

SIX MONTHS IN: COVID-19 IMPACTS ON CONFLICT

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Event Summary



On Wednesday 30 September 2020, the All Party Parliamentary Group on the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development, in collaboration with [Mercy Corps](#), hosted an online panel discussion to explore the impact of COVID-19 on conflict six months into the pandemic. This discussion was a follow-up to a previous session on the same topic that took place in May 2020, both of which were chaired by Rt Hon Lord Jack McConnell, Co-Chair of the APPG on the UN Global Goals.

The panel event brought together the FCDO Head of Profession for Conflict and peacebuilding experts from Mercy Corps, to ground-truth the impacts of COVID-19 on conflict. In a lively discussion, the speakers assessed our collective response so far and considered what more can be done to safeguard the ambitions of the SDGs. Over 75 participants including UK parliamentary and government representatives and civil society joined the event.¹

GLOBAL VIEW

Lisa Inks, Peace & Conflict Director, Mercy Corps

- Six months in, Mercy Corps has taken evidence - from over 40 countries where we work - on how COVID-19 is affecting conflict, and vice versa. In some places we are seeing immediate effects such as violent protests and intercommunal violence. In others the impacts are not yet visible or fully realised.
- We have identified four main ways in which COVID-19 and government responses to it are impacting conflict dynamics:
 1. **Fraying social cohesion:** COVID-19 is increasing stigmatisation and scapegoating across identity groups. In 22 countries, our teams reported that the pandemic has contributed to deteriorating relationships between local groups.
 2. **Deteriorating relationships between state and society:** In some cases, local populations have seen COVID-19 as an opportunity for government corruption or exclusive and repressive behaviour, leading to increased mob violence and protests. Some armed opposition groups (including violent extremist groups) are filling the void that governments are creating, capitalising on poor responses and grievances to expand their influence.

¹ Please note this summary includes additional recommendations to those discussed in the webinar.

3. **Proliferating mis-/disinformation:** The widely discussed “infodemic” is not only hampering public health outcomes, but also contributing to conflict by fuelling fears and hostility across identity groups.
 4. **Increased economic scarcity and competition:** is further fraying social cohesion and in some cases directly encouraging theft and looting. Past research shows that inequality is a strong motivator for joining armed opposition groups.
- Even before COVID-19, the world was already behind on SDG16. It is more vital than ever that donors, including the FCDO, actively prioritise and increase investments towards the prevention of conflict and resolution of chronic crises, addressing both the long term drivers and immediate triggers of conflict. We urge the UK to establish a whole-of-government strategy for peacebuilding and conflict prevention informed by the Building Stability Framework. It is also essential that COVID-19 responses are conflict sensitive and focus on fragile and conflict affected states, where we will see the vicious cycle play out.

Please see Mercy Corps’ report [Advancing Peace in a Changed World](#) for more detail.

COUNTRY SPECIFIC TESTIMONIES

NIGERIA: Rahama Baloni, Programme Manager, Mercy Corps Nigeria

- Over the past six months, drivers of conflict have significantly increased in Nigeria. In some cases this has led to more violence, in others it has not.
- In particular, we have noted an increase in **gender based violence (GBV)** in both rural and urban areas, attributed to job losses and unemployment; and to **farmer-herder conflict**, whereby herders have often been unable to move due to government lockdowns. This has heightened competition and has taken on dangerous religious and ethnic dimensions.
- There are three main drivers of conflict manifesting in Nigeria: **strained state society relations** - as illustrated by citizens’ deep suspicion and mistrust of a recent government COVID-19 policy; **misinformation and disinformation** - with countless stories that the pandemic is a hoax for politicians to enrich themselves; and finally, **economic impacts** - which is increasing social tensions and driving anti-government protests.
- In response, we are piloting a rumour tracker in the Northeast, have rolled out a communications campaign using mobile phones and radio, and are working with local governments to help bridge the communication gap with communities.
- Whilst some of these conflict drivers predate COVID-19, they are being exacerbated by the pandemic. Left unaddressed they will reverse development progress and increase humanitarian needs in the long-term.

