How do we build peace during a pandemic?
Lessons for peacebuilding and health sector organisations

Peace
is within
our power

Executive summary

The repercussions of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) have reverberated across the global peace and security landscape, creating and heightening risk factors for conflict across social, political and economic spheres, often exacerbating already fragile situations. The pandemic, and the operational restrictions that accompanied it, also forced a rapid adaptation of the way peacebuilding was delivered by local and international actors.

Using illustrative examples provided by peacebuilding organisations around the world, this background paper attempts to understand better the new environments in which peacebuilders are operating, focusing on conflict dynamics that have arisen in the last year and looking at how peacebuilders are addressing these. It also explores the ways in which local practitioners are using their skills, knowledge and networks to strengthen the COVID-19 response and recovery.

The paper is structured around five programming strands:

1. **Drawing on peacebuilders' contextual knowledge to inform short- and long-term responses to COVID-19;**
2. **Supporting conflict-sensitive public health and humanitarian responses, vaccination, and long-term recovery interventions;**
3. **Countering divisive narratives and building bridges across divides;**
4. **Building trust and accountability between citizens and state; and**
5. **Reducing gender inequalities through responding to COVID-19 and its impacts.**

The case studies in this paper clearly illustrate the positive impact of peacebuilding across these areas and the importance of continued collaboration with humanitarian and development actors in a multidimensional crisis. Evidence from Rwanda demonstrates the value of psychosocial support for genocide survivors and perpetrators in alleviating potential trauma associated with government restrictions. Digital platforms have enabled thought leaders from both sides of the Line of Control in Kashmir to share information and guidance on the pandemic and its effects on social cohesion.

The paper also identifies the ways in which the peacebuilding sector must strengthen its role in the multi-sectoral response and grapple with new ways of working in unprecedented

and protracted crisis settings. Insights were shared into the limitations of digital engagement over the long-term, with experiences in Somalia identifying the need for continued advocacy around technological access for marginalised communities. The urgency of alternative avenues of mental health support for practitioners and beneficiaries were identified by several respondents as the health impacts of the pandemic increasingly extend beyond the physical in a socially distanced environment.

Above all, this background paper depicts the ways in which the pandemic has magnified the structural inequalities and injustices driving violence and unrest in fragile contexts. This awareness must be transformed into increased resources and support for local peacebuilding practitioners to address the structural drivers of conflict, drawing upon their contextual knowledge of conflict dynamics and their strong presence and networks in isolated and conflict-affected areas.

1. Introduction

Over a year has now passed since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on the 11 March 2020. The multidimensional effects of the virus have traversed social, economic and political spheres, with women, children, the elderly, informal workers and people on the move often disproportionately impacted. These consequences have had diverse and far-reaching implications for peace and conflict, with recent data demonstrating that violence has sadly escalated in many conflict-affected contexts over the last 12 months.[1] Although the approval and initial distribution of several vaccines has represented hope for many in the Global North, the length and breadth of an inherently inequitable vaccine delivery and the arrival of numerous new variants indicate that the crisis is far from over. Critical risk factors for violence remain a pressing concern.

Yet at a time when peacebuilding is more needed than ever, dedicated funds have been requisitioned for COVID-19 relief, while practical constraints arising from the global hiatus in domestic and international travel have upended traditional approaches to peacebuilding and limited engagement in global venues.[2] Although peacebuilders' capacities have been severely stretched in the face of increasing demand and dwindling resources, they remain at the forefront of the COVID-19 response, providing immediate attention to emerging conflict trends, adapting existing programmes to

Can we build peace from a distance?[3]

International Alert's recent background paper explores the ways in which COVID-19 has disrupted one of the foundational principles of peacebuilding practice: bringing people together face to face. The paper examines how an online transition challenges the creation of safe spaces, particularly with regard to sensitive issues, and jeopardises trust-building in peace mediation and dialogue over the long term. The consequences of inequitable access to the digital world have meant that some now hold a new form of power, while further marginalising others, potentially aggravating grievances and conflict. The evolving global context and changing practice of peacebuilding have, however, opened the space to consider exactly how the localisation agenda can finally be realised, with the possibilities of transferring project implementation and service delivery to local staff or commissioning new partners. The sector must work together to navigate challenges such as the transfer of risks and fluctuating donor support to fulfil this agenda in reality.

maintain peace gains and working across the humanitarian and development spheres to ensure the conflict sensitivity of interventions.

This background paper has been compiled by International Alert, with generous contributions from peacebuilding partners and civil society organisations around the world. It builds upon the methodological analysis of core peacebuilding practice presented in International Alert's *'Can we build peace from a distance?'* [4] by exploring the ways in which practitioners are using their skills, knowledge and networks to support and strengthen the COVID-19 response and illustrating the value of integrating peacebuilding approaches at a local level. It takes as its starting point that substantive incorporation of peace outcomes in pandemic responses is essential to ensure the success of interventions rolled out in the context of deepening social divisions, to mitigate emerging conflict trends and to take advantage of opportunities to address comprehensively the root causes of conflict.

