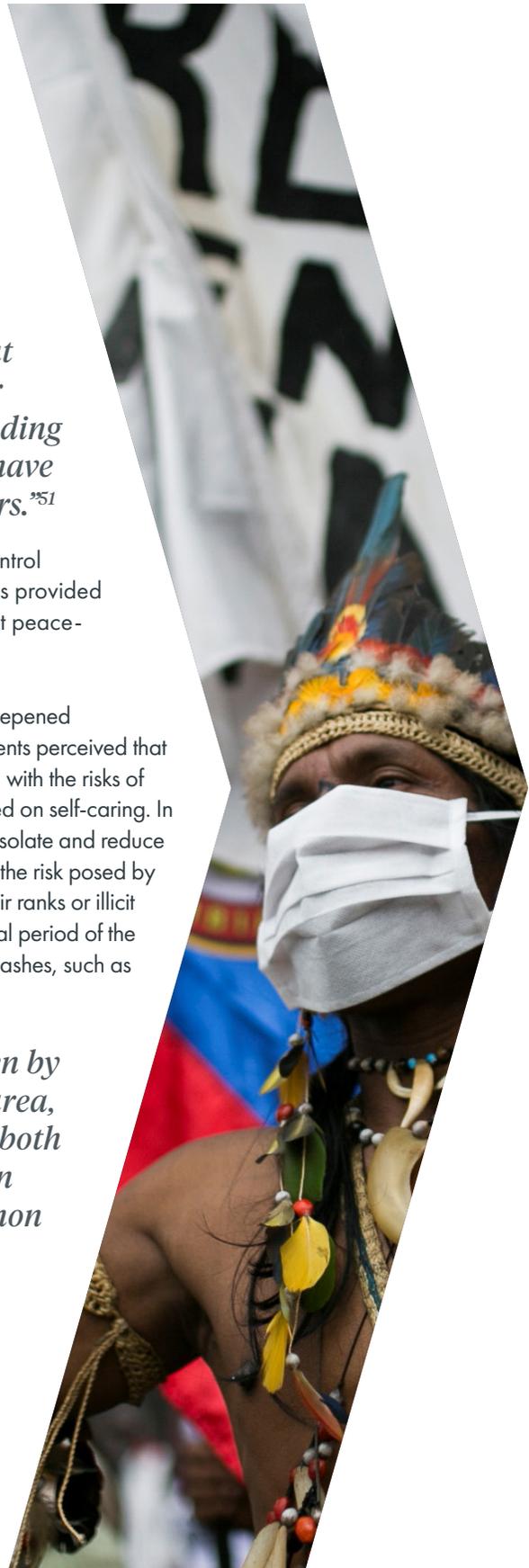
51 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

52 W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

53 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

54 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

55 W1 - Female, Catatumbo



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

This initial caution by illegal armed groups rapidly gave way to more proactive involvement in responding to the pandemic in their communities of influence. Coinciding with the period of most stringent state-mandated restrictions, illegal armed groups established roadblocks to control entries and exits into communities, mandated the use of masks, established rules for trading and opening shops, and even engaged in COVID-19 awareness campaigns.⁵⁶ These actors did not always impose measures of their own design. At times they enforced the very restrictions enacted by the Colombian state to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including lockdowns.⁵⁷ However, taking over measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 provided a window of opportunity for armed groups to become more involved in community life, as summarized by a human rights defender from Popayán:

› *“Illegal groups took advantage of COVID to take up positions in the communities, carrying out so-called clean-ups [killings] and decreeing mandatory curfews — those who were seen outside after 6pm were considered a military target.”⁵⁸*



Jorge PM/Shutterstock

Reports of illegal armed groups sanctioning with violence those who did not comply with their COVID-19 rules were common in our interviews and workshops.⁵⁹ For instance, in Buenos Aires, respondents in a workshop noted:

› *“At the beginning of the pandemic, they promoted a mandatory lockdown with threats. So to tensions caused by fear of contagion, we had to add fear of infringing on rules imposed for which the only sanction was death.”⁶⁰*

In El Tambo, participants described how:

› *“the restrictions were imposed by armed groups, who imposed curfews, biosecurity measures and controlled entries and exits into villages in the municipality. The phrase ‘you either care for yourself, or we will take care of you’ was used to enforce these measures.”⁶¹*

56 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca/ I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

57 W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca
58 I20 - Male expert, Cauca

59 W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

60 W18 - Mixed, Cauca

61 W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca

However, COVID-19 was not just an opportunity to reassert control through coercion, it provided an opportunity to shore up legitimacy. For instance, respondents from Sardinata and Tibú indicated that, in response to the increased vulnerability of community members, illegal armed groups provided some relief in the form of food items and construction material.⁶² Expert interviewees have also noted that as a relief measure some actors declared an amnesty on extortion fees.⁶³

Overall, it is clear from the dynamics described by our respondents that enforcement of COVID-19 mitigation measures became a novel driver in an already existing conflict scenario, following patterns of interaction between illegal armed groups and communities that pre-dated the pandemic. The adjustment by illegal armed groups to the realities of the pandemic mirrored the tactics employed prior, such as restrictions on mobility, which have affected community members in areas of Tibú, Buenos Aires or Patía for years.⁶⁴ Eventually, as the first period of lockdown subsided nationally, starting in September 2020, the focus of these actors on containing the spread of COVID-19 decreased substantially. While their grip on many of our focus communities remained tight, illegal armed groups did lessen COVID-19 restrictions and even shifted in some cases from encouraging to banning mask wearing as a security precaution.⁶⁵

Most importantly, it is not only that groups already present were able to ramp up their operations and consolidate control, but competition became fiercer. Respondents explained that the vacuum left by diminished state presence facilitated the emergence and consolidation of actors that were new to their area, increasing competition for territorial control during the period of the pandemic.⁶⁶ Most frequently, the groups entering our respondents' area were new to their community, but not unknown to the Colombian conflict. For instance, in Argelia, the void left after the FARC demobilized was filled by the ELN, who clashed with the Carlos Patiño group of FARC dissidents — who are seen to have gained the upper hand during the period of the pandemic.⁶⁷ In Sardinata, it was the EPL (or *Pelusos*) who confronted the ELN once the FARC demobilized.⁶⁸



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

62 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo

63 I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict

64 W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca

65 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo

66 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca;

67 I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

68 I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo

However, an emerging trend during the pandemic deserves close monitoring: the arrival of entirely unknown groups in the territory was reported in several municipalities. This is noteworthy because it is unusual for community members to not be able to identify which illegal armed groups are active and exerting control in their area, as traditionally these groups seek recognition and legitimacy for their operations. Our respondents described activities by illegal armed groups who were entirely unknown, who did not identify themselves or did not claim responsibility for actions such as political assassinations of social leaders in Algeria, Buenos Aires and El Tambo, for instance.⁶⁹ Participants from Popayán, Patía, and Tibú did describe these new groups as Mexican, and speculated that these unknown groups are drug trafficking cartels, focused on illicit economies.⁷⁰ As a respondent in a workshop in Patía explained:

» *“This was a FARC area, with the peace accord this group withdrew and the vacuum was filled by the ELN. Now the [FARC] dissidence wants to return, but the ELN will not abandon what it had gained so easily. To this, we have to add the arrival of Mexican drug trafficking groups who also want some of the profits from coca.”⁷¹*



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

This finding provides further evidence for the growing influence that Mexican drug cartels are gaining in both Cauca and Catatumbo. Mexican drug cartels have had connections in Colombia for decades, but until recently their operational presence was minimal — limited to identifying viable partners, establishing supply routes and making payments (ICG, 2019, pp. 14 – 15; Miranda, 2019). Early warnings from May 2020 by the Human Rights Ombuds Office and other civil society organizations cautioned that several Mexican cartels were exerting control themselves in different areas of the country (Arciniegas, 2020; El Tiempo, 2020). Our findings are consistent with these initial reports and highlight that Cauca and Catatumbo are among the areas affected and will require close monitoring in the medium and long term. Competition or the emergence of a new actor entails heightened vulnerability, as it means new ‘rules’ and patterns of interaction between the illegal armed group and civilians. Community members need to re-learn and re-adapt their survival and self-protection strategies.⁷² Competition between illegal armed groups debilitates social organizations and leaders particularly as they frequently become military objectives in contexts of dispute, for their perceived affinity to one or another group.⁷³ These areas are at a particularly high risk of mass violence and human rights violations.

69 I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca /

70 I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo;

71 W21 - Mixed, Cauca

72 I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

73 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

The gender-differentiated impacts of illegal armed group presence

Even in areas controlled by a single actor, increased illegal armed group presence comes associated with a variety of forms of victimization, human rights violations and manifestations of violence. Beyond the violent enforcement of COVID-19 mitigation measures described above, in both Cauca and Catatumbo, respondents described increased instances of threats, forced displacement, kidnapping, disappearances and attacks by illegal armed groups against civilians.⁷⁴ In particular, community members playing a role in social organizations, defending human rights or advocating for neighbors faced increased vulnerability. Threats against leaders, including with leaflets or WhatsApp audios were common impacts of increased illegal armed group activity, pushing many to flee from their homes during the pandemic.⁷⁵ Many of our respondents describe how, frequently, neighbors are killed for their leadership role in their community.⁷⁶ The increasingly criminal nature (lacking explicit political motives) of some of the new groups further compounds the vulnerability of social leaders, as activists perceive that their lack of ideology makes them less reticent to use violence against key members of the community who could threaten their control.⁷⁷ This targeted violence has weakened grassroots organizations and networks, as the increased risk against leaders has made many reconsider their role in the community.⁷⁸ This weakened social organization and vulnerability of leaders brings about greater silence and compliance by communities, further consolidating the control of illegal armed groups.⁷⁹



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The impacts of the growing presence of illegal armed groups are highly gendered and influenced by age. The increased presence of illegal armed groups heightens the vulnerability of minors greatly. Our respondents found that the pandemic has seen a substantial increase in the recruitment of minors, described further below. Recruitment is not the only form of victimization for youth. It was notable that community members have grown increasingly worried about patterns of violence aimed directly at youth.⁸⁰ No consistent explanations could be gleaned from our interviews and workshops, but several elements appear to be feeding this trend. Increasing participation in illegal armed groups, involvement in petty criminality (which illegal armed groups often seek to control), and assumption of community leadership roles by young people were all reported to be fueling a perception of youth as a threat for illegal armed groups.⁸¹

For women and girls, the forms of victimization from illegal armed groups unfold differently. Respondents across research areas described an increase in femicides (particularly of women in leadership positions)⁸² and in sexual violence⁸³ perpetrated

74 W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

75 W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo

76 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

77 W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca

78 W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

79 W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

80 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

81 I3 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo/ W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Colombia; W22 - Mixed, Cauca

82 W17 - Female, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

83 W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

by illegal armed groups during the period of the pandemic, especially in Cauca. Nationally, the number of homicides has decreased in Colombia between 2019 and 2020, according to National Police data (Policía Nacional de Colombia, 2020, 2021). However, it is notable that the number of murdered women in Cauca grew by 13% (in Norte de Santander, where Catatumbo is located, it decreased by 8.3% — broadly in line with the national trend). The reasons behind this reported growth in femicides are also uncertain, but could partially be explained by the increasing role that women have taken as community leaders, as this interviewee from Popayán and civil society leader indicates: “I don’t know if it’s because as women we have become more empowered in many activities: in our home, in our society, and in the community, and if that is why we are those hit the hardest now.”⁸⁴

A return of mass recruitment of minors

The effect of COVID-19 responses on state capacity has also resulted in a substantial worsening of recruitment of minors into illegal armed groups and the illicit economies they control. Recruitment of minors was a form of victimization that was progressively fading and had shown signs of improvement nationally (González Cepero et al., 2020) and in some of the communities included in our study.⁸⁵ However, it is one of the most consistent impacts that respondents observed since the pandemic started, a period during which they understand recruitment to have grown substantially.⁸⁶ This pattern of victimization has an important gender component in this period, as in our workshops and interviews participants also evidenced that girls were increasingly being recruited, often as forced sexual companions.⁸⁷

Recruited minors take on a variety of roles within armed groups, not only as fighters. Many young persons are recruited into armed groups via the coca value chain and other roles in drug trafficking.⁸⁸ They are also being recruited often for menial or logistical tasks (as cooks, cleaners, couriers, or patrols).⁸⁹ Some are being recruited in urban areas or municipal centers like Popayán or Sardinata, mostly by criminal gangs.⁹⁰ However, most cases of recruitment of minors are happening in rural areas, with little security presence.⁹¹ In a workshop, a resident in Tibú explained: “recruitment of minors

84 18 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

85 12 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; 115 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; 110 - Female expert, recruitment of minors

86 18 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 111 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 125 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 19 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; 110 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; 117 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca

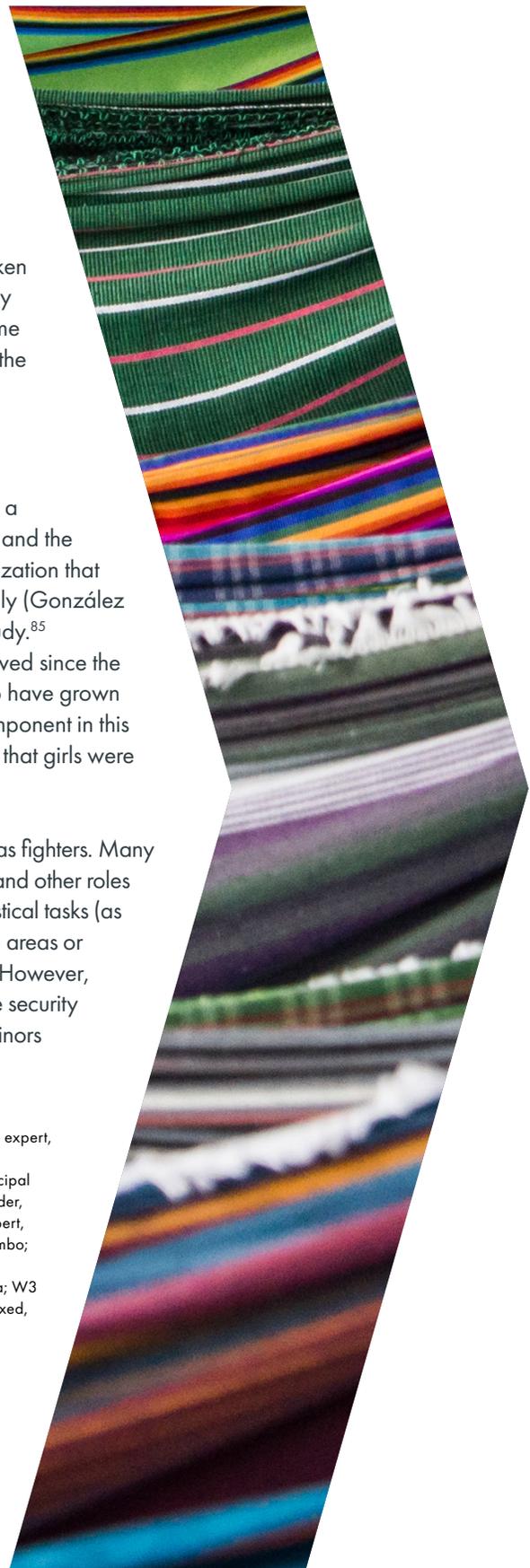
87 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; 110 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; 19 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

88 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 12 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; 124 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

89 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca

90 117 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

91 125 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 111 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 117 - Male expert, peace and conflict; 19 - Female



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continues happening and showed an increase during the pandemic, because we didn't have any presence or support from international organizations or the state."⁹²

Responses to the COVID-19 crisis have impacted drivers of recruitment directly and indirectly. One of the factors that heightens the risks of recruitment is if the area is being disputed by several illegal armed groups (González Cepero et al., 2020, pp. 15 – 19). Competition between groups is a risk multiplier that, as described above, has been magnified by responses to the pandemic and diminishing state presence. In this context, many of our respondents perceive that illegal armed groups are more actively seeking to recruit to increase their strength, which includes minors, adults, and both Colombians and Venezuelan refugees.⁹³ The link between competition among illegal armed groups and recruitment is consistent with the fact that there is not solely one group that is described as being behind the increase. Research participants have witnessed recruitment by the ELN, FARC dissidence, such as the Carlos Patiño group, paramilitaries, and at times new groups which they were unable to identify.⁹⁴

What has fundamentally changed for our respondents, which directly stems from the COVID-19 crisis, is the loss of prospects and protective spaces for youth. Illegal armed groups become more appealing when youth increasingly lack confidence in their prospects for the future.⁹⁵ Illegal armed groups frequently recruit by force and intimidation,⁹⁶ but they also attempt to attract youth voluntarily by offering better life conditions (Semana, 2020a)⁹⁷ or by appealing to the sense of purpose, belonging and adventure that youth can gain from joining them.⁹⁸ The pandemic has meant the closure of spaces for socializing and for youth to engage positively with peers and their community, which respondents in workshops in El Tarra and Teorama found to explain increasing vulnerability to these forms of recruitment.⁹⁹ In parallel, but in a less direct manner, the economic pressures which have resulted from the pandemic and its responses (to which we turn subsequently), are also contributing to recruitment. For several of our research participants, economic need was a crucial motivator for young people to link themselves to illegal armed groups or the illicit economies they support.¹⁰⁰ A respondent from Santander de Quilichao described how economic need among families has forced many children to have to work outside the home, which also increases their exposure and vulnerability to illegal armed groups and recruitment.¹⁰¹ Overwhelmingly, however, the factor feeding a lack of prospects for our respondents has been the physical closure of schools and educational centers.

