



PEACE AND STABILITY IN COVID-19: OUR AGENCY APPROACH

FEBRUARY 2021

Introduction

The global community is facing a crisis of greater scale, urgency, and complexity than at any time since the Second World War. COVID-19 will infect millions of people, with many hundreds of thousands likely to die as the pandemic continues to spread around the world; but the impact goes far beyond the immediate effects of the illness. The spread of COVID-19 and efforts to contain it are already devastating economies and will strain the political and social fabric in contexts already overwhelmed by or at risk of natural disasters, conflict, and deteriorating livelihoods. The vulnerable will yet again be the most negatively impacted and face the steepest climb to recovery.

Mercy Corps' COVID response focuses on protecting and building food security, economic opportunity, and peace and stability - all severely under threat from the pandemic and its secondary impacts - in the world's most fragile environments. This includes a focus on ensuring that vaccines reach the last mile, and that vaccine distribution helps advance, rather than impedes, our development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding goals.

Leveraging our core strengths in building resilience and systems-strengthening, we partner with communities, local governments, and the private sector to strengthen their ability to cope with the crisis, minimize adverse effects, and foster long-term well-being. Throughout the pandemic, Mercy Corps will continue to respond to meet emergency



needs while strengthening local systems to accelerate sustained recovery and lay the foundation for a better, more secure future.

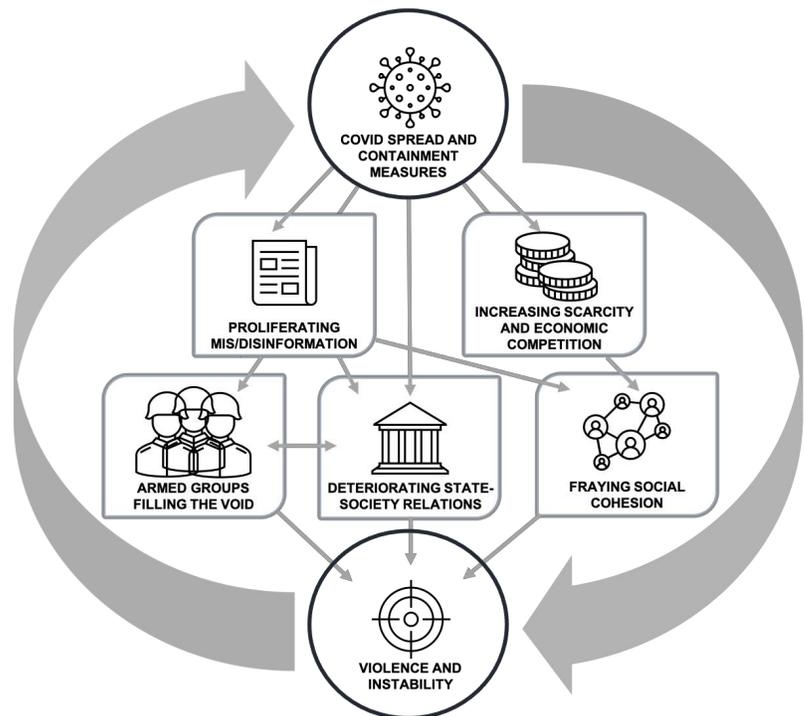
Rationale: Investing in Peace during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened risks for societies with low levels of social cohesion¹ and a lack of trust between citizens and the state. COVID-19 is now widely understood as a [threat multiplier](#) that can amplify existing conflict drivers, as well as an accelerant of existing conflict processes that can hasten a spiral into deeper instability. Research from past pandemics, like [HIV/AIDS](#) and [Ebola](#), makes clear that both exposure to infectious disease and the way that governments respond to an outbreak can [increase the risk of armed conflict](#). Conflict, in turn, tends to [exacerbate disease transmission](#) and [hinder public health responses](#).

Strengthening good governance is central to advancing peace amidst COVID-19, both because good governance and trust in public institutions have been shown to have a positive impact on economic and health-related outcomes, and because [addressing governance drivers of conflict](#) can strengthen the social contract and reduce violence, enabling improved health responses and thus promoting a virtuous cycle of public health and peace outcomes. The World Bank’s assessment on the first wave impacts of the virus found that trust in government institutions has proven to be an important determinant of the effectiveness of health policies, behaviours, and economic outcomes. In the case of COVID-19 and the relationship between community behaviour change and the level of government trust, high levels of trust in government (and interpersonal trust²) are likely to be associated with better compliance with social distancing measures.

