

HOW COVID-19 IS DRIVING RISK OF CONFLICT

Policy Brief

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An [in-depth study by Mercy Corps](#) based on interviews and focus group discussions with more than 600 individuals in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Colombia shows that **COVID-19, and responses to it, are exacerbating drivers of conflict** by:

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1. Diminishing trust in government leaders and institutions
 2. Increasing economic hardship and resource scarcity
 3. Disrupting, and often eroding, social cohesion

In these three distinct conflict-affected contexts, the pandemic has proven to be a **boon for armed groups, criminal networks, and disruptive actors** that have expanded their spheres of influence by capitalising on communities' increased vulnerability and disillusion with local or national governments. This has manifested in various ways -- for example expanding recruitment, fomenting illicit economic activities such as drug trafficking, or offering financial incentives to garner support.

The policy implications of these trends are far-reaching – whether preventing disease spread, achieving mass immunisation, recovering lost and disrupted livelihoods, or building communities resilience to outbreaks of new conflicts and the deterioration of existing ones. The findings of this report serve as vital early **warning signs of the potential for instability and worsening conflict**, which are likely to outlast the pandemic and have repercussions for national security and international peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE UK GOVERNMENT

1. Integrate conflict prevention into COVID-19 response and adopt a holistic approach to pandemic recovery. The UK should also reverse the cuts to, and instead increase investment in, conflict-prevention and peacebuilding programming.

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 prioritises 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.

The cuts to the aid budget, including to the CSSF and to planned conflict prevention work, will ultimately drive further humanitarian need, conflict, food insecurity and poverty. FCDO's budget for 2021-2022 allocates only £419 million - 5% of the total FCDO ODA allocation - to open societies and conflict. The UK government has also failed to reconfirm its previous commitment to spend 50% of ODA in Fragile and Conflict Affected states. This goes against the UK's historic commitment to protect the most vulnerable, particularly in places affected by war and instability.

With longer-term efforts to address root causes of conflict, we will be better able to achieve our global development goals. Research has shown that every \$1 spent on peacebuilding would reduce the costs of conflict by \$16. The pandemic's deleterious effects on conflict drivers and its potential to exacerbate global fragility means that addressing both the long term drivers and immediate triggers of conflict is more critical than ever before. The FCDO should therefore:

- Ensure that the COVID-19 response includes a commitment to **integrating conflict analysis into all pandemic response activities.**
- **Respond to immediate needs while supporting jobs and livelihoods** that help communities recover from the economic shocks of the pandemic in ways that build resilience to future shocks and stresses. Ensure that funds that build social cohesion or address the root causes of conflict, such as livelihoods programmes are not diverted elsewhere, including within responses to COVID-19 or other emergencies.
- **Maintain robust funding to promote democracy and protect human rights.** Our report underscores the importance of supporting good governance, improving state-society relations, and protecting human rights, particularly among marginalised communities, to overcome the secondary impacts of COVID-19 and stave off the heightened risks to peace and stability caused by the pandemic. An effective local government response will be key to preventing disease spread and repairing strained state-society relations exploited by non-state armed groups during the pandemic.
- **Strengthen social cohesion within and between communities** by countering narratives that heighten conflict, fortifying grassroots dispute-resolution mechanisms weakened during the pandemic, and promoting collaborative approaches to natural resource management and community development in order to bring people together to cooperatively address shared challenges.
- **Embrace funding models that permit greater flexibility and innovation** to allow necessary adaptations to conflict resolution, prevention and peacebuilding interventions in the COVID-19 context. This includes support to local peacebuilding in order to manage community-level tensions and direct funding to local organisations for community level engagement.

2. The forthcoming FCDO Conflict Strategic framework should build on the UK's expertise and capacity in effective conflict prevention and have conflict prevention and peacebuilding at its centre, and ensure these are integrated across our international responses.

The Integrated Review (IR) prioritised conflict resolution and tackling the drivers of instability, and the retention of the CSSF, however, this has not been supported by adequate resourcing, and instead comes amidst significant cuts for fragile states. Our report demonstrates the need for concerted action to alleviate poverty, promote development, prevent democratic and economic backsliding, and connect good governance to conflict prevention. The forthcoming Conflict Strategic framework should **prioritise countries and regions most at risk of instability** and fully embrace the peace strand of the humanitarian, development and peace 'triple' nexus, by addressing drivers of conflict and violence - both those that predate the COVID-19 crisis, and those exacerbated by it. The framework should:

- Have a **whole-of-government approach** that aligns diplomacy, defence, and programmatic assistance to bring chronic crises to an end, whilst also ensuring that the drivers and root causes of conflict are addressed, including poor governance and inequality.
- Inform how aid can best help communities, states and regions **transition from fragility to stability**. The framework could also be used to organise cross-departmental UK conflict prevention efforts, whilst also helping the UK monitor cumulative investment towards SDG16.
- Include an **accountability framework** which will drive a more strategic approach that identifies and coordinates ministries' respective capabilities whilst also robustly engaging with civil society.
- Ensure all programmes and strategies for the seven **ODA priority areas are conflict sensitive** and based on gender and conflict analyses.
- **Prioritise research and apply lessons-learned:** Mercy Corps' research provides an important contribution to mapping the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on conflict, insecurity, and instability. Still, there is much we do not yet know that must be better understood to enact conflict transformation and violence prevention as the world emerges from the pandemic. The FCDO should therefore partner with research entities to develop a comprehensive learning agenda.
- **Enable locally led, participatory approaches by supporting capacity sharing, and the meaningful engagement of local and national NGOs.** This includes engaging young people and youth-led organisations and ensuring women's participation in all conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts. **There should also be meaningful consultation with and support of local communities** through participatory, locally led programs, drawing on local knowledge and expertise, and ensuring that those most affected by deteriorating security conditions are able to inform and help lead efforts to prevent conflict and build resilience.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organisation 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.