In addition to diminished prospects, school closures have meant a loss of protection that has rendered minors and youth more vulnerable to recruitment during the pandemic. With school closures, they have lost a crucial protective space, sheltered from illegal armed groups, where teachers and other adults can monitor their behavior and often identify early signs of recruitment risks. An expert we interviewed, who works directly with victims of recruitment told us:

》 *“Recruitment of minors by armed groups was very marginal, but it intensified a lot since March. This is because at home there is no protection, there is no school, there are no teachers or leaders of JAC [community development committees] who can protect, nor is there army presence.”¹⁰²*

Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

92 11 - Mixed, Catatumbo

93 I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca /

94 I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors

95 I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca;

96 I6 - Female expert, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

97 I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

98 I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors

99 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo

100 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca

101 I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

102 I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

The barriers imposed by shifting education to remote methods were insurmountable for Colombia's poorest families. While older youth have seen vocational training through the SENA (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*) discontinued,¹⁰³ children faced barriers to continue their education virtually. Communities across Cauca and Catatumbo reported having experienced mass school dropouts due mainly to connectivity challenges.¹⁰⁴ Data from the OECD's PISA 2018 surveys showed that only 20% of students from Colombia's poorest quintile of families had a computer (García et al., 2020, p. 3). In August 2020, fewer than 10% of Colombian households with youth under 25 reported having been able to acquire an electronic device for their education since the national quarantine began (Warren et al., 2020b, p. 48). Our findings resonate with figures published by the Ministry of Education that evidenced a drop in the total number of children enrolled in school of over 100,000 by August 2020 (Semana, 2020b). The year 2020 closed with an overall reported dropout rate of 2.2% nationally (Medellín Aranguren, 2021). The Colombian Statistics Department (DANE) estimated 4.5% of families had not continued with any education because of the pandemic (El País, 2020). Given the huge economic inequities between regions, it is likely the proportion in areas such as Catatumbo and Cauca is much higher than national estimates.

103 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

104 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

Available figures on recruitment are in line with our findings, but our research suggests underreporting could be substantial. Data from June 2020 evidenced an increase of 113% in cases of child recruitment (Ávila, 2020). The perception of our respondents is also consistent with national surveys, where 15% of households with children aged 6 – 18 perceived that recruitment by illegal armed groups had increased in their community (Warren et al., 2020b, p. 66). However, diminished access to state institutions are impacting the ability to report. As mentioned above, often reports of recruitment come from teachers and school staff, but they have not been in permanent contact with children. Family members are facing further difficulties when seeking support for their children as the threat is much more immediate than the protection mechanisms available. As respondents in a workshop in Tibú described, cases of children at-risk are being reported to state institutions less frequently.¹⁰⁵ Many families have displacement as their only option when they receive threats of or attempts at having their children recruited, participants from Popayán, El Carmen and El Tarra indicated.¹⁰⁶ These families flee their community rather than risk staying put while they report and navigate state protection mechanisms. As a result, many of those recruitment threats go undocumented.

Pathway 2: Strained social cohesion and intra-family relations

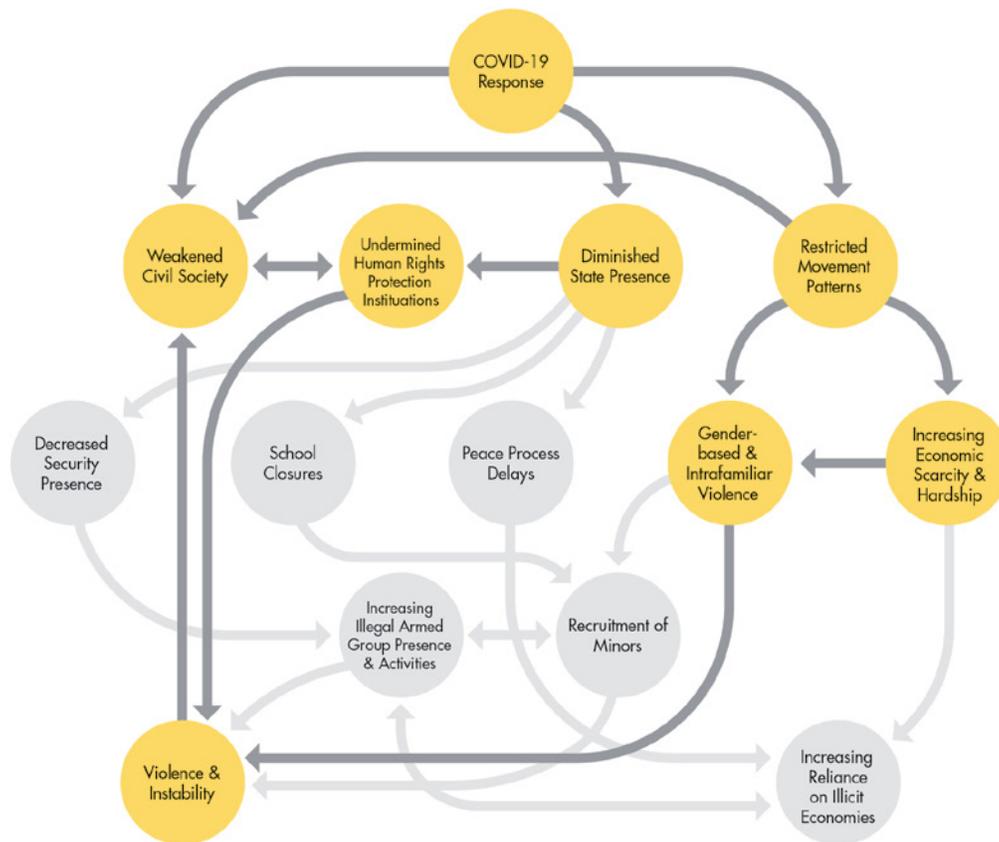


Figure 3. System map linking COVID-19 and Conflict drivers. In red, Pathway 2 factors.

The pandemic has also impacted drivers of conflict and instability through its effect on social and family relations. Our findings evidence that responses to COVID-19 have worsened dynamics around gender-based and intra-familial violence, and the vulnerability of civil society. Prolonged periods of lockdown, amid a climate of anxiety and vulnerability have exacerbated gender-based violence and child abuse. This impact of COVID-19 responses, albeit less directly, also has further knock-on consequences on the dynamics of armed conflict and insecurity, particularly recruitment into illegal armed groups. For civil society leaders, constrained access to constituencies and partners, and the inability to gather in person have impaired their effectiveness and rendered them more vulnerable to violence.

105 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo

106 W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

Increased intra-familial and gender-based violence and its links to armed conflict

The most direct link between pandemic responses and levels of violence was observed by respondents (overwhelmingly female ones) at home. Women and children are suffering a differentiated impact during the pandemic. Not only are women burdened further with having to take on children's education and additional caring responsibility, but they are increasingly victims of intra-family and gender-based violence.¹⁰⁷ Across Colombia, 7% of households surveyed in August 2020 reported being worried about physical violence by their partner since the pandemic began (Warren et al., 2020b, p. 66). Several factors, in view of our respondents, are driving this dynamic: the prolonged period of lockdown, added to the stress produced by a profound economic crisis and fear of COVID, and a perceived increase in drug and alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism.¹⁰⁸ Our respondents' view of the causes behind increased violence resonate with research into drivers of gender-based violence globally. Periods of drastic change and crises (e.g. the stress over economic hardship) can undermine abuser's sense of control, who may seek to re-assert power over aspects of their lives they can affect directly, in this case by perpetrating violence against partners and/or children (Weil, 2020; Sheppard, 2021). Women, girls and boys in Cauca and Catatumbo were suffering more frequent instances of sexual violence at home during the pandemic, in our participants' experience.¹⁰⁹ In addition, it is concerning that these cases appear to be severely underreported, because of difficulty reaching institutions who offer support for victims.¹¹⁰

The increase of violence against women and children alone is a serious impact of the pandemic. However, in the communities we studied, it is also connected to wider dynamics of armed conflict. As a consequence of family disputes and violence, many victims abandon their home.¹¹¹ These tensions and increased vulnerability are seen by respondents in our workshops as feeding recruitment into illegal armed groups and pushing minors and young people towards illicit crops.¹¹² For young women, being forced to marry, having to assume traditional gender roles, and suffering sexual violence are all drivers of recruitment into illegal armed groups.¹¹³ As this participant in a workshop in Patía describes:

Y *“Young women see armed groups as an option to free themselves from paternal or maternal care, because sometimes it is mothers who are most violent against them. This did not start during the pandemic, but lockdown and intra-family violence worsened these situations.”¹¹⁴*

107 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo;

108 W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

109 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca

110 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca

111 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

112 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca;

113 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

114 W21 - Mixed, Cauca



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

A weakened and more vulnerable civil society

In the areas we studied in Cauca and Catatumbo, civil society organizations and social leaders play critical functions to attempt to compensate for the state's uneven presence, to support victims of human rights violations, and as grassroots peacebuilders. During the pandemic, these community-based organizations, victims groups and growers associations have seen their capacity severely diminished. Even if in some areas community groups have been key players in the containment of the virus, those activities often caused further friction with their neighbors and even illegal armed groups.

Many community members described how in their area, it was neighbors who took on the control of the pandemic. In areas where this was the case, communities organized roadblocks to prevent outsiders from entering and insiders from exiting. These initiatives were undertaken mostly on community's own accord, often drawing on previous networks and organization experience, such as community committees or JACs (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*), grassroots organizations, indigenous groups or even campesino groups.¹¹⁵ However, the restrictions were not always popular and caused friction between neighbors, because they impacted their ability to work and trade,¹¹⁶ or because they restricted the capacity of other social leaders to verify violations of human rights and play their organizing roles.¹¹⁷ Similarly, frequently, illegal armed groups tolerated or actively supported these efforts by communities,¹¹⁸ but they also became a source of conflict where they were perceived as obstacles to transport supplies and inputs for the drug trade.¹¹⁹ Altogether, grassroots COVID-19 mitigation lost strength after a few months, as the effort was difficult to sustain by the few engaged neighbors or because municipal governments demanded that communities desist from imposing restrictions above those legally enacted by the state.¹²⁰

115 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 16 - Female expert, Cauca; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca

116 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca

117 111 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

118 120 - Male expert, Cauca; 112 - Female expert, Catatumbo; 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 122 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

119 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 124 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

120 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 16 - Female expert, Cauca; 116 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; 121 - Male expert, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; 115 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

More generally, however, civil society groups and their constituents have been largely unable to gather because of movement restrictions imposed by the state, illegal armed groups or their neighbors.¹²¹ Social organizations have lost impact in spaces like the *Comité Territorial de Justicia Transicional (CTJT)* or *Mesas de Víctimas del Municipio*.¹²² These spaces are important platforms for participation and advocacy around peace process activities and on behalf of the population of victims. Virtual platforms have not been effective means to coordinate and get grassroots participation in political processes.¹²³ The restrictions on movement have also greatly diminished the role that civil society played verifying violations of human rights and accompanying their victims.¹²⁴

This decreased role of civil society is compounded by the increasing levels of violence that social leaders have suffered. This trend pre-dates the pandemic but has continued or even has grown in Cauca and Catatumbo.¹²⁵ The greater presence of illegal armed groups made it riskier for civil society organizations to verify or report human rights violations.¹²⁶ Many leaders are desisting from these roles, faced with growing insecurity, or are having to resort to displacement to safeguard their integrity.¹²⁷ In part, research participants see this heightened risk for social leaders as a consequence of decreased state support, security presence and diminishing protection.¹²⁸ But other drivers appear to be that during periods of lockdown and movement restrictions leaders could not have the backing and protection of neighbors.¹²⁹ The trend of both increasing victimization of social leaders and decreased cohesion of social organizations is a cause of concern to most of our respondents. Leaders play a crucial role in local development, facilitating and/or demanding access to state-run programs and services (including those stemming from the peace process), and they are crucial advocates for the rights of victimized community members. Grassroots leaders also have an important protective impact as they have the legitimacy to mediate between communities and illegal armed groups, which helps avoid violent escalations against civilians (Alther, 2006; Kaplan, 2017).¹³⁰



Blue Sky/Shutterstock

121 I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca

122 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

123 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca;

124 I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca

125 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca

126 W20 - Mixed, Cauca

127 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

128 6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca;

129 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo

130 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

Pathway 3: Economic hardship and illicit economies

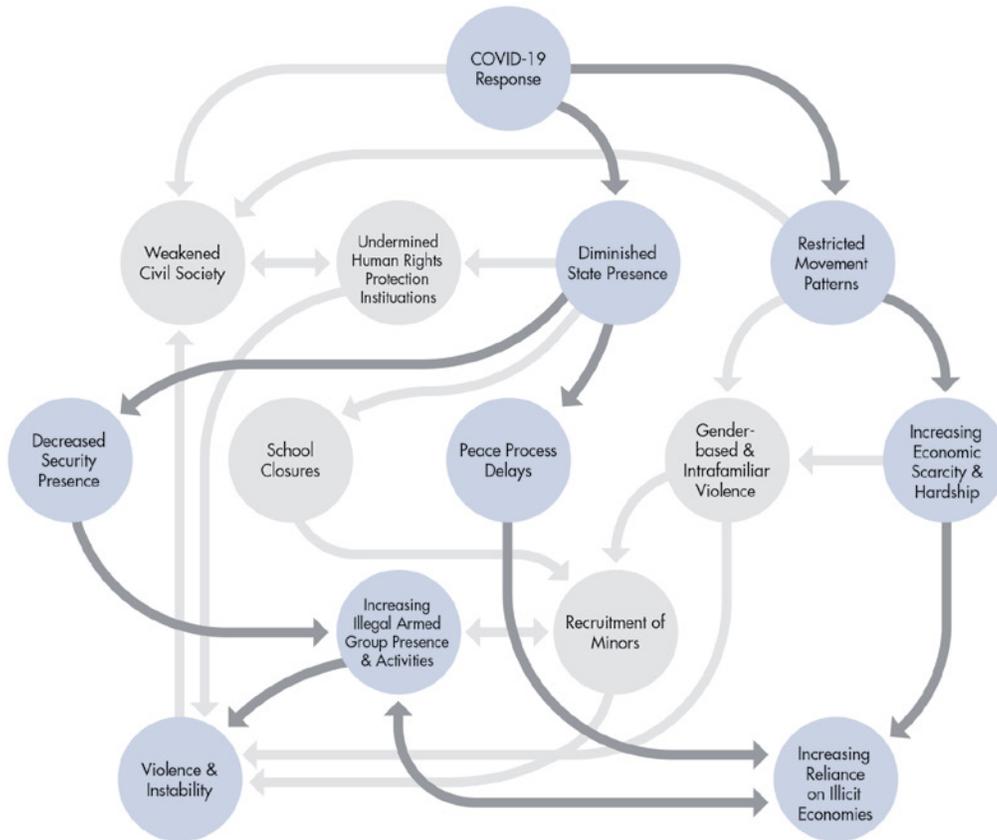


Figure 4. System map linking COVID-19 and Conflict drivers. In red, Pathway 3 factors.