Conversely, in contexts experiencing low levels of trust in public institutions and government, due to prior conflict and/or crisis, COVID-19 has further eroded public trust and social cohesion under the widening inequalities brought on by rising food insecurity, economic strain, and misinformation, overwhelming capacities for resilience. These factors have contributed to a climate of frustration that, when combined with existing tensions, has worsened government-citizen relationships and deepened competition between communities.³ In some contexts, increasing frustrations have contributed to [localised events of violence](#) as well as conflict on digital spaces.

Another prominent threat to peace is the rise of misinformation, creating an ‘infodemic’,



¹Mercy Corps defines 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.”

²Demirguc-Kunt, Asli; Lokshin, Michael; Torre, Ivan. 2020. [Opening-up Trajectories and Economic Recovery: Lessons after the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). Policy Research Working Paper; No. 9480. World Bank, Washington, DC. World Bank.

³UN/DESA Policy Brief #75: COVID-19: Reaffirming State-People Governance Relationships. May 2020.

that digital spaces have accelerated and that erode social cohesion and public trust. Both massive amounts of information and a rapidly evolving scientific understanding and response to the pandemic have created knowledge gaps, confusion, and mistrust, leaving room for misinformation and disinformation to fill the void. This information landscape has created conditions for malicious actors to take advantage of divisive narratives, sowing both reduced trust in officials and increased animosity between and stigmatization of identity groups. There is also suggestive evidence that providing people information on the progress of the pandemic may speed up the economic recovery process.⁴

Trust building and countering misinformation regarding vaccines are essential for increasing vaccine acceptance and will require an enormous, united effort from governments, public health experts, humanitarian groups, civil society, the private sector, and local community leaders. Without the appropriate trust in authorities, learning and engaging communities to address questions and concerns, as well as to participatory planning in communication efforts including addressing information voids, providing correct information and addressing misinformation, immunization efforts will not meet their targets, and vaccine hesitancy and refusal will increase - leading to prolonged cycles of disease spread and increased likelihood of further devastating secondary effects, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Learning from the Past: Lessons from Ebola

Mercy Corps' own experience working on the Ebola epidemics in West Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo has shown that ensuring a constructive exchange of information and healthy collaboration between communities, authorities, and responders can play a crucial role in enabling an effective response and preventing violence. For example, in Liberia Mercy Corps supported community mobilisation campaigns that reached over half the country and established two-way flows of information between communities and responders that led to an increase in the acceptance of health workers from 15% to 68%. (Community Mobilization: Essential for Stopping the Spread of Ebola. Mercy Corps. September 2019.)

COVID-19 Approach: Advancing Peace in Crisis

To help communities and countries achieve and maintain development gains and break out of a cycle of conflict and poverty, Mercy Corps adopts an Advancing Peace in Complex Crises framework. The objective of this framework is to support actors working in protracted crisis environments to better prevent and mitigate violence and advance peace within and across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts.

The Advancing Peace in Complex Crises framework is comprised of three components that are each highly relevant to the COVID-19 response in fragile contexts:

- **Conflict sensitive humanitarian action** is necessary to ensure that the immediate response to the pandemic does not exacerbate existing tensions. In particular, aid workers and governments will need to assess the risks and potential resistance around health behaviors and vaccination programmes. Based on that analysis they can take community concerns into consideration and communicate effectively around efforts to combat the virus while laying the groundwork for increased cooperation across groups in tension.

⁴Demirguc-Kunt, Asli; Lokshin, Michael; Torre, Ivan. 2020. [Opening-up Trajectories and Economic Recovery: Lessons after the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). Policy Research Working Paper; No. 9480. World Bank, Washington, DC. World Bank.