IRAQ: Muhammed Ismael, Senior Programme Manager, Mercy Corps Iraq

- Before COVID-19, Iraq was already facing tribal, ethnic, religious and political divisions. These are now complicated by one of the highest recorded COVID-19 outbreaks in the region.
- We are particularly concerned about increased **tension and division between communities:**
- A recent survey of community leaders in Ninewa and Anbar indicated that 65% of people believe the level of cooperation and trust in their community has changed since COVID. Stigmatisation towards Iranian and Iranian-affiliated people has also increased as they are seen as a primary source of infection.
- **Relations between government and communities** are also deteriorating. The Iraqi population was already unhappy about their government performance before the pandemic hit. Citizens are blaming the government for the mismanagement of the outbreak- while also criticising the heavy restrictions that have been implemented. 85% of respondents to our survey reported they were unhappy about how the government is dealing with COVID-19.

- Efforts by the new government to improve coordination with the international community are positive but there is more to do. It is vital to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion by enhancing inclusion in the response. Donors must also continue and scale up financial support for long-term programming to address the root causes of conflict, including poor governance.

UK GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

Rebecca Dale, Head of Profession for Conflict, FCDO

- This is going to be a protracted and compound crisis. Getting to grips with the secondary impacts of COVID-19 is critical, not only for our own response, but for helping move the international response towards thinking about the SDGs as a whole and the impacts of COVID-19 on conflict.
- The UK sees its responsibility on COVID-19 as quite broad, particularly given we are coming up to the G7 presidency and COP26. We will not be able to respond to conflict drivers unless we respond to other intersecting issues including COVID-19 and climate change.
- The evidence of COVID-19 and government responses impacting conflict drivers still needs further interrogation. We can say with some confidence however that we are already seeing an impact on conflict drivers - especially around: fraud and corruption, organised crime, disinformation and misuse of anti-disinformation legislation, sexual gender based violence, and an increase in "everyday authoritarianism".
- The UK has a four pillar COVID-19 response:
 1. **Strengthening global health security, vaccines etc:** The UK is focused on international cooperation, openness and transparency and invest in development into vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics.
 2. **Supporting the global economy:** We are working to ensure that massive programmes dealing with economic impacts, for example, are conflict sensitive and are not exacerbating conflict dynamics.
 3. **Supporting the most vulnerable countries and groups:** We are focusing on countries considered more vulnerable, many of which are fragile and conflict affected, and doing it in a way to address conflict drivers as much as possible.
 4. **Building back better:** This is about clean, inclusive and resilient recovery, for which peacebuilding must be seen as a critical part.
- At a global level we are working to ensure conflict sensitivity, which is not easily done, and making the case for prioritising secondary impacts of COVID-19 at a time of enormous stress on our budgets. At a country level, we are taking a multi-sectoral approach, pivoting programmes to address COVID-19, and trying to make sure conflict programmes continue to address short and long term drivers of instability.
- The new FCDO should be an opportunity for us to do better on this. You see that in places such as Nigeria and Kenya where FCO and DFID were already working hand in glove on these issues. I am also hoping as we broaden cooperation, it will make a difference to our international clout.

DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

Leave No One Behind: Concerns were shared around the impact of the pandemic on the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) agenda given that the pandemic has lifted the lid on huge inequality. There is a danger of reversal across the SDGs and also of that reversal exacerbating conflict drivers. We cannot forget the bottom billion. If we 'build back better' coming out of the pandemic, we might be able to target groups that have been left behind in the past and build more stability.

A need for more data: There is also a need for more data - particularly to investigate if there is any difference between the spread of COVID-19 in conflict affected countries versus non-conflict affected countries. This will help us to further understand the impacts of COVID-19 and therefore our responses.