The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing insecurity through its impact on economic hardship and illicit economies. The advent of COVID-19 responses without remedial support has exacerbated socio-economic vulnerabilities. Concretely, an unemployment crisis in urban areas and increasing difficulties for Colombians depending on agricultural livelihoods have cornered many into economies that went largely without disruption from COVID-19 responses. In rural Cauca and Catatumbo, this meant mostly a growing reliance on illicit crops, predominantly coca.

COVID-19 responses and economic hardship

As has been the case globally, lockdowns, movement restrictions and limitations on businesses and trading have caused a severe economic crisis in Colombia. Participants in our study described how restrictions have brought with them the bankruptcy of numerous businesses, major increases in unemployment and generalized losses of income even for those still employed.¹³¹ Nationally, 73% of households were reporting losses of income in August 2020 (Warren et al., 2020b, p. 56). The impacts have been widespread, and have affected both the formal and informal economy.¹³² However, informal livelihoods were hit particularly hard. In surveys conducted in mid-May 2020, 49% of workers in formal employment reported having worked in the previous week, while that figure decreased to 26% for Colombians in informal jobs (Warren

131 I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo
132 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

et al., 2020a, p. 31). The disruption of state-run programs also fed the unemployment crisis further, as opportunities for public employment or via international cooperation halted.¹³³

The economic impacts of the pandemic were compounded by ongoing difficulties brought by the mass displacement of vulnerable Venezuelan refugees into already precarious economies. Ongoing economic vulnerability has fueled tension between hosts and Venezuelans over scarce resources. Participants in our research expressed sympathy for the plight of Venezuelans, but were also concerned that their arrival was making employment opportunities scarcer and overwhelming public services.¹³⁴ The fact that there is greater supply of labor and that, being more vulnerable, Venezuelans are willing to work for less is seen as a driver for decreasing salaries.¹³⁵ Venezuelans were overwhelmingly seeking income through informal livelihoods, increasing competition in a reduced market for those Colombians who also rely on the informal sector.¹³⁶ While these dynamics pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents in Santander de Quilichao and Sardinata, for instance, explained that with increased movement restrictions, Venezuelans who would have otherwise moved onwards to other urban centers or even countries, have been forced to stay put in their communities.¹³⁷

There are important differences in the economic impacts of the pandemic in urban and rural settings in the regions we researched. Overall, extreme poverty in Colombia has gone up by 3.2 percentage points (reaching 12.8% of the population in 2020), while poverty grew 6.9 points in one year (to 42.6% of the population) (DANE, 2021, p. 6). However, our participants perceive that unemployment did not increase as markedly in rural areas, where COVID-19 restrictions were reported to be less strict.¹³⁸ In contrast, the consequences of the crisis are so dire in urban centers that many participants described how patterns of internal migration had begun to shift, at least temporarily. Many rural households had settled in urban centers and gained employment in towns and cities prior to the pandemic. With the advent of mass unemployment, many of those urban dwellers began to return to their villages of origin, where family support networks and the lower living costs could see them through the crisis.¹³⁹ This return from urban to rural areas has been an important coping mechanism, but in the medium term it further strains these local economies, which were fragile enough in the first place to push many to migrate to cities.

In rural areas, licit agricultural livelihoods were severely disrupted. Movement restrictions implemented by the state, community members and/or illegal armed groups made it increasingly difficult for producers to reach markets.¹⁴⁰ Across the country, 49% of households that rely on agriculture declared in May 2020 having to change their operations because of challenges transporting and selling their produce (Warren et al., 2020a, p. 31). Restrictions also affected the support available to make licit crops viable. Respondents in Tibú and Patía, for instance, described how technical support for growers provided by state officials and NGO workers decreased.¹⁴¹ In El Carmen, community members felt that a crucial difficulty was that the state's Agrarian Bank stopped outreach to help growers in remote communities access flexible credit lines.¹⁴²

This economic crisis has made it increasingly difficult to meet basic needs. In some instances economic hardship has led to worsened food security, and many families are increasingly resorting to making their children work and contribute to meet basic needs.¹⁴³ In May 2020, 40% of households in a national survey declared having to reduce their number of meals in the previous week (Warren et al., 2020a, p. 16). To cope with the economic crisis, many Colombians and Venezuelans have resorted to illicit economies, which offer ample opportunities in both Cauca and Catatumbo. An interviewee from Balboa described the economic crisis and its links to illicit crops this way:

133 W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca/ W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca

134 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca;

135 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca;

136 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo

137 W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo

138 W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca

139 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca;

140 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

141 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

142 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

143 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo;

”When a community has its licit crop like plantain, yuca, cocoa, coffee and you see that it is not working out because of lockdown, that you cannot sell your products, well, you have to look for other ways.”¹⁴⁴

Growing reliance on illicit economies

After years of increases in the number of hectares dedicated to illicit crops, Colombia had started to see a decrease at a national level (UNODC & SIMCI, 2020, p. 15). Since 2017, it appeared the country was turning a corner thanks to the demobilization of the FARC and the promise of rural reform, especially via the PNIS crop substitution scheme. The decrease was not even, however, and both Catatumbo and Cauca had seen increases in the total area cultivated with illicit crops already in 2019 (UNODC & SIMCI, 2020). The impacts of responses to the pandemic have further deepened this pre-existing trend. There is a generalized sense in all our research areas that faced with diminished state capacity, increased presence of illegal armed groups, and most importantly a major economic crisis, illicit crop cultivation has accelerated rapidly. For instance, a respondent from Buenos Aires told us: “before, there wasn’t as much coca growing as there is now, before there was no leaf washing in the region and now there is, this has brought more threats [from illegal armed groups].”¹⁴⁵

For research participants, following the advent of the pandemic, illicit crops filled an employment gap that neither the informal or formal economy could.¹⁴⁶ People turned either towards cultivation or processing of coca leaf, because its value and potential earnings remained stable despite the economic crisis.¹⁴⁷ It is an economy that has not suffered disruptions because of COVID-19 restrictions and still has a viable outlet as illegal armed groups constitute accessible buyers.¹⁴⁸ A resident in Teorama explained: “[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.”¹⁴⁹ Given the relative certainty and stability of illicit crops amidst a pandemic-fueled crisis, our respondents consider that it attracted numerous Colombians, but especially groups that are most vulnerable: youth and Venezuelans.¹⁵⁰ In fact, several of our participants see coca growing and processing as the reason many urban dwellers had returned to rural areas seeking a livelihood option during the crisis.¹⁵¹

144 I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

145 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

146 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo/ I25 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

147 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo

148 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

149 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

150 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

151 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca;



Alan Grundy/Mercy Corps

The growth of coca and other illicit crops is diminishing further the viability of licit crops, establishing a dangerous causal loop that can continue pushing growers towards the illicit economy. The more prominent these crops are, the greater the incentives to abandon food crops — indirectly impacting food security in remote areas.¹⁵² Coca, being more profitable, is seen by respondents in our study as increasing the price of land, rendering access more difficult for licit growers with lower earnings.¹⁵³ Coca also has a substantial impact on the availability and cost of labor for other crops. Coca picking pays higher rates generally, and so daily laborers desist from working in licit fields or demand much higher wages.¹⁵⁴ A civil society leader from Popayán expressed it cogently:

› *“If you need wage laborers to pick corn in any area, or other subsistence crops, people will not go, because they do better picking coca leaf. They earn between 80,000 and 120,000 [COP (21.9 – 32.8 USD)] daily and if they pick coffee they will only earn between 25,000 and 30,000 per day [6.8 – 8.2 USD]. So this complicates the situation.”¹⁵⁵*

The growing reliance on illicit crops is also interconnected with the pathway that links state presence, illegal armed groups and insecurity. Diminished presence from security forces and fewer eradication operations have also made coca and other illicit crops a safer alternative to generate income both for growers and for illegal armed groups during the pandemic.¹⁵⁶ The resurgence of illicit crops is also worsened by the slow implementation of the PNIS substitution program, described above, which pushed some families who had voluntarily eradicated their coca fields to re-sow.¹⁵⁷ Emboldened illegal armed groups are also crucial in fuelling the shift towards illicit crops. These actors offer incentives in some cases; as a workshop participant in Tibú stated, they even provide credit to growers to start coca crops.¹⁵⁸ However, more frequently, respondents indicated that illegal armed groups seek to increase

152 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

153 W19 - Mixed, Cauca

154 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

155 I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

156 I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

157 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

158 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo

cultivation through threats and coercion.¹⁵⁹ Illegal armed groups also use violence to retaliate against those who refuse to turn to illicit crops or against community leaders, who play a crucial role in supporting peers to access support for licit options and/or the PNIS substitution program.¹⁶⁰

The link between increased illicit crops and conflict was evident for research participants in the analysis of their communities. The potential for profits from illicit crops attracts illegal armed groups and fuels competition, as it is a key source of financing (both from the proceeds of the drug trade and from taxation/extortion of growers).¹⁶¹ This reliance on illicit crops also antagonizes the relationship with the state, which sees coca as a problem while many Colombians see it as their only lifeline.¹⁶² Having to remain at the margins of the state makes communities reliant on illegal armed groups for any other issues they face, as this respondent from Argelia explained:

› *“When one is used to a culture where there is always someone armed who is going to solve one’s problem and who will not interfere with one’s daily bread, which is coca, then one approaches whatever armed groups there are. Because in a way they exert control. In contrast, if public security forces come in, people know they will eradicate, they will take coca, paste, whatever has been produced. There will be arrests, so for them public forces are a threat, because people make a living out of this.”¹⁶³*



Mercy Corps

The growth in illicit activities is not constrained solely to crops. Although not as prominent in research participants’ analysis of conflict drivers in their communities, the period of the pandemic has brought about increases in common criminality (mostly robberies).¹⁶⁴ This increase in crime is largely an urban phenomenon in both Catatumbo and Cauca.¹⁶⁵ Notably, it is happening, for instance, in areas of El Carmen and Teorama, where respondents describe these forms of criminality were not common before.¹⁶⁶ In general, respondents who describe these increases ascribe the trend to the increased economic hardship that has resulted from responses to the pandemic.¹⁶⁷ Frequently, community members also understood these increases in criminality to be closely associated with Venezuelans, who in response to significant vulnerability are forced to cope by engaging in robbery.¹⁶⁸ While it may be plausible that their vulnerable status is pushing refugees disproportionately to these forms of petty criminality, it is an assessment that is hard to make from our data. However, what is perhaps more important is that, regardless of the veracity of the claim that insecurity is driven mostly by Venezuelans, the fact that this perception is held by many host community members is fueling discrimination and tensions against refugees, at times even escalating into violence.

159 W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

160 W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

161 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

162 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

163 I6 - Female expert, Cauca

164 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

165 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo;

166 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

167 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

168 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Colombia faced difficult choices because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally and in Colombia, rapid and stringent measures saved thousands of lives. The Colombian government acted quickly and imposed severe restrictions, which lasted for months. It is not within the scope or aim of this case study to assess the epidemiological appropriateness of the measures taken. However, our research indicates clearly that the COVID-19 containment strategy had significant secondary impacts on the country's conflict dynamics. Colombia showcases how, without adequate mitigation, measures enacted to contain COVID-19 (however necessary and lifesaving) can deepen conflict risks and drivers of instability. With no clear end to the pandemic on the horizon, it is important to mitigate further impacts, while also monitoring early warnings of future instability and violence. The pandemic is far from over and the consequences identified in our data are likely to have their most serious impact in the medium and long term.



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Our findings have the following policy implications:

1. COVID-19 containment had a serious impact on state capacity, and the most dire consequences were borne by vulnerable communities in conflict-affected areas:
 - › The restrictions imposed by the state have impaired its ability to fulfil core functions, like providing security, protecting human rights, ensuring the right to education for all, or implementing the long-awaited peace process.
 - › Without a solid state presence, illegal armed groups have been able to step up their operations, presence, control, and influence over civilians.
 - › With diminished security presence, emboldened illegal armed groups and lost educational protective spaces, youth have become increasingly vulnerable to recruitment.

Broadening access to state services and ensuring an integral presence across Colombia has been a historical challenge, but it has never been more urgent. Many communities in Cauca and Catatumbo have been left to cope with a deadly pandemic in a dangerous crossfire, compounding decades of mistrust in the state's ability to ensure their rights in an integral manner. Restoring youth's right to education, their prospects for a dignified future, and reintegrating those traumatized by having to participate in illegal armed groups should be an urgent priority. More broadly, restoring access to state services must not be understood as a return to the status quo, but rather a decided push to address drivers of conflict and historical inequities.

2. The pandemic-induced transformation of social interaction patterns has weakened an already vulnerable civil society, and has made women and children particularly vulnerable to diverse patterns of abuse and violence:
 - › Because of stresses linked to mandatory lockdown, increased economic hardship, and an increase in substance abuse to cope, women, girls and boys have become more vulnerable to varying types of violence at home.

- › Faced by a lack of alternatives, many young people saw abandoning their homes as the only viable coping mechanism, making them increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by illegal armed groups or becoming involved in illicit economies.
- › Social leaders and civil society groups have struggled to sustain their activities, impacting grassroots human rights monitoring and protection work.
- › Without support from the state, their peers, and their neighbours, local social leaders have become easier targets for increasingly present illegal armed groups.

The loss of protection mechanisms for women, youth and civil society requires urgent action. As women and girls continue to be especially vulnerable to violence, deconstructing toxic gender norms and protecting the growing number of victims of abuse should be at the forefront of efforts to build peace in Colombia. Civil society leaders are crucial in their communities' development, advocating for their rights, furthering social cohesion, and also building trust in existing state programs and initiatives. For too long, they have been exposed to violence for their role advancing human rights, peacebuilding and licit livelihood alternatives, and the pandemic has made them increasingly vulnerable. Despite challenges to grassroots social mobilization, conflict-affected communities were able to draw on previous networks and experience of organization to contribute to the containment of the pandemic locally. The arbitrariness and lack of legal mandate for informal COVID-19 containment caused conflict among neighbours in some instances. However, with the right support from municipal, departmental or central authorities, these grassroots forms of organization could be crucial to respond to future public health crises and even to support ongoing COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

3. The economic shock that followed lockdown and movement restrictions has severely exacerbated economic hardship, fuelling drivers of insecurity:
 - › The lack of alternatives and growing economic need has increasingly pushed Colombian families into the vicious cycle of relying on illicit crops.
 - › With the consolidation of illicit crops in Cauca and Catatumbo, by-products are the strengthening of illegal armed groups, and alienating communities further from the state, which becomes a threat to their livelihood.

The impacts of the severe economic crisis are likely to be drawn out and to continue pushing Colombians (and Venezuelans in Colombia) into stark choices if viable and licit livelihood opportunities are not available to them. For those already dependent on illicit economies, the country's recent history evidences how painstaking the shift to licit livelihoods can be. Given a growing sense of abandonment and grievance towards the state, tackling illicit economies will require a rights-based and consensus-centered approach to avoid the violence and conflict that can ensue from forced eradication (manual or aerial). Reigniting PNIS decisively would be a start, but ambitious rural reform (as highlighted in the peace process) must follow.

The findings in this report highlight that integrating a conflict-sensitive approach into the response to the COVID-19 pandemic (and any future pandemics) is critical. States must consider the differentiated impacts that measures such as lockdowns, social distancing and movement restrictions will have in conflict-affected areas and diverse conflict actors, so that mitigating measures can be taken in parallel. Public health responses cannot be disassociated from responding to existing challenges and drivers of insecurity. Colombia starkly demonstrates that conflict and drivers of instability are not immune to pandemics; bold and holistic responses are necessary to prevent one crisis from feeding the other.

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Where possible, we sourced photos depicting life during the COVID-19 pandemic period in the areas of Colombia that are the focus of this study: Cauca and Catatumbo. Many of the images in this chapter are from other parts of the country and/or from the years preceding the pandemic, but were chosen to help illustrate the broader themes, ideas, and places described by the individuals who participated in our research.



AN UNSUNG CRISIS

**How the COVID-19
Pandemic is Shaping
Conflict in
Afghanistan**

Key Findings and Implications

Drawing on workshops and interviews with more than 200 participants across 8 districts in 4 provinces, we find:

- › COVID-19 and response measures, including early lockdown measures, border closures, pandemic relief programs, and how communities related to the virus, impacted conflict systems in Afghanistan. More specifically, the pandemic has shaped drivers of conflict and violence through four pathways:
 - COVID-19 regulations heightened economic hardship and insecurity.
 - COVID-19 responses shaped resource competition within and between communities and aggravated state-society grievances.
 - Communities' varying knowledge, attitude, and practices related to COVID-19 diminished social cohesion.
 - COVID-19 responses — and the household conditions they created — hampered women's rights and exacerbated gender-based violence.