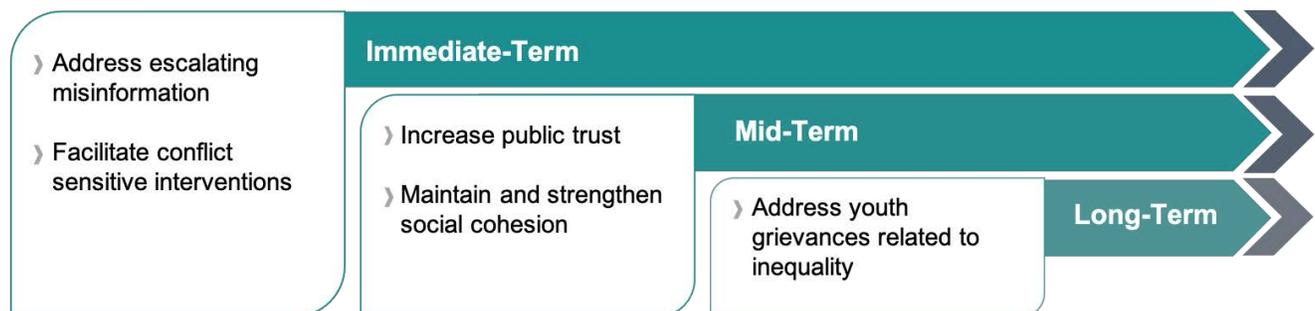
- **Violence reduction in the short- and medium-term** can help strengthen social cohesion and build public trust between authorities and their constituents. This will be required not only to overcome the pandemic in the coming years but also to build societies back following the economic disruption unleashed by the virus and build or strengthen the foundation for long-term, sustainable peace.
- **Development and peacebuilding to address underlying causes of conflict** is required in the longer-term so that communities are able to effectively respond to public health emergencies in the future, and to ensure that the current emergency does not leave lasting tears in the social fabric. In Nigeria for example, the experience of Ebola prepared the country for future epidemics, and their response to COVID-19 has provided models for community engagement that can help to build peace.⁵

Taken together, our approach focuses on delivering a response that strengthens sources of resilience to ensure that shocks, including COVID-19, do not lead to or escalate violence, and addresses root causes of social tensions to promote long-term peace and stability.

Drawing from Mercy Corps programs and ongoing evaluation and research on the COVID response, we integrate conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding as a part of the Mercy Corps cross-sectoral response to COVID and embedded in our WASH, Social Protection, and Food Security interventions. Peace and stability cross-sectoral integrated programming ensure program targeting reflects community dynamics, especially among host/displaced communities, working through local partners to navigate conflict drivers.

Programmatic Response: What We Do and How We Do it

Mercy Corps’ response seeks to mitigate and address the effects of immediate, visible effects of COVID-19 on stability, as well as prevent and prepare for the long-term adverse effects of COVID-19 on dynamics between identity groups and relations between state and society.



Address escalating misinformation: We tackle the COVID-19 infodemic for two purposes: 1) increase healthy behaviors and strengthen vaccination efforts that can slow the spread of the virus, drawing on our community networks and trusted presence; and 2) combat COVID-19-related misinformation that politicizes the pandemic, exacerbates divisions among different groups in society, and erodes the relationship between communities and leaders, thus increasing the likelihood for conflict. We seek to achieve these aims through **information monitoring and analysis** that deepens our understanding of misinformation spread, drawing on our country teams’ local community networks as well as to identify perceptions and messages related to COVID-19 and conflict dynamics and the relationship between them. We also draw on our country-led Crisis Analytics capacity for situation monitoring, our [CATALYSE](#) and [CARM](#)

⁵<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/nigeria-should-build-peace-it-fights-coronavirus>

processes to engage communities in analysis and solution creation, and Mercy Corps' [Weaponization of Social Media](#) framework. In order to foster trust in reliable information, we conduct social listening to understand the information landscape and then reinforce targeted information sharing as a **multi-way flow of communication** between and across communities, authorities, and other stakeholders. We meet communities where they are, **leveraging existing communication networks, online and offline**, to amplify locally trusted sources of accurate information.

Facilitate conflict-sensitive interventions: Mercy Corps draws on its tools and approaches in Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity to ensure that interventions related to COVID-19 do not inadvertently increase tensions and divisions. Conflict sensitivity is particularly essential for global efforts like vaccination delivery whose potential one-size-fits-all approach risks exacerbating very localized conflict dynamics and deepening social and economic inequalities. In addition, international aid workers face a particular risk in that the coronavirus pandemic is seen by many as being spread or even created by Western citizens. Drawing on tools developed under MC's [Advancing Peace in Complex Crises](#) framework and Crisis Analytics capacities, delivering a conflict sensitive response begins with regular, rapid, and local action research into the interaction between conflict dynamics and the COVID-19 response. Following that, responders and local authorities are trained on conflict sensitivity principles so that they can apply them to their work. Ensuring conflict sensitivity throughout interventions will require regular communication and dialogue—online and offline—between community members, authorities and aid actors.

