

Fuel to the fire: Is the COVID-19 pandemic a driver of conflict?

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Last week, António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, called for a global ceasefire so that humanity could collectively address the COVID-19 pandemic. He did this because he realises, like we do, that COVID-19 could exacerbate existing divisions, or contribute to creating new conflicts.

Conflict is the single biggest driver of humanitarian crisis today. Insecurity seriously hampers effective humanitarian responses, including to the COVID-19 pandemic, which will cost additional lives.

The pandemic is already having a significant impact on the global economy, and it may yet devastate an already weakened global economy, causing increased unemployment, decreasing consumption, and collapsing supply chains. A serious global economic recession lasting well beyond the immediate impacts of the virus looks inevitable.

The people disproportionately impacted economically by isolation or lockdown strategies are – inevitably – the poor. Those who live precariously will be increasingly unlikely to make ends meet. In countries without social security systems, this can be catastrophic. Of them, the urban poor are probably the most vulnerable, as they are more reliant on a cash economy than the rural poor.

Additionally, in many urban areas and refugee and displacement camps, social distancing is largely impossible, and with water, soap and healthcare in short supply, the rate of transmission may be very high. In many contexts, health systems will be inadequate to meet the surge in need.

There is already fear and panic surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, fuelled by a frequently emotive and alarmist media. In many areas of the world, where conditions are insecure and precarious, this pressure is additional to an already existing burden of fear and stress. As poor people try to circumvent isolation measures, so enforcement may become stricter, leading to civil disorder – as has been seen recently in a number of countries. You can track disorder related to COVID-19 here: <https://acleddata.com/analysis/covid-19-disorder-tracker/>

Too little; too late; too strict; military back on the streets; fines and beatings; accusations of politicians taking advantage of the situation for their own political gains; frustration at the erosion

of public services and safety nets by years of austerity measures, the blame game... all of these claims are being heard.

Disasters create ideal conditions to drive through unpopular policies, such as austerity measures and restricted human rights. Having extended control measures under the guise of controlling COVID-19, some governments may not be willing to fully relax them afterwards. A violent reaction to these outcomes may not happen yet, but it probably will. One only needs to look at recent popular uprisings in Chile, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan, among many, to see how the poor and marginalised masses might react.

Will this fuel conflict? Urban areas are often strongholds for the opposition and gangs. Popular uprisings normally start in urban areas. Large numbers of frightened, urbanised, unemployed people, connected through social media, can mobilise against oppression very rapidly, or can be manipulated by politicians for their own ends.

Closed borders can also be sites of unrest as has been seen between Kenya and Ethiopia. Isolationist and nationalist politics can pit nation states against each other, especially as some leaders engage in racializing the virus.

A rise in conflict resulting from the economic and political impacts of COVID-19 is highly likely.

In countries already dealing with past or present conflict, or where there is a high potential for conflict (which is true of most of the countries in which Concern works); the government's ability to manage public health crises is already compromised. As was seen in DRC during the recent Ebola crisis, conflict makes the management of epidemics significantly more dangerous and challenging.

Inevitably, humanitarian need will increase as a result of COVID-19, but funding to the humanitarian sector may well go down at the same time. Before the pandemic was declared, humanitarian funding only covered about 50% of proposed life-saving programmes in conflict contexts. Compensatory budget measures may well divert money from overseas humanitarian aid into domestic responses; and existing humanitarian aid budgets may also be re-assigned to COVID-19 responses, away from other critical, life-saving humanitarian responses which will become more important in the coming weeks and months. This cannot happen.

We are only as strong as the weakest health system: therefore if we are to make progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the global recovery must be more inclusive and we must recover better than efforts made the 2008 financial crisis.

Conflict drivers need to be addressed by all as a matter of urgency. The building blocks for the revitalisation of the global economy must be put in place by national and international leadership as soon as possible, targeted towards the extreme poor in countries already dealing with conflict dynamics.

For those donor countries facing inwards and trying to address the pandemic within their own countries, there is a simple message: **collapsing economies and conflict in other countries will inevitably affect us all.**

Now is the time, more than ever, for the global community to come together, and not to isolate or only think about domestic priorities. At the very least, all countries should step up to the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, especially in places like Syria and Yemen, and

contribute to the UN's initial \$2 billion appeal to address the humanitarian consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concern supports the #globalceasefire campaign, an initiative of more than 190 NGOs and civil society actors supporting the Secretary-General's call for every country to put their differences aside and collectively address the COVID-19 pandemic.