These findings have important policy implications, particularly the need to prioritize:

- › A comprehensive economic support package to counter the negative effects of public health measures and restrictions with a focus on development, in particular a livelihood response as well as a humanitarian one;
- › International diplomatic pressure to maintain open borders for trade — i.e. COVID Safe border crossings for goods;
- › Diplomatic action for protection of migrant workers, including engagement with key countries such as Iran and Pakistan, to work towards — at a minimum — cooperation to prepare for and mitigate as far as possible the economic and social shocks of migrant returns to their communities;
- › Redoubling support for economic development, especially in the agricultural sector, in rural areas to lessen the impact of reverse migration to rural areas;
- › International assistance and effective means to provide income protection and a social safety net to stymie crime and AOG recruitment;
- › Mechanisms to target and distribute aid to prevent breakdown in social cohesion and to reduce clientelism, which hampers communities' trust in the GOA and worsens conflict risks;
- › Greater COVID relief and policy reforms to focus on addressing the economic and social impacts of COVID-19.



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Afghanistan



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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic first emerged in Afghanistan in late February of 2020, when the first confirmed case was identified in Herat city (Ruttig, 2020). As of 27 May, 2021 the World Health Organization had confirmed 68,366 cases and 2,869 deaths from COVID-19 (WHO, 2021). However, the true public health impact of COVID-19 in the country has been difficult to measure, given limitations in testing capacity, a health sector weakened by decades of conflict and instability, and other constraints. Official statistics are thought to considerably underestimate the reality of COVID-19's spread (UNOCHA, 2021), with some estimates indicated that millions of Afghans have been infected, with a likely death toll in the hundreds of thousands — a figure “well exceeding total deaths of both combatants and civilians since 2001,” (Byrd, 2020)

Afghanistan's COVID-19 response has varied across the country and over time. In the first quarter of 2020, the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) introduced a series of mitigation measures in response to emerging cases and concerns over the potential impact of the virus. President Ghani issued a decree instructing the population to avoid large crowds, and the Ministry of Interior Affairs banned large gatherings, sporting and entertainment events (Basij Rasikh et al., 2020). In late March 2020, the Government imposed a countrywide lockdown, which was extended twice (IMF, 2021).



Gabrielle Aron and Michael Fane served as the lead authors for this chapter.



Mercy Corps

In practice, however, restrictions and enforcement varied by province and in rural versus urban areas, with most of the strictest measures being issued by provincial authorities (Ruttig, 2020). Lockdown measures were progressively eased from May 2020, however, having failed to contain the outbreak while generating significant economic consequences (IMF, 2021). Temporary border closures with Iran and Pakistan were announced in February and March 2020, respectively, and Uzbekistan closed its border with Afghanistan for the movement of persons on 23 March, 2020. Since that time, however, borders with neighboring countries have been closed and re-opened several times, and with differing restrictions in terms of the movements of goods versus people (Ruttig, 2020).

Despite these concerns, the pandemic has been largely eclipsed in the country's political discourse by a parallel escalation in armed conflict and heightened risks of political instability. In the same month that Afghanistan identified its first case of COVID-19, the United States (US) signed a landmark agreement with the Taliban and began to signal plans to draw down US troop presence. The following months were marked by tense preparations and subsequent negotiations within the framework of the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks. Despite these measures, armed conflict and offensives by Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) increased throughout the majority of the pandemic period (SIGAR, 2021).

The pandemic had limited impact on these macro conflict developments, as it "unfortunately has not resulted in greater political unity in Afghanistan: neither across the Taliban/non-Taliban divide, nor among the various non-Taliban political groupings for whom working together would manifestly be in their collective interest — not least in presenting a united front in peace negotiations," (Byrd, 2020). However, Afghanistan is plagued by multiple dimensions of conflict and violence at many levels. Communities across Afghanistan face numerous manifestations of armed conflict, resource conflict, identity-based conflict, and gender-based and criminal violence, among others. The impacts of the pandemic on conflict and violence as experienced by Afghanistan's communities has not received sufficient focus to date, given the complexities of the context and the dominance of macro political and armed conflict developments in discourse.

This study aims to fill that gap, recognizing both that conflict dynamics are inevitably impacted by the entry of new factors into a conflict system, and that the pandemic has been shown to exacerbate economic, social and governance drivers of conflict in many contexts around the world. Furthermore, Afghanistan is thought to have suffered a "deadly and mostly

silent pandemic wave” through the summer of 2020, and an increasing prevalence of new variants and positive cases in recent weeks threaten to replicate a similar or potentially worse situation through the summer of 2021 (Mehrddad, 2021). Understanding the intersection of the pandemic and conflict dynamics in Afghanistan is therefore an essential foundation for anticipating and mitigating future risks to the country’s health, economy, and stability.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is grounded in systems analysis, an approach which views conflict as a dynamic system of causally interconnected factors (CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2017). Systems analysis facilitates an understanding of how myriad factors present within a conflict environment exert influence on the conflict, through both direct and indirect channels of impact.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be understood as having entered a set of new factors into Afghanistan’s complex conflict system. The systems analytical framework for this study therefore seeks to investigate the linkages between the pandemic and violence and conflict in Afghanistan and to highlight lower-visibility pathways of impact that may nonetheless be playing a role in shaping conflict outcomes.

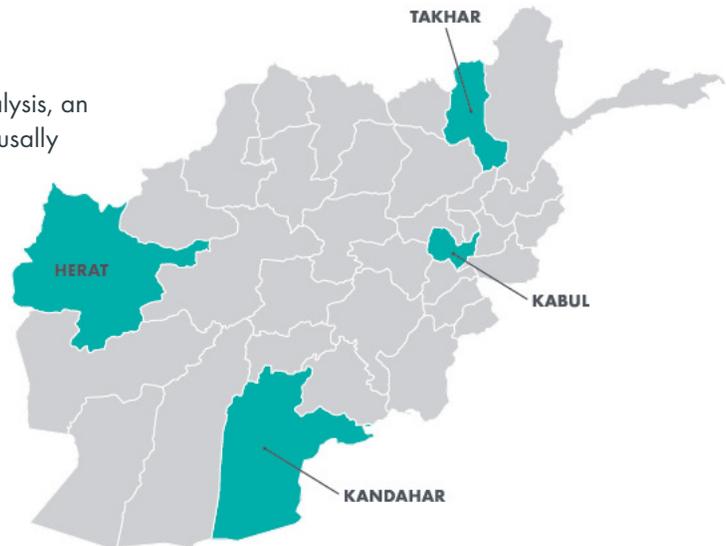


Figure 1. Location of Sampled Provinces in Afghanistan

Data for this study was collected between February and April 2021, roughly one year after the pandemic first emerged within Afghanistan. The timing of the data collection has implications for the findings of the study, as the participants were able to describe the evolution of their community’s experiences over time. This enabled participants to discuss impacts during specific stages of the pandemic, for example during lockdown, as well as to highlight which of the pandemic’s consequences continue to impact communities today.

Targeting for this study was designed to collect diverse perspectives, and participants spanned a wide range of identity groups including majority and minority ethnic and tribal groups and religious sects. Data was collected across 8 districts in 4 provinces: Kabul, Herat, Takhar and Kandahar, and covered both rural and urban areas in each province. More than 200 people participated in participatory systems mapping workshops or Key Informant Interviews, with participation split equally across men and women.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the experiences of communities during the pandemic, and therefore gives limited attention to macro-level political developments and dynamics. Additionally, given insecurity and access constraints, it is important to note that data for this study was collected solely in Government-controlled and contested areas. The findings therefore cannot speak to dynamics related to the pandemic, violence and conflict in areas administered by AOGs. Further, given Afghanistan’s complexity and the scope of the study, the findings should be interpreted as indicative, and as an impetus for further research and investigation. The study is not intended as a comprehensive national conflict analysis, but rather focuses on illuminating the intersections of the pandemic with violence and conflict as experienced by communities in the target areas.

Enduring economic consequences stemming from lockdown measures and border closures in 2020 were raised more frequently than any other issue across all demographic and geographic groups participating in the study. Furthermore, these economic consequences were linked to a wide range of tertiary impacts, including shifts in or escalation of local conflict dynamics. Reported increases by study participants in conflict and violence at the local level stemming from pandemic-related economic deprivation manifested primarily in two forms: increases in violent crime, and shifting modalities in AOG recruitment linked to financial incentives. Collectively, these facilitated increasing AOG influence and insecurity at the local level during a time of AOG expansion and escalating armed conflict. The first pathway of impact therefore sets out the linkages between key COVID-19 regulations, their associated economic consequences, and tertiary impacts on conflict and violence.

Economic Consequences of COVID-19 Regulations

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed the Afghan economy's 3% growth from the prior year and contributed to an economic contraction estimated at 5% of GDP (SIGAR, 2021). The lockdowns and border closures adversely impacted the industry and service sectors, which contracted 4.2% and 4.8%, respectively. Agricultural processing and trade were also severely impacted, with trade in goods falling by 23.6% (y-o-y) by the end of June 2020. Exports continued to contract in the second half of 2020, despite the relaxation of lockdown measures and border closures (World Bank Group, 2021). As of September 2020, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had estimated that the pandemic contributed to a 17% increase in poverty compared to pre-pandemic levels (UNDP, 2021a).

Despite the varied and time-limited application of lockdown and border closures, a number of damaging impacts on local economies quickly came to fruition, many of which have had lasting impacts. These fall generally into three categories: (1) Impacts on income and employment; (2) Impacts on trade, market prices and purchasing power; and (3) Impacts on migration and remittances.

First, respondents from a strong majority of KIs and workshops conducted cited both increased unemployment and increased poverty as a consequence of the pandemic, largely due to lockdown and border closures. Nearly all cited decreased employment, income and livelihoods opportunities. These factors were present across all 4 provinces and 8 districts covered in the study. Where cited, figures for the increase in the rate of unemployment and decrease in income since the start of the pandemic were significant. While these figures are self-reported and must be assessed with the appropriate caveats, they must also be considered within the context of high levels of pre-existing economic vulnerability across Afghanistan.

› *“Before COVID-19, people could go to the streets and work to earn at least 50 AFN; however, things have changed now and they cannot earn even that amount of money. Every day, the situation is getting worse. Unemployment has reached its peak since the pandemic started. Most of our people are unemployed and this has caused a lot of misery in our society.”¹*

Unemployment and poverty were often described as having reached levels never previously encountered in the target communities. While some communities noted disproportionate adverse impacts on daily wage workers, youth, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, or those who had lived furthest below the poverty line prior to the pandemic, others observed a broad pattern of increased unemployment across socioeconomic classes and education levels. Irrespective of the dynamics of relative deprivation, however, discussions of increased unemployment were often accompanied by narratives of unparalleled desperation. This was perceived as having forced segments of the community to make survival-based decisions that led to harmful coping mechanisms which diverged from prior practice. These coping mechanisms were the driver of many of the tertiary impacts on violence and insecurity discussed later in this section.

¹ W16 – Male, Kabul.

› *“In the past, people could at least find a job and work to earn some amount of money, like me through teaching. However, last year, we received no salary through which we could help the poor; we could not even solve our own problems. The same thing happened to other people, since they got unemployed, too...Some men were daily wage laborers, but they have been jobless for one year. Also, a number of people received a regular salary, but they are jobless now. Thus, they cannot afford to provide livelihoods for their families, and the reason for their unemployment is the Coronavirus.”²*

Secondly, disruptions to trade and price stability contributed to this economic condition. Border closures interrupted the flow of imports and exports, resulting in a range of shifts in the availability, quality and relative value of domestic versus imported goods. In combination with market closures and movement restrictions resulting from lockdown, several interviewees also noted issues of unsold stock for farmers and traders, caused by disruptions to cross-border trade, lack of cold storage to preserve agricultural products, market closures and/or price instability. This contributed to specific economic vulnerabilities for these groups stemming from these restrictions. Beyond the increase in unemployment and decrease in income, however, price hikes were the most pressing and widely discussed economic consequence of COVID-19 regulations.



Michal Knitl/Shutterstock

Respondents in more than half of the KIIs and workshops conducted observed price increases for basic commodities such as food and housing, with many citing specific examples which demonstrated a pattern of dramatic shifts. Anecdotal information provided by participants about price changes typically surpassed the World Bank’s estimate of a 10% increase in food price on average during the pandemic (World Bank Group, 2021). The same assessment indicated a degree of price normalization in the second half of 2020, while participants indicated that prices remained substantially elevated in 2021, when data for the study was collected. Narratives around price hikes were present in all provinces and in 7 of the 8 districts targeted; however, the issue was most prominently raised among participants in Takhar.

› *“Because the COVID-19 pandemic caused the prices of the items to be doubled, poverty and unemployment in the community eventually caused insecurity in the community. In general, all the items’ prices increased. For instance, a bottle of cooking oil was 500 AFN, but right now its price has increased to 1200 AFN.”³*

² I25 – Female, Herat.
³ I45 – Male, Takhar.



Jono Photography/Shutterstock

It is worth noting that many attributed price increases not only to border closures and trade disruptions, but to opportunism by traders and shop owners who took advantage of market closures and price instability to hoard or otherwise manipulate prices for personal gain. This was a source of grievance not only among communities, but towards the government; a number of respondents in Kabul city and across rural and urban areas of Kandahar and Takhar expressed anger and disappointment over the government's lack of price regulation during the pandemic. Mentions of price hikes, lack of market regulation and inability to afford basic commodities were more likely to be associated with increased grievances towards the government than mentions of increased unemployment or poverty. This may point to a perception that price hikes were a less inevitable consequence of the pandemic which added an unnecessary layer of strain within an already-desperate economic landscape.

» *“There has been an increase in goods prices but because there were not standard quotations for vendors, vendors and all sellers have sold things at higher prices. Unfortunately, the government and Kabul municipality did not take action against this issue. Food and other prices doubled during the pandemic. For instance, the price of a sack of flour before the pandemic was 1700 AFN while during the pandemic it was sold at 3000 AFN. Meanwhile, no action has been taken regarding this issue by the government or municipality.”⁴*

Third, increased unemployment and inability to afford basic needs each contributed to changes in migration patterns, both within Afghanistan and across borders with neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. Economic crisis and deportations of Afghan migrant workers from Iran and neighboring countries led to an influx of returnees, who arrived in border areas and dispersed throughout the country. 2020 was the largest return year on record, with 865,793 total returns from Iran and Pakistan (IOM Afghanistan, 2020). This trend has been sustained in early 2021, with an additional 368,415 returning between January and April 2021 alone. IOM has noted dramatic increases in returnee vulnerability due to economic conditions in both Iran and Afghanistan (IOM Afghanistan, 2021).

4 W15 – Female, Kabul.



Colin Spurway/Mercy Corps

Among participants, there were significant geographic divergences regarding observations of increased returnee presence. This issue was highly prominent in Herat, where the vast majority of respondents observed increased returnee presence, followed by Kandahar with just over half. Both of these provinces experienced high increases in returnee presence. Interestingly, despite substantial returnee increases in urban areas of Kabul, during the study there were virtually no mentions of increased returnee presence in rural or urban areas of Kabul. This may be due to lower salience of host-returnee dynamics within the complex socio-economic landscape of the nation's capital; however, further study would be needed to understand these dynamics.

》 *“It should also be mentioned that many people have left here and moved to the northern provinces such as Parwan, Kapisa, and Panjshir. First of all, they thought that the disease has not spread in the provinces and there would be no lockdown. The second reason was poverty. Since everything was expensive here, they moved to the provinces so that they could work on the farmlands and earn money. The third reason was the rent of houses. They moved to their homelands because they had their own houses there.”⁵*

COVID-19 regulations changed not only the presence of returnees, but also the economic vulnerabilities of returnees, their families, and in some cases the broader host communities. Lockdowns in Iran and Pakistan and the expulsion of Afghan migrant workers compounded the economic downturn in Afghanistan due to the pandemic. The remittances provided by many returnees had been a key income stream for their families in Afghanistan prior to the pandemic and was substantially curtailed by the pandemic, with UNDP estimating a nearly 16% reduction in remittances to Afghanistan from 2019 to 2020 (UNDP, 2021b).