Build public trust: The onset of COVID-19 has challenged governance systems, and instances of poor performance have eroded confidence in public institutions, and elevated mistrust between communities and leaders where it may have simmered previously. In order to mitigate the risk of social unrest and damage to social cohesion as a result of COVID-19, we focus on **community engagement** so that community members have opportunities to help lead the response to the virus in a way that strengthens community networks and citizen-state relations. We apply approaches such as [CATALYSE](#), dialogue facilitation, and interest-based negotiation and mediation to facilitate locally-created COVID-19 action plans that address the pandemic while providing an inclusive platform for constructive deliberation by community members and local authorities. Further, targeted advocacy with local authorities will ensure that there is approval and support for community and civil society work amid restrictions related to COVID-19. At the same time, increased trust in government is dependent on **inclusive, responsive, and effective service delivery**. We apply our governance capacity to local organizations and state service providers to strengthen services, and importantly, the process of service delivery, particularly around water and sanitation, and public health efforts. Crucially, public trust will also need to be built in international actors, as many of the vaccines originate from Western or other countries outside of Mercy Corps locations, and Western countries are also buying vaccine doses at the exclusion of low- and middle-income countries. Mistrust is already heightened as people around the world see Western countries as major hotspots for spreading the virus.

Maintain and strengthen social cohesion: Not only has cohesion between identity groups deteriorated since the advent of COVID-19 and its related effects, such as increased economic competition and a rise in misinformation, but strong, cohesive communities are more essential than ever to help societies cope with the lingering effects of COVID-19. Drawing on our deep experience facilitating joint initiatives across identity lines, fostering inclusive dialogue and decision-making, and peaceful dispute resolution, Mercy Corps seeks to **strengthen collective action and trust** between groups and communities, which will make them more resistant to shocks like COVID-19 well into the future. In the immediate term, effectively combating COVID-19 requires collective action: both ubiquitous adherence to safety measures to prevent the virus's spread and widespread vaccination acceptance to reach herd immunity. Into the future, partnering with local peacebuilding organizations and building on existing successes in community capacities and systems are essential to building sustainable social cohesion and the foundations of peace. We seek to integrate measures to strengthen relationships and trust across more multi-sector programs to increase the resilience capacities of

conflict-affected communities bracing for continued COVID-19 related shocks, challenges related to vaccine roll-out, and emerging secondary and tertiary effects of the pandemic.

In Iraq, Mercy Corps social cohesion programming enables communities to mitigate conflict and build bridges across ethno-religious divides. Our core methodology and support of community action groups has been built over several years working with community leaders representing the diversity of the community to form community action groups that, with training, develop community action plans that identify drivers of conflict and recommend social projects to address these drivers of conflict. As COVID-19 misinformation campaigns began to create new divisions in the social fabric of these communities in Iraq, we adapted these community action groups to become essential focal points, positioned to mitigate and manage deepening divisions and misinformation marginalizing vulnerable communities.

Address youth grievances related to inequality: Injustice, marginalization, and exclusion are all well-documented [drivers](#) of [youth participation in violence](#), which can lead to or exacerbate conflict between communities and the state. COVID-19 and its containment measures have already contributed to increased inequality and also have laid bare existing inequality in a stark way. While less visible, such effects of inequality—and importantly, perceptions of inequality—carry the potential to spark new forms of unrest or tip some societies past breaking point. The specific dynamics of COVID-19—its disproportionate health risks to older people but far-reaching economic and social effects on young people—and vaccine prioritization protocols threatens to exacerbate generational divides as well, which can further alienate young people from traditional power brokers, particularly in gerontocratic societies. These grievances combined with efforts by non-state armed groups - including violent extremist organizations - to exploit the political and economic fallout from the pandemic can create new opportunities for violent mobilization. Our analytical capacity, as mentioned above, is crucial for understanding when and how these dynamics might play out in local contexts and preventing the worst effects from occurring. Mercy Corps draws on its long history of engaging youth through Positive Youth Development, creating opportunities for youth to influence leaders to effect changes that can improve their lives while at the same time building leaders’ trust in youth capacity, and providing youth with ways to advance socioeconomically. Our efforts to date must be scaled to reach the type of youth engagement levels required to help prevent or transform the new conflict drivers exacerbated by COVID-19 and withstand its ripple effects—seen and unseen—into the future.

Research, Learning, and Influence

A key pillar of Mercy Corps’ peace and conflict response to COVID is utilizing our existing evidence base while investing in further research to better understand the impact of the pandemic on conflict and violence, assess “what works” in mitigating or addressing these impacts, and document good practices to both identify scalable solutions and ensure context-appropriate responses. In addition to informing Mercy Corps’ own programming, our [research and learning agenda](#) seeks to generate evidence at the global and country levels to inform policymakers, investors, and practitioners on how to effectively bolster communities’ resilience and build peace during the COVID crisis and recovery. Our expansive internal study on humanitarian assistance and peace⁶ was critical in identifying

⁶[Advancing Peace in a Changed World](#). Mercy Corps. September 2020.

success factors for advancing peace in crisis, from which we built the Advancing Peace in Complex Crises Framework - a critical tool for shaping our rapid adaptation of programs to respond to the COVID pandemic.

Throughout the course of adapting to the ongoing pandemic, Mercy Corps has used information from program teams in more than 40 countries to identify pathways through which the spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of containment measures are potentially aggravating conflict risks.⁷ Building on this framework, Mercy Corps developed a case study of ongoing dynamics related to governance, conflict, and the pandemic in Northeast Nigeria. We are currently expanding this research through an [in-depth study](#) of how the virus and associated response measures have changed factors that contribute to conflict and violence in three countries - Afghanistan, Colombia, and Nigeria - using a [conflict systems analysis](#). We are also adding COVID-specific modules to ongoing studies of conflict, governance, and livelihoods in Somalia, Jordan, Syria, South Sudan, Myanmar and Yemen. Together, this research will help us understand where, when, and how to proactively respond to COVID-related conflict impacts - and influence broader humanitarian and development responses.

These studies underscore the imperative for donors and practitioners to effectively address both the spread of COVID and broader governance and peacebuilding goals concurrently. The evidence we have gathered so far suggests that when strained state-society relations are a cause or consequence of pre-existing conflict, responses to COVID-19 that fail to incorporate governance and peacebuilding approaches run the risk of undermining public health goals while further exacerbating cycles of violence. In such contexts, longstanding political and economic grievances and mistrust shape the narratives through which communities understand the spread of COVID-19 and responses to it by both government and international actors. It is therefore essential that our approach considers these grievances and the underlying structural issues that reinforce them in formulating context-specific messaging to counter misinformation, improve public trust and mitigate threats to social cohesion.

Recommendations for Donors and Implementers

Advancing peace takes the concerted efforts of multiple actors, from implementing organisations to civil society, donor governments, security and diplomatic actors, and the private sector. COVID-19 could present opportunities for governments, donors, and practitioners to catalyze some positive trends toward peace while blunting the political, economic, and social consequences of the virus. Before these opportunities recede, the international community must ensure that crucial investments to address conflict drivers—both those that predate the pandemic and those that have been exacerbated by it—are not diverted elsewhere, while proactively anticipating and preventing COVID-19's worst impacts in conflict-affected contexts.

History suggests that the conflict-intensifying effects of pandemics can linger for years after the outbreak ends.⁸

Therefore, donors and governments should:

- **Anticipate and proactively invest in mitigating the secondary and tertiary impacts of COVID-19 on stability**, creating longer funding time horizons that account for the anticipated long-lasting effects of inequality, misinformation, and poor governance on peace and resilience.
- **Maintain and increase investments towards addressing the governance, conflict, and security factors** that are exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, and which threaten to undermine the public health response and long-term peace and stability if not addressed.

⁷Advancing Peace in a Changed World. Mercy Corps. September 2020.

⁸González-Torres, Ada and Esposito, Elena, 'Epidemics and Conflict: Evidence from the Ebola Outbreak in Western Africa' (May 31, 2016).

- **Invest in rigorous research** to test the immediate, medium-term, and long-term effectiveness of responses programming approaches that aim to prevent and mitigate COVID-19's impact on conflict dynamics.

Implementing agencies should:

- **Incorporate conflict sensitivity** in all COVID-19 responses, whether those focus on public health outcomes or the secondary impacts of the pandemic and its containment measures.
- **Address the known impacts of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics** by strengthening social cohesion, improving state-society relationships, combating mis-/disinformation, and extending economic assistance to the most marginalized. Approaches should draw on existing tools, evidence, and best practice for peacebuilding while also remaining flexible and responsive to rapidly changing conditions related to the pandemic's spread, vaccine distribution, and other government responses to it.
- **Focus programming on those most marginalized and hardest hit by COVID-19's secondary impacts, such as youth and women**, to prevent frustration with government, injustice, and rising inequality from pushing societies to a breaking point of fragility.
- **Seize 'windows of opportunity' created by COVID-related disruptions to advance peace.** In aggressively addressing these impacts and forging stronger relationships between communities and between citizens and the state, we have an opportunity to bolster communities' resilience to COVID-19 and build the foundations for lasting security.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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