5 19 – Female, Kabul.

Unemployment among Afghan migrant workers and the subsequent cessation of remittances removed a critical source of income for the families of Afghan migrant workers, at the same moment when sharp increases in unemployment were beginning within Afghanistan. Many Afghan migrant workers then returned to their families in Afghanistan, where their role was transformed from that of a provider to a drain on families' rapidly dwindling resources. Beyond returnees, the border closures also removed migrant work as a coping strategy for the broader population, resulting in an increase in unemployed and disillusioned youth in particular.

› *“Before COVID-19, the people of this village were working in foreign countries, including Iran, Turkey, etc., to provide their essential expenses. But upon the spread of COVID-19, everyone has been quarantined, including the people who were working in foreign countries, and the unemployment rates have increased. When the borders closed, the people couldn't go to other countries to work, and border restrictions have increased unemployment in this area.”⁶*

Participants in Herat and Kandahar also observed changes in internal migration and displacement, though to a far lesser extent than cross-border migration. Though much of the internal population movements during the pandemic period can be attributed to insecurity stemming from political and armed conflict developments unrelated to the spread of COVID-19, several dynamics specific to the pandemic emerged. The traditional incentive structure for rural to urban migration as an economic coping mechanism appears to have been somewhat reversed, as health and economic divergences emerged early on between rural and urban areas.

Initial COVID-19 outbreaks and stricter lockdowns in cities reportedly led to incidences of urban to rural migration in some areas, where individuals sought to avoid lockdown and seek out work in less restricted areas, take up subsistence work on family lands, or otherwise rely on family support networks for survival in their places of origin. In addition, acknowledgment of COVID-19 as a serious threat was higher in urban versus rural areas, particularly in the early stage of the pandemic. A small number of respondents across all target provinces noted that urban to rural migration had been motivated by fear of the virus and a perception that it was less prevalent in rural areas. Though this dynamic was not discussed extensively, it is likely that the migration of unemployed individuals from cities to rural areas placed some additional economic — and sociocultural — strain on the recipient families and communities.

6 W52 – Female, Takhar.



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

”Another conflict was the return of people who were living in cities such as Kabul. When the Coronavirus outbreak occurred, they returned to rural areas and started agricultural activities. Though they started farming, natural disasters like heavy rain ruined their products. Since they did not have any other sources of income, they became poorer than before.”⁷

In Afghanistan, it is clear that the COVID-19 lockdown and border closures resulted in multiple dimensions of economic impact which in some areas significantly exacerbated pre-existing economic vulnerabilities. Though factors such as unemployment, price instability and shifts in migration patterns are not new to the context, the early stage of the pandemic in Afghanistan was unique in the concurrent and compounding manifestation of these variables; communities faced both new shocks and greater challenges in accessing traditional coping mechanisms. The result has been a dire economic situation which has reportedly endured in some areas, even following the lifting of lockdown and the reopening of borders.

Participants were not asked explicitly about the trajectory of economic recovery following the end of these policies. Nonetheless, respondents from roughly one-quarter of the KIIs and workshops conducted raised this issue, stating that there had been little to no economic recovery in their community to date. By contrast, very few noted that economic recovery had occurred. While some economic recovery is likely to have occurred in many areas in recent months, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, the tertiary impacts on conflict and violence have in many places contributed to paradigm shifts which are less easily reversed.



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Economic vulnerability and violent crime

”After the emergence of COVID and lockdown, people’s economic situation worsened, unemployment increased, people could not afford their daily living expenses, and as a result of it, people turned to committing crimes including robbery, kidnapping, and other crimes. People had no other choice to afford their living expenses. Both educated and uneducated people became unemployed after the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, and because of economic hardships, people committed crimes.”⁸

Violent crime is pervasive throughout many areas of Afghanistan, functioning both as a mechanism to support clientelism and a range of state- and non-state power-holders and as a coping mechanism for economic deprivation. Participants across all target areas and in the vast majority of interviews and KIIs noted an increase in criminality in their communities as a consequence of the pandemic, with a particular emphasis on violent crime leading to increased insecurity.

⁷ I11 – Male, Kabul.

⁸ I67 – Female, Kandahar

Some participants referenced violent crime having been an issue previously in the community, which the economic consequences of the pandemic had escalated; others noted that violent crime in particular had not been a significant issue in their community prior to the pandemic. While there are no official statistics on crime rates in Afghanistan, the prevalence and consistency of this observation across diverse geographic and demographic groups within the study merit meaningful consideration.

› *“There were many conflicts over border closures in our area. For instance, previously gangsters and drug addicts used to go to foreign and neighboring countries to sell their drugs. Once the borders were closed due to pandemic, they could not sell their drugs, so to find money they committed robberies, armed robberies, kidnapping, society disorder, and overall, conflicts in the area. Poor people were damaged massively by the border closure due to the pandemic.”⁹*

As highlighted above, the increase in violent crime was framed as a consequence of the economic impacts of the lockdown and/or border closures. Narratives about increased violent crime mirrored the narratives about the increased economic vulnerability. Firstly, both are factors which existed prior to the pandemic, but which were described as having reached an unprecedented level as a consequence of the pandemic. In addition, both narratives centered around the condition of desperation, with increased economic vulnerability perceived as the cause of this new level of desperation, and crime — and subsequent insecurity — as its consequence. This narrative, and overarching observations about increased criminality, featured equally in urban and rural areas. Particularly in Kabul, increased criminality was often linked specifically to unemployed youth.

Respondents specified a range of criminal activities which had increased following the emergence of COVID-19. The most commonly cited was violent and/or armed robbery, particularly of tradable assets such as mobile phones. These were frequently discussed in tandem with increased assaults and murders, with victims of robberies often injured or killed during the course of the theft. Some participants also noted a pre-existing prevalence or increase in illegal weapons, which were used by criminal elements and facilitated violent outcomes of criminal acts.

› *“We suffered from insecurity before the outbreak of COVID as well, but not to this extent. People were committing crimes using illegal weapons. In addition, there was robbery, kidnapping, drug use, existence of power brokers, open shots at night, and murders, but not to this extent. However, since the outbreak of COVID, all of them reached their peak. They even steal the cell phones and purses of the people on the streets. These were the conflicts that happened rarely before but increased after the outbreak of COVID, and it still continues.”¹⁰*

9 W32 – Male, Herat.

10 I10 – Male, Kabul.



Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

Violent acts of theft reportedly led to reduced movements within communities, particularly at night. During the early stages of the pandemic, in some areas this meant increased self-imposed movement restrictions as a downstream consequence of the pandemic, even in communities which otherwise had low awareness of COVID-19 and/or adherence to lockdown rules.

Increased kidnapping was also commonly mentioned, as was an increase in illicit drug sale/smuggling. The latter was also framed as having contributed to increased drug addiction, which in turn fed the cycle of violent crime and insecurity as addicts resorted to criminal activity in order to fund their addiction. In some areas, this was seen as exacerbating economic vulnerability, as people were less able to safely move, work, and maintain valuable assets.

Robbery and kidnapping increases were noted with equal prevalence in urban and rural areas, while increased drug sales/smuggling was more frequently noted in rural areas. The highest geographic prevalence for increased robbery, kidnapping and drug sales/smuggling appeared in Kabul and Takhar provinces and least commonly in Kandahar. Increased kidnapping was highlighted most commonly in Takhar and Kandahar, with least prevalence in Kabul. Herat fell in the middle range for most of the above-mentioned crimes, though comprised the majority of the relatively few observations of increased organ selling (voluntary and involuntary) and human/child trafficking, potentially suggesting a more localized pattern in those target communities.

Crime, insecurity and AOG influence

Dynamics linked to economic deprivation and violent crime following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic were also linked to observations regarding AOG influence. Within the broader political context, the pandemic period coincided with an expansion of AOG activity and presence within Afghanistan, largely driven by announcements of US troop withdrawal and the developments within the peace process. While these macro-level factors were in some cases acknowledged by the study participants, at the local level, increased presence and influence of AOGs, was more commonly framed as having been at minimum enabled by (1) increased economic vulnerability due to COVID-19 regulations; and (2) consequent increases in violent crime and insecurity.

› *“Due to the pandemic, many opponent groups and unauthorized gunmen emerged. They had been robbing the people during the night. These issues were very prominent during the pandemic. [Opponent groups] used the opportunity to their benefit because lockdown caused unemployment for most young people and adults. As a result, people voluntarily joined Taliban groups to make money and earn bread for their families. On the other hand, some became unauthorized gunmen or joined other unauthorized AOGs to burglarize people and houses to make money. In response to your question, I would say that people referred to different kinds of illegal activities to earn bread. When opponent groups became aware of people’s prostration, they took advantage of it and enlisted many of them. They used their power to enlist many people who had lived in areas where they have authority.”¹¹*



Markus Stappen/Shutterstock

A key finding of the study linked increased economic vulnerability stemming from COVID-19 regulations to increased AOG recruitment. AOG recruitment in Afghanistan has been observed as largely ideologically-driven, with financial incentives playing a more minor role. Of the participants who noted increased AOG recruitment during the pandemic, however, the far more common narrative that emerged was heightened economic desperation and the provision of financial incentives driving recruitment. Ideological motivations were rarely mentioned; by contrast, the economic motivation narrative typically framed joining AOGs as a survival rather than ideological mechanism. Of course, these findings should be considered in the light of this study’s limitations, in particular that research was only conducted in government-controlled and contested areas.

A number of respondents discussed not only the motivation of new recruits, but also of the AOGs themselves in providing financial incentives. This was framed as a strategic and opportunistic tactic employed by AOGs to take advantage of increased survival incentives within a landscape of decreased economic opportunities and coping mechanisms (lockdown, border closers, and unemployment) and an increase in economic vulnerabilities (price hikes, depleted savings and assets, and poverty). This tactic may have been particularly pragmatic given the simultaneous escalation of AOG offensives and expansion into new areas during the same period.

Local increases in AOG presence, influence and/or activity were cited by participants in a strong majority of interviews and KIIs conducted in Takhar, and in roughly half of the interviews and workshops conducted within Herat, Kabul and Kandahar. Increased AOG recruitment followed largely the same pattern, with the notable exception of Herat, where observations of increased AOG recruitment were relatively few. Both trends were predominantly, but not exclusively, observed in rural areas. Some participants perceived unemployed youth or, in a few cases, unemployed IDPs or returnees, as being particularly likely to join AOGs for financial gain.

11 148 – Male, Takhar.

The increase in AOG recruitment among community members appears to have created two feedback loops; the first is by further solidifying AOG influence and presence in the community. This in turn was associated with enabling other AOG activities, most notably increased taxation, sometimes framed as *zakat* or *ushur*.¹² Noted increases in AOG taxation by participants also reflect other, non-COVID-19 related realities, though, particularly regarding AOG practices of taxing areas that they newly control or influence and how AOG territorial control expanded over the course of 2020. Some participants living in areas with AOG presence prior to the pandemic also noted increases in the amount of tax demanded compared to the past, though this could also have been impacted by AOG offensives in the country, given that hikes in taxation are often implemented in the build-up to them. Several participants also noted intrusive and violent means of collecting tax, such as through home invasion at night, and by violent coercion including reprisal killings for failure to pay. Several participants noted that families in their community had left the area as a result of their inability to pay.

》 *“Opponent groups’ presence has caused people to feel uncomfortable. In detail, after the Coronavirus outbreak, many opponent groups started their operations in this community. They attack people’s houses during the nights to collect Zakat, Ushur (Islamic tax), and money. The opponent group will attack those families who had good harvest just to get more money from them.”¹³*

While many participants framed increased AOG recruitment as pandemic opportunism, the same rationale was not provided for patterns of increased taxation — though participants did frame increased recruitment as having facilitated AOG influence and activities in the community, including taxation. Taxation by the country’s most prominent AOG, the Taliban, has become increasingly structured and systematic in recent years, and also has often increased in advance of escalations in offensives.

Secondly, some participants framed recruitment into AOGs as further contributing to violent crime, observing that individuals who joined AOGs subsequently began — or were given the cover to commit — a range of crimes, many resulting in assault or murder of victims. No participants mentioned cases of justice or other services being administered by AOGs. This suggests that AOGs at minimum did not seek to deter crime in these communities, and in some cases acted more as a participant in or driver of criminal activity.

¹² Zakat is an Islamic tenet requiring a percent of income be given in donations to the poor; *ushur* is a tax on harvested goods.

¹³ W19 – Female, Kabul.

› *“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. In short, there have been changes in criminality due to economic hardship since the pandemic started. You know that joining the Taliban itself means criminality has changed. The people who joined the Taliban killed, wounded and robbed the villagers.”¹⁴*

It is worth highlighting that data for the study was collected only in government-controlled and contested areas, and therefore can only reflect AOG tactics outside of their areas of administrative control. The sample of the study is insufficient to draw broad or concrete conclusions regarding changing patterns in AOG incentive structures or the war economy. However, there does appear to be some evidence to merit further exploration of changes in AOG institutional financial needs and financing modalities in light of the combined factors above: increased presence and activity; increased recruitment based on financial incentives; increased taxation; and prioritization of engagement in crime for profit rather than justice for crime in contested areas.

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether AOGs experienced increased financial strain as a consequence of COVID-19 regulations. What is clear, however, is that the economic fallout experienced by communities created an opportunity which certain AOGs and criminal actors were able to exploit for their own ends. While this is unlikely to have altered the broader evolution of armed conflict since the start of the pandemic it is likely to have facilitated in limited and indirect ways certain AOG efforts to expand or consolidate their control in specific communities.

Pathway 2: COVID-19 Response, Resource Competition and State-Society Grievances

Overview

Participants highlighted two broad facets of the Government of Afghanistan’s COVID-19 response: COVID-19 mitigation measures such as lockdown and border closures, and government managed COVID-19 relief programs. To date, international donors have pledged more than 1.5 billion USD in assistance to the GoA to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, which was largely mobilized through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implemented through a range of mechanisms (Byrd, 2020). Several Government-led projects have been designed to provide direct relief to households; perhaps the most high-profile of these has been the Dastarkhwan-e Meli program, intended to provide the vulnerable with food and non-food items, distributed through local intermediaries across the country (Citizen Charter, 2020).

The execution of these programs has been highly contentious. A vast majority of participants in the study highlighted concerns about the economic impacts of Government lockdown rules, and grievances regarding the mismanagement of government COVID-19 relief programming. Each of these response measures generated increased resource competition within and between communities and eroded the already-tenuous state-society relationship. Pathway 2 highlights the relationship between the government’s COVID-19 response measures, resource competition, and tertiary impacts on conflict, violence and the state-society relationship.

COVID-19 regulations, economic vulnerability and resource competition

As highlighted in Pathway 1, the government’s lockdown policy and the closure of borders between Afghanistan and neighboring states had significant adverse effects on the livelihoods and wellbeing of populations across the country. Despite the stricter enforcement of lockdown measures in urban areas, lockdown was raised as an issue of key concern in nearly all interviews and workshops conducted in both rural and urban areas; it was also raised as a far more significant concern than other COVID-19 response measures, such as the inadequate health sector response.

¹⁴ W30 – Female, Herat.

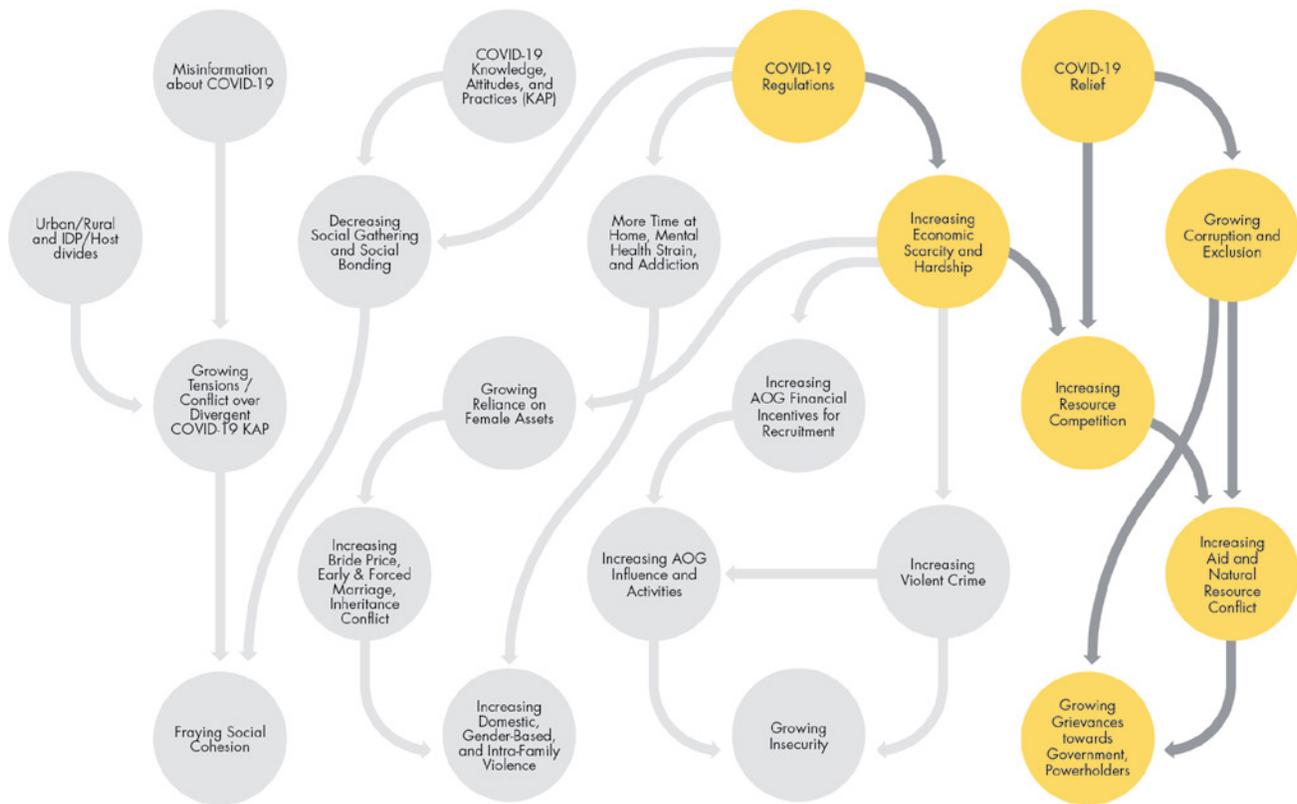


Figure 3. Pathway 2- Resource Competition and State-Society Grievances

In addition to long-standing and widespread patterns of economic deprivation prior to the pandemic, the pandemic period coincided with other economic stressors which further strained household resources and limited coping mechanisms in many areas. These included price hikes, migration changes, escalating insecurity, and environmental shocks such as drought and flooding, among others.

”The outbreak of Coronavirus and the increase in unemployment coincided with the time of drought, where people lost their agriculture, due to lack of rain, which was the only source of income left. During these difficult times, if the aid is distributed among the relatives and based on the relationships, of course, there will be huge conflict among people. The increasing number of vulnerable people has caused conflicts to increase.”¹⁵

Within this environment, competition for already-scarce resources intensified, generating or exacerbating a range of resource conflicts. COVID-19 relief assistance emerged overwhelmingly as the primary resource-based conflict driven by the pandemic; this will be discussed in further detail below. Beyond COVID-19 relief, however, participants highlighted several other dimensions of resource competition and/or conflict which the pandemic exacerbated.

First, unemployment and income loss stemming from COVID-19 regulations as one of the most damaging consequences of the pandemic, resulting in increased competition for jobs in some areas. Some participants noted that this reinforced pre-existing grievances around Afghanistan’s pervasively clientelistic and identity-based hiring norms. Participants described educated as well as uneducated individuals as being unable to afford bribes in order to secure government positions during the pandemic, due to

¹⁵ W41 – Male, Kandahar.



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increased economic deprivation. This was in some cases linked to the increase in AOG recruitment as the only viable alternative to secure an income. Among the participants who raised this issue, this was a source of grievance towards the Government; one individual claimed that a relative's grievances over this issue specifically had led to his decision to join an AOG.

In addition, some rural communities reported increased competition over natural resources, or a shift in dynamics surrounding pre-existing natural resource tensions linked to the pandemic. Several participants mentioned increased reliance on agriculture as a coping mechanism for other job loss, for example among returnees and urban residents who migrated to their rural villages of origin in the early stages of the pandemic. In some areas, this led to increased competition over land or over water for irrigation. In a few cases, lockdown specifically was cited as having intensified land conflicts. In one community, lockdown prevented farmworkers from cultivating land, increasing conflicts between landowners who rent cultivation rights and the farmworkers who pay for those rights through a share of the crop yield. In another case, lockdown and the neglect of farmland was cited as having left local land more exposed to land grabbing by powerholders.

Shifts in migration, due both to the COVID-19 regulations and unemployment (in the case of returnees), and increased insecurity, drought and economic deprivation (in the case of IDPs) also reportedly increased conflict due to land grabbing. Local power holders in some areas were further incentivized to seize public or private lands in order to build shelters to rent to new returnees and/or IDPs. In other cases, returnees or IDPs would squat on host community land, leading to increased tensions between the two groups. In other cases, pre-existing identity-group tensions over land equity were exacerbated, leading to intensification of intercommunal land conflict.

› *“There have been many conflicts due to the presence of IDPs in this area. The reason is that they do not have any information about urban laws, so they unintentionally create lots of conflicts in this area. Since the start of the pandemic, conflicts around this issue have also increased. When the migrants came to this area, they grabbed the government lands. And the government couldn't prevent them.”¹⁶*

16 W29 – Male, Herat.

Some rural communities also discussed increases or shifts in conflicts over access to water. This included increased demand for water stemming from drought, health concerns and increased reliance on agriculture and water irrigation; exacerbated tensions over the inequitable location of shared water access points between villages and/or identity groups; and increased fighting at water points, due to concerns over social distancing.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be interpreted as one factor amongst many which contributed to mild to moderate shifts in these resource-based conflicts. The most significant direct impact of the pandemic was in generating multiple and concurrent economic strains, which exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, heightened resource scarcity and necessitated increased resource competition. While the range of conflicts noted above is worth highlighting, by far the most significant manifestation of increased resource competition was in the distribution of COVID-19 relief assistance.

COVID-19 relief, corruption, and grievances

One of the most prevalent grievances reported across all provinces and in both rural and urban areas was corruption and exclusion in the COVID-19 relief distribution process. When questioned about pandemic relief, nearly all interviewees claimed to have had all or part of their allotted assistance misappropriated by powerholders. A minority of participants focused their grievances on state capture of pandemic resources, including high-ranking officials who embezzled international donor funding or committed other acts of fraud, and allocation of assistance by the political elite based on nepotism and clientelism. As of February 2021, the Inspector General’s Office of Afghanistan and Afghan Supreme Audit Office had reportedly referred hundreds of government officials to the Attorney General’s Office for investigation related to COVID-19 relief embezzlement or fraud, among other investigations (AVA Press, 2021).



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

”*In the aid distribution, people were selected through favoritism. Individuals from high influence tribes and languages only were assisted by the government, and the other tribes with less influence were not really assisted by the government. 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. So what is this? This is the recklessness of the government.”¹⁷*

More commonly, however, grievances focused on lower-ranking officials and informal leaders, such as Community Development Council (CDC) leaders, whom the government appointed as aid distribution intermediaries. In both cases, the government as an institution was viewed as responsible for COVID-19 relief mismanagement; many expressed their frustration that the government had involved local intermediaries in the distribution process without providing oversight or avenues for complaints.

17 166 – Female, Kandahar.

Mismanagement of assistance is a common occurrence in the context of Afghanistan, and deeply entrenched grievances and mistrust towards the government are not a new phenomenon caused by the pandemic. However, several factors appear to have raised expectations that relief either would or should be allocated equitably. Some participants noted hearing information or public relations campaigns about the COVID-19 relief programs on television or on the radio. In addition, the modality for intermediaries to receive their community's aid allocation involved the collection of each individual's national ID number and phone number. Both of these factors increased participants' awareness of the assistance program and their eligibility for it.

”*The unfair distribution of aid in this area has increased the people's distrust in the government. They have collected Tazkira and phone numbers of the people. Still, they haven't distributed assistance to them, because the CDC leader is not from this community, and he distributed the aid to his relatives and his people at night. He did not distribute them to the people of this area.*”¹⁸

This created a personalized sense of being stolen from when relief items or aid collection cards were later misappropriated. CDC leaders, community elders, Maliks, *Wakil-e-Gozars*¹⁹ local warlords and other powerholders were cited almost universally as having given relief items and/or aid collection cards to their relatives and friends. In some cases, these individuals also allocated COVID-19 relief resources based on identity group, with members of one tribe, ethnic group or village being granted the assistance allocated for another.

Conflicts over corruption and exclusion in the COVID-19 relief distribution process were pervasive. While many communities noted pre-existing patterns of corruption in aid distribution, in others this was a new or intensified dynamic. There were several reasons cited in the latter case. For some communities, the government's COVID-19 relief program was their first experience receiving aid of any kind. In others, prior assistance had been distributed through different modalities or different intermediaries. The most common reason for increased grievances over a previously experienced pattern of misappropriation, however, was the increase in economic deprivation caused by COVID-19 regulations.

”*Coronavirus was introduced as a dangerous and deadly disease to us. Unfortunately, the government did not assist the people of this area during those hard days and it lost its trust among the people. Our villagers do not trust the government anymore because they did not even receive a single face mask from the government.*”²⁰

It is important to also consider the unique nature of the pandemic, and how this may have shifted interpretations of citizen rights and state responsibility even in contexts like Afghanistan with a nominal social contract. The pandemic is global in scale, unparalleled in the gravity of its consequences, and has likely achieved greater global information penetration than any prior event. Many participants linked the severe level of need and absence of or corruption in government assistance to reduced trust and increased grievances in the government. Despite the context of weak state-society relations in Afghanistan, perceived mismanagement and corruption in the government relating to COVID-19 still appeared to damage participants' views of and trust in the government.

Several participants compared the response of Afghanistan's government relief provision to that of other countries, acknowledging the necessity of lockdown measures, but noting that they had consumed media or had otherwise heard about the comparative better support provided by other governments. There was also a relatively high level of awareness about government COVID-19 relief programs, specific allocations that people were owed under the program, and that

18 W52 – Female, Takhar.

19 *Wakil-e-Gozars* are local representatives in Afghanistan who act as the intermediaries between the government and local communities for a range of activities and services.

20 I12 – Male, Kabul.

international funding had been given specifically for COVID-19 relief. Awareness of the COVID-19 relief programming existed even in the minority of cases where the target community had been entirely excluded.

› *“During the COVID-19, most foreign countries and especially the World Bank have sent aid to Afghanistan. But the government didn’t distribute them to the people as they broadcasted on TV. This caused the people to lose their trust in the government.”²¹*

These factors may indicate that the pandemic was seen as an exception to the status quo of low expectations that the Government can or should uphold its end of the social contract. Participants in roughly three quarters of the interviews and workshops conducted indicated that their level of grievance and mistrust in the government had increased due to the pandemic. Additionally, in the dataset, the topics most frequently concurring with the increased grievances and mistrust in government since the pandemic started were: COVID-19 aid exclusion, COVID-19 relief, absence of government intervention or assistance, and government mismanagement of COVID-19 relief. It is noteworthy that these were the top correlations, rather than lockdown, unemployment, gaps in health service delivery, or increased insecurity or crime.

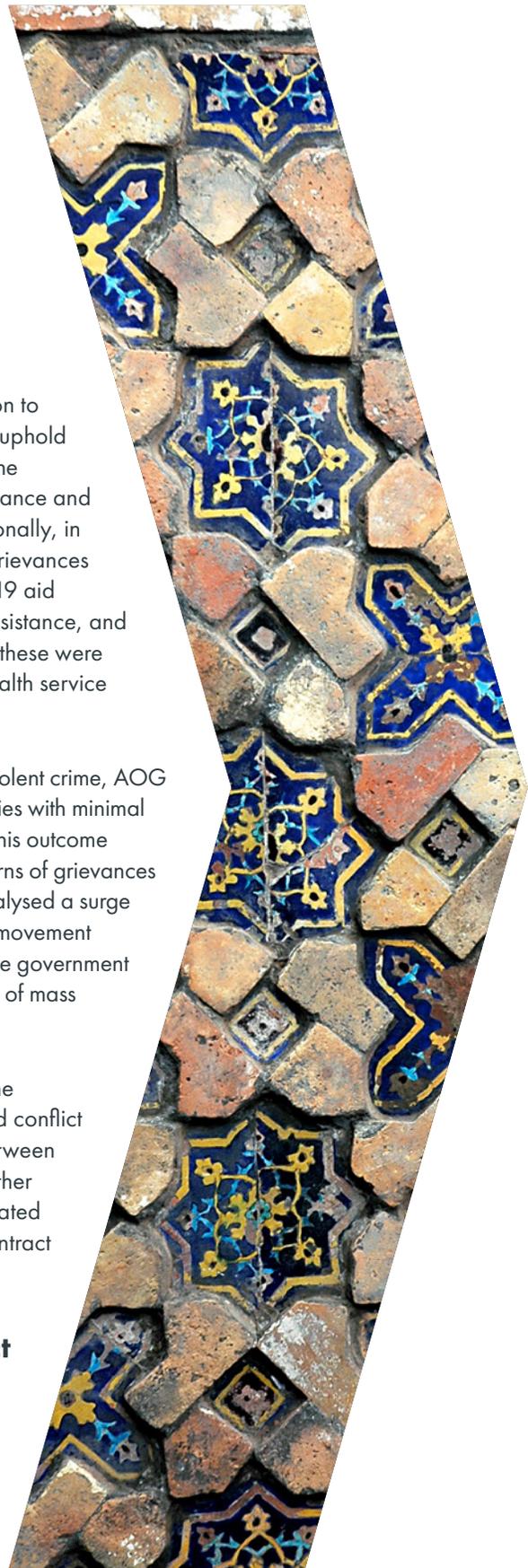
During the pandemic, dynamics of increasing economic vulnerability, violent crime, AOG influence, population movements, and other factors provided communities with minimal scope to act upon any increased grievances towards the government. This outcome contrasts with some other contexts, such as Nigeria, where similar patterns of grievances about COVID-19 relief exacerbated mistrust in the government and catalysed a surge in citizen activism and protest, most notably the nationwide #EndSARS movement (Sheely and Hakiman, 2021). To date, increased grievances towards the government in Afghanistan do not appear to have generated specific manifestations of mass protest or social unrest.

However, there are significant challenges ahead for the GoA within the broader political context, given AOG expansionism, increasing armed conflict and upcoming US troop withdrawal. As competition for legitimacy between the GoA and non-state authorities increases in the coming months, further study would be merited on the potential contributions of pandemic-related grievances towards the GoA in shifting attitudes towards the social contract — and which actor(s) may be better able to uphold it.

COVID-19 relief, intra- and intercommunal conflict

Participants largely expressed grievances over COVID-19 aid distribution towards the government as an institution, or towards specific corrupt individuals whom the government had designated as local aid distribution intermediaries. However, in many cases

21 W27- Male, Herat.



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the participants noted that COVID-19 relief resources were distributed along identity group lines, sometimes leading to exacerbated tensions or even violent reprisal conflicts between broader identity groups. As noted above, tensions over aid distribution are not a new dynamic in many of the communities participating in the study. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that COVID-19 relief exclusion emerged as one of the most prevalent drivers of conflict, likely due to the dynamics of increased deprivation and resource competition highlighted above.

› *“Although they registered us in the list and received the assistance with our identity, we are not given any aid. In detail, we have not been given even a bar of soap. So, this is due to the dissension and carelessness of the CDC head. If we had a CDC head, it would not happen and the poor in our village would have received the aid as well...The Coronavirus assistance is obtained for three communities, but it is distributed only in one community. It even caused injuring some people with knives as people want their rights and what they deserve.”²²*

CDC leaders were most frequently identified as having been responsible for allocating COVID-19 relief in communities. These individuals and the councils they manage are informal leaders, in most cases representing a single village and selected via community election. In practice, however, some participants presented divergences from this mandate, noting that their CDC leader had been appointed by influential power-holders in a clientelistic manner, or that their village did not have its own CDC, and was managed by the CDC of another village. In these cases, participants often described an underlying dynamic of domination versus deprivation between the CDC leader’s village and their own. In some cases, the allotment of COVID-19 relief for one village was reportedly co-opted by the CDC leader and distributed among his²³ own village.

This pattern of misappropriation exacerbated pre-existing grievances of exclusion and intensified tensions, in some cases leading to violent confrontations or new contestation of the CDC leadership. In one example, conflicts over COVID-19 aid distribution led to ad hoc elections and the replacement of the CDC leader. In another, a community sued their CDC leader, but failed to obtain restitution due to his relationships with local authorities; the CDC leader later “punished” those who brought the case by withholding further aid. Another CDC leader was forced to flee the area for his safety. Stories like these were provided frequently as examples of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 relief distribution on a given community.

²² I25 – Female, Herat

²³ There were no mentions of female CDC leaders in the study.



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› *“Our community elders allocate aid for themselves while they take the poor and needy people’s share. Also, targeted killings have increased. These targeted killings are related to COVID-19 aid. Those people who did not receive the aid, they targeted the CDC’s relatives and they are killing those people. They said the CDC leader distributed the aid to his relatives and friends not to the people....They do ethnic discrimination and because of discrimination, unemployment, crime, and corruption take place.”²⁴*

Misappropriated COVID-19 relief resources were almost universally reported as having been redirected in part or in full to local power-holders’ relatives and friends. However, many participants also shared instances of COVID-19 relief exclusion along identity lines, exacerbating intercommunal grievances and sometimes directly contributing to increased intercommunal violence at the local level. In the dataset, the topics most frequently concurring with both increased inter-tribal and inter-ethnic conflict, respectively, were: aid distribution exclusion, COVID-19 relief, nepotism, CDC leaders, and increased aid conflict. Given the many other economic, security, and sociocultural stressors present during the pandemic period, the prominence of COVID-19 relief mismanagement as a primary driver of intercommunal conflict is notable, and perhaps lends credence to participants’ claims of new levels of economic deprivation and the necessity of increased resource competition.

Finally, COVID-19 relief conflicts also emerged between other identity groups. A number of participants framed COVID-19 relief exclusion as delineated along economic status, with wealthier segments of the community appropriating aid intended for low-income members of the community. In these cases, participants drew implicit linkages between wealth and power, and inversely, poverty and marginalization. These cases of COVID-19 relief appropriation thus generated conflicts that exacerbated economic dimensions of marginalization irrespective of identity — though in some cases economic and identity groupings converged.

24 167 – Female, Kandahar.

Similar examples were provided in terms of increased tensions between host communities and IDPs or returnees regarding the allocation of assistance, exclusion, and perceptions of which groups were more or less deserving of COVID-19 assistance. Resource competition between host communities and IDPs or returnees, particularly over provision of assistance, is not a new development in the context of Afghanistan.²⁵ However, the pandemic contributed concurrently to increased population movements, increased economic deprivation, and increased entitlements to and awareness of specific assistance. These factors collectively appear to have further exacerbated underlying host-IDP and host-returnee tensions. Finally, in some cases these divisions also corresponded with divergent ethnic or tribal identities, generating grievances linked to multiple dimensions of exclusion.

Pathway 3: COVID-19 Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) and Social Cohesion

Overview

Beyond the ways in which social cohesion was adversely affected by the factors detailed in Pathways 1 and 2, many participants remarked on a broader breakdown in social cohesion stemming from the reduction in social bonding activities due to pandemic regulations, combined with divergent and shifting knowledge, attitudes and practices around COVID-19. These dynamics will be discussed in Pathway 3.

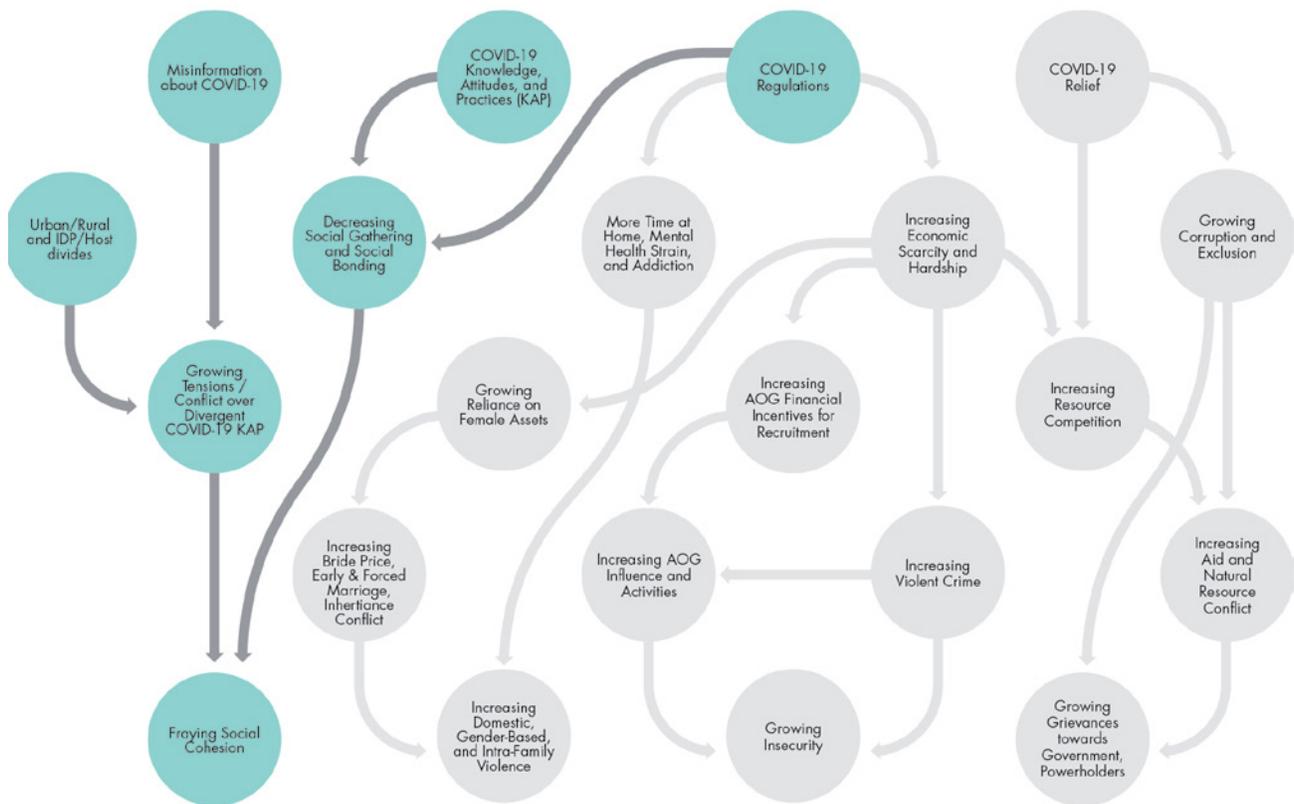


Figure 4. Pathway 3- Social Cohesion and COVID-19 Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices

²⁵ For example, see: ADSP. (2019). Action Plan for Integration: Herat. Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP). https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ADSP_2019_Herat_Integration_Plan_Final.pdf



Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

Identity, information and divergent COVID-19 KAP

The first COVID-19 outbreak in Afghanistan appeared in Herat city (Ruttig, 2020). In the early stages of the pandemic, both cases of and information about COVID-19 remained concentrated in urban areas. A number of participants in rural communities noted that they had received no awareness campaigns by the government; for some, this was a source of grievance. Data for the study was collected between February-April 2021, roughly one year after the virus emerged in Afghanistan; during this period, all participating communities were aware of the virus, and almost all believed it to be a real and serious public health concern. However, it is apparent that particularly in rural areas, this broad acknowledgement was a slow process which had notable negative impacts on social cohesion as knowledge and attitudes regarding the virus evolved over time.

› *“Actually, I am an Imam and people were asking me a lot of questions. One group of people believed that it is not necessary to use a face mask, and there is no such disease at all; however, the other group believed that the disease is real. It has caused tensions and conflicts among the elders of our village, and they even fought each other. I was also scared of the disease and I was confused about whether it is real or not, but we believed that the disease had come from God and we had to prevent it.”²⁶*

Beyond relatively lower knowledge of COVID-19 in rural areas, attitudes towards the virus were also influenced by a relatively higher prevalence of religious conservatism and stronger influence of local religious leaders. Some participants noted that religious leaders played a prominent role in encouraging disbelief in the virus and nonadherence to mitigation measures. It is likely that some of these leaders were resistant to lockdown measures or personal health concerns which reduced attendance at prayers.

26 112 – Male, Kabul.

In response, religious leaders and, in some cases, madrasa students, and extremist groups, promoted one of several common narratives. These narratives included denial of the virus' existence, claims that the virus would only infect non-Muslims and infidels, and/or the fatalistic narrative that as the virus was created by Allah, people's fate would be controlled by Allah and not by any individual mitigation measures.

Some participants noted that attitudes towards COVID-19 were also impacted by pre-existing mistrust in the Government which was then reinforced by the divergence in the guidance and information provided by authorities versus trusted religious leaders. This discrepancy both reduced the effectiveness of government messaging and contributed to further pandemic-related grievances against the government. Additionally, lockdown restrictions across the country varied both in their specific rules and in their enforcement. This lack of clarity may have further undermined government messaging; several participants, for example, described frustration and grievances towards a local policy that permitted market access only at night — the most insecure time of the day to be traveling and purchasing items.



Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

Y *“You know how much social cohesion was reduced due to Coronavirus. First of all, they said that people should not go to mosques to prevent the spread of the coronavirus...On the one hand, the imams of the mosques said over loudspeakers that people should come to the mosques, and if anyone did not show up, he would be one of the infidels. Think for yourself. They call those who do not attend the mosque infidels. How do you say they become infidels? They do not go to the mosques to save their lives, and they are called 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. And that caused a gap among the people. I wish there was no Coronavirus. May God destroy the Coronavirus.”²⁷*

Attitudes towards the virus were also informed by a range of other rumors which were not religious in nature, and which were not seemingly perpetuated by specific community leaders. These included rumors that the pandemic was a political hoax for the purpose of misappropriating international donor funding, that the pandemic was a weapon or hoax created by the West, and that COVID-19 treatment was a ruse to enable lethal injections of patients.

Population movements also impacted knowledge and attitudes towards the pandemic, and in some cases contributed to tensions over differing COVID-19 mitigation practices. Several participants noted that residents returning to the village from the city (see Pathway 1) brought with them vastly different knowledge, attitudes and practices. This discrepancy created either fear, tensions, or both among members of the village; one participant even claimed that the newly-instilled fear of COVID-19 caused the death of several community members.

²⁷ 135 – Female, Kandahar.

At the same time, increased insecurity coinciding with the pandemic period, largely due to political developments and the escalation in armed conflict led to increased displacement of some rural populations into urban areas. By contrast, social cohesion among IDPs and urban host communities was strained by IDPs' skepticism of the virus (according to those interviewed), low adherence to mitigation measures, and mockery of those who did take COVID-19 precautions.

› *“There were many disturbances among people during the pandemic among the Pashtun tribe as they have very strict culture so they were having arguments with each other in order to protect themselves from spread of this virus. Since there is no other water source except this deep well in the village, they wanted other people to avoid standing in line and respect social distancing, but other villagers were not listening to the Pashtuns and using bad words against each other. Such issues caused physical disputes among people.”²⁸*

In rare cases, divergent COVID-19 KAP also fell along ethnic or tribal lines. In these cases, participants noted that inter-ethnic or inter-tribal tensions had been inflamed by arguments over social distancing and other mitigation measures. In one workshop in a neighborhood of Kabul city, participants claimed that tribal relationships had noticeably changed as a result of the belief that only some tribes were susceptible to the virus, while others were immune, leading to inter-tribal conflict and deteriorated relations.

It is worth noting that COVID-19 KAP clearly evolved over time, particularly in rural areas. This most commonly occurred as community members witnessed or heard about COVID-19 infections and deaths among their friendship and kinship networks. In some cases, participants also referenced traditional or social media, indicating that there may have been increasing information penetration over time. However, it is worth noting that this progression did not occur at the same pace in all areas or among all segments of a given community. As further discussed in the following section, this divergence had meaningful negative impacts on social cohesion in many communities as fear of the virus among some clashed with others' skepticism, exacerbated by religious and cultural norms.

› *“Some people were ashamed of wearing masks because they believed that Allah will keep them safe, not a piece of cloth. It was very tough to discuss with people and convince them, but their mind changed gradually when they witnessed many fatalities. There was a rumor that this virus is only for non-Muslim people and will not affect true Muslims. Then, later, people understood that the COVID does not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims. People had the idea that this virus is not as dangerous as an explosion or bombing, but their minds changed when they witnessed the disasters that were caused by the virus to society.”²⁹*

COVID-19 regulations, social bonding and social cohesion

The most prevalent narrative regarding the pandemic's impact on social cohesion linked the reduction in social gatherings to weakened social relationships. Participants in roughly half of the interviews and workshops conducted observed that social cohesion had declined due to reduced visits among relatives, reduced participation in cultural and religious events, and increased disagreements over attendance at important family events such as weddings and funerals. The former two patterns were framed largely as weakening social bonds; participants appeared to view these activities as fundamental to maintaining social relationships, with tensions and “gaps” as an inevitable result of lower engagement in social gatherings.

28 W30 – Female, Herat.

29 W16 – Male, Kabul.

By contrast, reduced attendance of events such as funerals and weddings were framed as a source of conflict. Tensions emerged between those who were concerned about COVID-19 transmission or who otherwise chose to follow lockdown guidance, and those hosting the events with more skeptical attitudes towards the virus. Non-attendance was seen as highly offensive, and as a cause for complete ruptures in relationships. This pattern was often linked to family networks, but was also in some cases linked to fractures within wider community relationships.

Non-attendance at funerals was framed as particularly damaging. This was likely exacerbated by misinformation which led communities to believe that COVID-19 could be transmitted by proximity to the body of the deceased, if that individual was suspected of having had COVID-19. One woman described a body sitting unattended and beginning to rot until she volunteered to wash and prepare it for burial, as no one was willing to handle the corpse.



Mercy Corps

› *“There were huge advertisements about the pandemic, and many precautionary points were mentioned in the advertisements. People were afraid. I got infected in the last Ramadan month, and I did not allow my family to come closer to me. Meanwhile, we did not attend the funeral/mourning/charity ceremony of dead people who were infected with the pandemic. Because we live in a religious community, people are upset because of not attending the funeral/mourning ceremonies of their dead family members. This issue still exists in the area, and some people have broken down their relationships with each other.”³⁰*

By contrast, a couple of participants observed that lockdown and self-imposed movement restrictions due to fear of COVID-19 had actually improved social cohesion; in these communities, reduced interactions led to reduced local disputes, including violent disputes. However, the majority of respondents who noted pandemic-related impacts on social cohesion viewed reduced social interaction as having a deleterious effect on relationships. Several participants also noted that lockdown and COVID-19 transmission concerns prevented gatherings from taking place which had previously served to mitigate local disputes.

Examples given included the cessation of monthly village-wide meetings where disputes would be aired and solved; dispute resolution meetings with community elders and other informal leaders; teacher’s meetings designed to address education-related problems and disputes; and youth councils for sharing mutual grievances that would then be brought to local MPs. In these cases, conflicts which emerged during the lockdown period were seen as having no avenue for resolution.

30 169 – Male, Kandahar.



Marko Beljan/Shutterstock

› *“Previously, there were many gatherings in the village and CDC office, but they have decreased now. Even we do not have any councils nowadays, and elections that used to be held for the CDC are all stopped. 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 these days.”³¹*

Though a few participants observed that relationships had recently normalized, a greater proportion indicated that social cohesion still remained weaker than before. Some participants noted that there had been permanent cleavages in specific relationships, for example as a result of nonattendance at a wedding or funeral. Others noted that despite the restoration of normality in other areas of life, there remained lower participation and/or alterations in the nature of social bonding activities up to present.

In the dataset, the topic of reduced social cohesion concurred most frequently with: reduced social gatherings, increased interpersonal/intra communal conflict, fear of COVID-19, and COVID-19 stigma/disagreements. The predominance of these thematic associations is noteworthy, given the many other possible sources of reduced social cohesion during this period — including economic strain and resource competition, changes in IDP and returnee presence, and increases in violent crime and AOG recruitment. This may speak to the critical importance of social bonding activities for the maintenance of social cohesion in a context driven by multiple, complex dimensions of conflict.

31 111 – Male, Kabul.

Pathway 4: COVID-19 Response, Women’s Rights and Gender-Based Violence

Overview

A full analysis of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic and gender-based violence is beyond the scope of this study. However, participants described several common patterns of impact, linking COVID-19 regulations to tertiary shifts in women’s rights, gender-based violence, and violence within and between family groups.

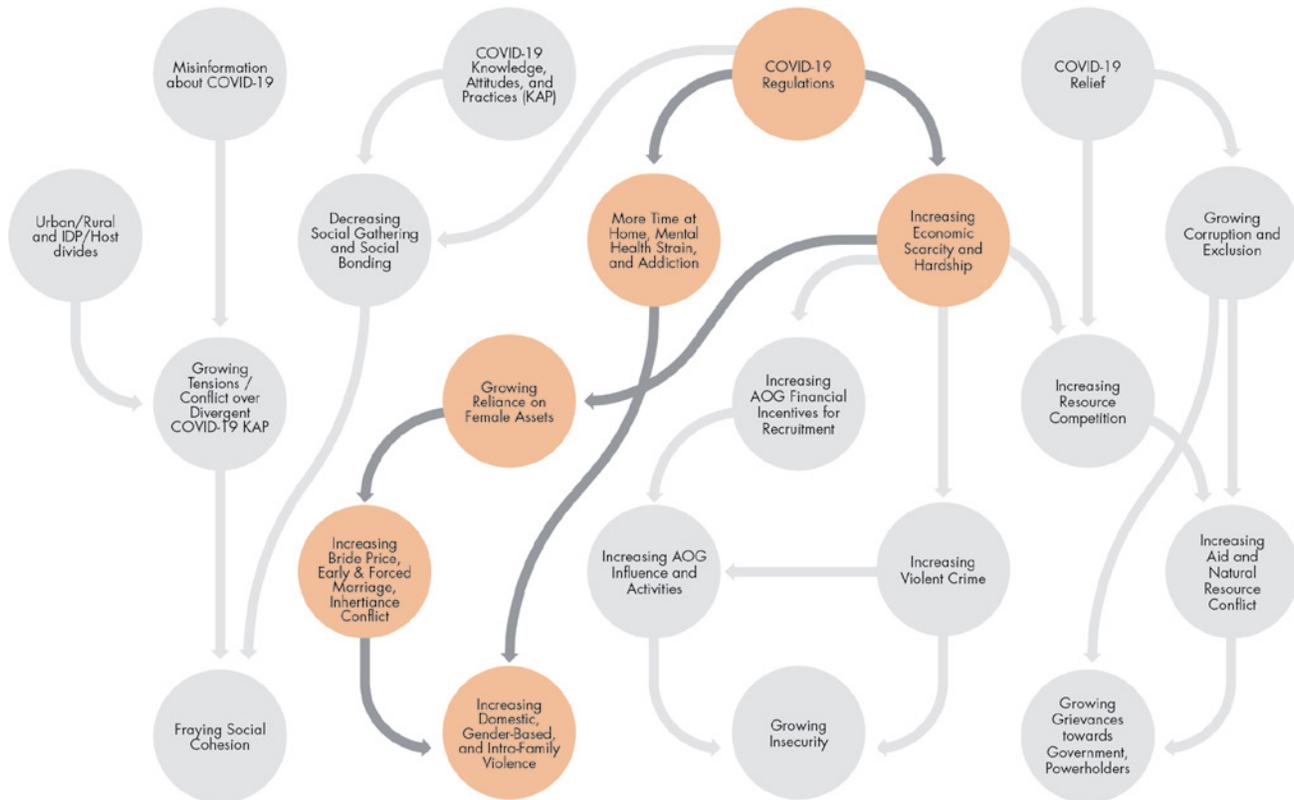


Figure 5. Pathway 4- Women’s Rights and Gender-Based Violence

Lockdown, mental health and domestic violence

“I should say that the level of insecurity and unemployment have doubled since March of 2020. Poverty has reached its peak. The majority have become unemployed and they were not even able to feed their families. In addition, unemployment caused violence against the women, and many women divorced their husbands. We have witnessed many cases of violence against women on news and social media. All of the above conflicts have increased since the outbreak of COVID.”³²

During the early stages of the pandemic, some participants noted an increase in time spent at home, either due to enforced lockdown measures or fear of the virus leading to self-imposed movement restrictions. In describing the impacts, many participants focused on the presence of newly unemployed males in the home, alongside increased pressure from wives to

32 19 – Female, Kabul.



Jono Photography/Shutterstock

provide for the family in light of increased food insecurity. These factors combined were commonly perceived as having led to deteriorations in mental health, with some participants observing an increase in rates of suicide as a result.

Participants noted that the two most common responses to this psychological strain among men were new or exacerbated drug addictions, and increased physical violence perpetrated against their families, particularly towards their wives. Women's responses to psychological strain were less frequently discussed. However, among urban interviewees in Kabul, several noted an increase in cases of women divorcing their husbands, largely as a result of domestic violence.

》 *“People of this area were providing for their expenses by working in foreign countries, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, they returned to Afghanistan, and due to lack of working opportunities, they couldn't work here. The unemployed men who had no income sources committed family violence and beat their wives and kids, and they also stole things from their neighbors. People who are poor and unemployed with many family members can't provide for their family's expenses and needs, so they will commit family violence. And family controversy and anxiety will cause them to get addicted to drugs.”³³*

Narratives of increased drug addiction, particularly among unemployed men, including unemployed returnees, were framed as a consequence of lockdown, unemployment, and psychological strain. Participants also cited increases in drug addiction as a cause of domestic violence, particularly towards women and children in the household, further fueling the economic and psychological strain that drove unemployed men to addiction. Households caught in this vicious cycle were then exposed to compounding vulnerabilities, with women and girls bearing much of the cost, in the form of gender-based violence, curtailing of their rights and female commodification, as detailed in the next section.

33 W52 – Female, Takhar



Jono Photography/Shutterstock

Economic shocks, violence against women, and early or forced marriage

As noted in Pathway 2, resource competition increased in some areas as a natural consequence of increased economic deprivation. This competition served not only to exacerbate tensions and conflict, but also to shift the value of some resources. The same pattern emerged with regards to issues such as bride prices and female inheritance. Some participants noted that the increase in economic deprivation as the result of COVID-19 regulations led to shifts in and exacerbation of these practices.

”In the lockdown, most of the people become jobless. They were cruel towards their wives and children; they would beat them. In addition to this, they would tell their wives to demand their inheritance from their fathers... Before the spread of COVID-19, people did not pay much attention. Most of them were busy with their jobs; however, after the spread of this virus, they became aware of this issue. They would taunt their wives, and even some of them would force their wives to get out of their houses. They would tell their wives: if you cannot take your inheritance, we do not need you. Consequently, it created tensions between the families and eventually ended up in conflict between the tribes. In our village, there is a conflict over inheritance between the Mohmand and Popalzai tribes.”³⁴

The first of these centers on miras, or the right of women to claim inheritance from their fathers. According to the Asia Foundation’s 2018 Survey of the Afghan People, acceptance of this right has been steadily increasing over time (Khan, 2018). Nonetheless, particularly in more traditional rural communities, this right is often not honored, with fathers, husbands or brothers co-opting the inheritance of their daughters, wives or sisters. Some participants perceived an increase in this practice of male capture of women’s inheritance within their community.

34 W40 – Female, Kandahar.

This was explained not only as an issue of the extent of miras capture, but in terms of generating more intense intrafamilial conflicts over accessing miras, particularly between husbands and their wives' fathers or brothers. In some cases, these intrafamilial conflicts also spilled over into broader intercommunal conflicts, for example when the wife's family of birth belonged to a different tribe than her husband's. These conflicts were sometimes violent in nature, with a few examples cited which ended in murder. Though inheritance conflicts are not a new development, some participants felt that they had intensified because of increased economic deprivation linked to the pandemic.

Another practice reportedly impacted by the pandemic relates to the financial value placed on girls and women by men in the process of arranged marriage. Several participants reported that the bride price (paid to by the men of the groom's family to the men of the bride's family) increased significantly during the pandemic, for example from 80,000 ANF prior to the pandemic to upwards of 1,000,000 ANF during the pandemic. Considered alongside the reports of increased economic deprivation during the pandemic, this may indicate increased reliance on the commodification of girls and women in marriage as an economic coping mechanism in some communities. Several participants who observed these patterns also noted specific increases in early and forced marriages as a result. One participant also connected reduced school attendance due to economic deprivation and school closures with increased early and forced marriages.

› *“Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 has occurred, schools are closed. Fathers could provide the transport allowance of their children before the pandemic started; however, they cannot do it now. As a result, they take their daughters out of school and marry their daughters. There is no school, so they are compelled to take their daughters out of school. The number of girls who have gotten married compared to before the pandemic increased significantly. They marry their daughters at a younger age.”³⁵*

35 | 60 – Female, Herat.

Conclusion and Implications

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a period of substantial political change and growing insecurity within Afghanistan, most prominently linked to the peace process, announcements of US troop withdrawal, and intensification of armed conflict. Against this backdrop, COVID-19 mitigation regulations were limited in duration and uneven in application. Perceptions of the threat that COVID-19 poses to the country have also varied over time and across different areas of the country. There appears to have been a dominant perception in the very early stages of the pandemic, and then again following the first wave, that the virus was not a significant concern. These factors in totality have resulted in limited focus and analysis on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, as compared to other concurrent political and conflict developments.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has had salient negative impacts on communities across diverse geographic, identity group and socioeconomic lines. Most of the pandemic's consequences are not new phenomena within the context of Afghanistan. Unemployment, violent crime, population movements, changing AOG modalities, fragile social cohesion and a weak social contract are challenges that the people of Afghanistan have grappled with for decades. However, the pandemic and response measures played a critical role in compounding these pre-existing stressors, contributing to the exacerbation of multiple dimensions of conflict and violence within and between communities.

Within Afghanistan's complex conflict landscape, the findings of this case study demonstrate the COVID-19 pandemic entered a set of new factors into the conflict system, most notably lockdown measures, border closures, COVID-19 relief programs, and divergent knowledge, attitudes and practices related to the virus. These factors generated a series of secondary impacts on economic, social and governance factors, which in turn contributed to tertiary impacts on conflict and violence. The direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic added new dimensions of complexity and strain on pre-existing vulnerabilities, contributing significantly to an enabling environment for more pro-violent and pro-conflict outcomes. This is evident in the widely reported shifts in:

- › The rates of violent crime as a coping mechanism for exacerbated economic deprivation;
- › The opportunism of AOGs in bolstering recruitment through increased reliance on financial recruitment incentives;
- › Shifts in perceptions and grievances related to the social contract when encountering a completely new type of catastrophe;
- › The intensification of conflict over natural, material and gender-specific resources; and
- › The weakening or even destruction of social bonds and cohesion.

Each of these pathways of impact have been either exacerbated or transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic with many of the effects enduring up to the present day. Particularly at the local level, understanding these less obvious but equally important contributing factors — and their interaction with other conflict drivers — is critical to effective conflict prevention and mitigation.

These findings also carry important policy implications, in particular approaches to mitigate the pandemic's adverse effects on conflict and violence, and to prevent new or worsening conflict in the future. More specifically, the analysis presented here points to a need for:

- › A comprehensive economic support package to counter the negative effects of public health measures and restrictions with a focus on development, in particular a livelihood response as well as a humanitarian one;
- › International diplomatic pressure to maintain open borders for trade - i.e. COVID Safe border crossings for goods;

- › Diplomatic action for protection of migrant workers, including engagement with key countries such as Iran and Pakistan, to work towards - at a minimum - cooperation to prepare for and mitigate as far as possible the economic and social shocks of migrant returns to their communities;
- › Redoubling support for economic development, especially in the agricultural sector, in rural areas to lessen the impact of reverse migration to rural areas;
- › International assistance and effective means to provide income protection and a social safety net to stymie crime and AOG recruitment;
- › Mechanisms to target and distribute aid to prevent breakdown in social cohesion and to reduce clientelism, which hampers communities' trust in the GOA and worsens conflict risks;
- › Greater COVID relief and policy reforms to focus on addressing the economic and social impacts of COVID-19.

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Where possible, we tried to source photos depicting life during the COVID-19 pandemic period in the areas of Afghanistan that are the focus of this study: Kabul, Herat, Takhar, and Kandahar. Many of the images in this chapter are from other parts of the country and/or from the years preceding the pandemic, but were chosen to help illustrate the broader themes, ideas, people, and places described by the individuals who participated in our research.



CONCLUSION

COVID-19 and Conflict: Compounding Risks and Preventing Contagion

Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters



In the United States, Europe, and other countries with widespread access to COVID-19 vaccines, there is an impending sense of a return to normalcy. But in most places, the pandemic is far from over. While the world is still in the early stages of grappling with the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19, understanding its effects on peace and stability is a political, humanitarian, and development imperative.

Based on in-depth case studies from Afghanistan, Colombia, and Nigeria, this report finds that the pandemic is having a corrosive effect on governance, economic livelihoods, and social cohesion in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. In doing so, it is exacerbating key factors that drive conflict and instability. While research from more countries is needed, there is evidence that the pandemic has had similar effects in other contexts — and that the findings of this report are not unique to our three cases (The New Humanitarian 2021, Search for Common Ground 2021). The 2021 Fragile States Index, for instance, suggests that COVID-19 has exposed and deepened fragility in various countries — from Peru, to Somalia, to Yemen, to the United States (Fiertz et al. 2021)

Our case studies demonstrate that in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Nigeria, COVID-19 — and its political, economic, social, and health consequences — manifested to different degrees and in different ways, and were met with different responses by the public. These differences were shaped in part by pre-pandemic conflict dynamics, governance capacities, and social mobilization. In Nigeria, the country's relatively robust civil society led to a more productive (if still contentious) reaction to the government's handling of the pandemic, so that many people engaged in non-violent protests rather than joining armed groups intent on fighting the government — a more prominent dynamic in Afghanistan. Colombia's significantly higher COVID-19 caseload and prolonged lockdown helped stymie large-scale collective action until recently, when massive demonstrations against proposed tax hikes and police brutality rippled across the country (Dickinson 2021).

While each context is distinct, our research shows that the pandemic has aggravated conflict drivers in strikingly similar ways — by emboldening armed actors, undermining state legitimacy, expanding illicit activities, and increasing insecurity and economic hardship — even if it has not been immediately apparent in short-term escalations in violence. This complexity underscores the need to expand our view beyond pandemic-era violence trends and, instead, diagnose the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on factors that can contribute to future conflict and social unrest.

This research should serve as both a warning — and a call to action for governments and the international community. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an impetus for domestic and international actors to invest in and support proactive measures to prevent conflict and mitigate instability. Rather than continuing to rely on reactive measures when violence erupts, donors and governments should redouble and recalibrate their peacebuilding efforts — by rebuilding trust between communities and state authorities; reducing economic scarcity and bolstering adaptive livelihoods; demobilizing and reintegrating members of armed groups;¹ and strengthening social cohesion and dispute resolution mechanisms. By doing so, we can reverse some of the adverse consequences of COVID-19 on peace and stability. We can also help stave off the risk of further conflict and bolster communities' resilience to future shocks — including another pandemic.

Failing to take action will increase the likelihood of more countries falling into conflict and fragility "traps," where they become locked in a persistent state of crisis due to the reinforcing pressures of low state capacity and legitimacy, insecurity and routine violence, social fragmentation, and limited livelihood opportunities, and proneness to economic and environmental shocks (Collier 1999; LSE-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development 2018). Like COVID-19, conflict and fragility are contagious: both their manifestations (such as violence) and their consequences (such as low economic growth) can spill across borders and threaten to destabilize entire regions (Garcia and Wimpy 2016; Gleditsch 2007; Metternich et al. 2017; Mueller and Tobias 2016). For this reason, both local and global COVID-19 strategies must integrate humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities across different sectors. A concerted and collaborative multilateral effort is needed not just to end the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to address its cascading and lingering secondary impacts, which have potentially dire implications for international stability and human security.

¹ Testimonies from our respondents indicate that armed group recruitment has increased during the pandemic due to the hardship and vulnerability it has imposed. This means that many people — particularly youth — will need support to overcome the social stigma and psychological distress that often comes with engaging in violent groups, which can leave former recruits economically alienated and socially marginalized (Annan et al. 2011). Unless those who have turned to armed groups during the pandemic are able to access opportunities to build productive, resilient livelihoods — and to meaningfully engage in their communities — the risk of their continued engagement with these actors will remain high, posing an ongoing threat to stability.

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