The paper draws in part on an in-depth scenario-planning exercise that International Alert undertook to guide its own strategy and operations as the pandemic took hold. This generated early insights into potential conflict dynamics and the changing role of peacebuilders in the context of COVID-19. The five programming areas around which the paper is structured were identified and refined through a series of reflection sessions with our global team. They seek to respond to the diverse ways the pandemic has interacted with pre-existing conflict and tensions and build upon opportunities to address the structural drivers of violence. These areas were further informed by a 'call for evidence' and structured interviews with local, national and international peacebuilding organisations who kindly provided illustrative examples of impactful peacebuilding responses, but also their views on the new challenges and opportunities which the pandemic has presented for peacebuilding, enabling us to critically examine gaps and areas for improvement.

2. Drawing on peacebuilders' contextual knowledge to inform short and long-term responses to COVID-19

COVID-19 has triggered a global health emergency, with secondary impacts spanning all aspects of life – from a deepening economic crisis and rising food insecurity, to buckling healthcare systems and an upswing in violence, both in the home and at large. Although an international crisis such as this requires a coordinated, coherent and global response, it must also be adaptable enough to respond to the differences in how the pandemic intersects with the social, economic and political contours of each country – doubly so, where conflict is concerned. Furthermore, adaptation is something that must be sustained over time. While some impacts have been evident immediately, many will take months and years to become apparent.

Drawing in conflict and gender analyses to inform the design of COVID-19 responses will help anticipate and face down this challenge. Where applied, it will increase the adaptability, effectiveness and long-term sustainability of assistance, while avoiding the potential for uncontextualised programming to exacerbate conflict dynamics. Data disaggregated by gender, age, disability and ethnicity will help to account for the differentiated impacts of the virus on vulnerable groups and to tailor programming accordingly.[5]

Peacebuilding organisations, particularly local ones, are well placed to produce highly detailed and nuanced conflict analysis. Present in the majority of conflict-affected contexts, peacebuilding organisations have access to hard-to-reach and highly marginalised populations, enjoying hard-won relationships and trust built up over years. Their analysis has informed COVID-19 responses over the short term and can inform conflict- and gender-sensitive recovery strategies in

The Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office of Lanao del Sur in southern Philippines uses our general reference maps in planning and coordinating their COVID-19-prevention activities in the province.

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the medium- to long-term. This is particularly the case when peacebuilding organisations at local and international levels work together to ensure that local analysis reaches the ears of national and international decision-makers.

Case studies collected from peacebuilding organisations around the world demonstrate the potential of robust analysis to inform approaches and influence change. The Water, Peace and Security partnership has used its Global

Early Warning Tool to predict possible conflict in Zimbabwe triggered by the interaction of poor political and economic conditions, COVID-19 and drought, using it to warn global actors. At a sub-national level, International Alert's team in the Philippines have adapted their Conflict Alert tool to monitor the impact of COVID-19 responses on community tensions, identifying increased tensions within Muslim communities as a response to culturally-insensitive actions by the government. This evidence was then used to advocate successfully for policy change.

Early warning systems: water, peace and security

Innovative technologies are enabling peacebuilders to deliver timely, credible and insightful analysis of conflict dynamics to inform the COVID-19 response. Early warning systems can map out detailed conflict hotspots on the ground, enabling stakeholders to provide early prevention. The Water, Peace and Security (WPS) partnership is a collaboration between the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a consortium of partners spanning academia, peacebuilding and natural resource management. The system raises awareness of water scarcity as a conflict trigger, using machine learning to analyse 80 different datasets of indicators such as migration, water, infrastructure and the economy. Over the last year, the tool has assessed the impacts of COVID-19 to pinpoint conflict and design effective response mechanisms. The September quarterly report found that poor economic and political conditions together with COVID-19 are compounding drought-driven food insecurity in Zimbabwe and predicts emerging conflict in the Harare region over the next 12 months, alongside conflict hotspots in Bangladesh and Kenya among others.

Conflict Alert and Critical Events Monitoring System in the Philippines

At the onset of the pandemic, Alert's Philippines team expanded the thematic and geographical scope of its SMS and high frequency radio-based Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) to include the effects of the government COVID-19 response on peace and human security within and beyond the Bangsamoro region. The team and its Early Response Network (ERN) across the country tracked COVID-19-related tensions and critical events in real time and coordinated a multi-stakeholder response in addressing urgent issues, including access to relief, bullying and intimidation by security auxiliary groups, the use of excessive force in the application of quarantine rules, and the absence of culturally sensitive protocols in the handling of the sick and the management and disposal of the dead.

Within the National Capital Region, the Philippines team discovered cases of discrimination toward the religious practices of Muslim populations that had heightened tensions during the lockdown. The team's quick advocacy work influenced the issuance of a national directive from the Department of the Interior and Local Government. The 'Interim Guidelines on the Management of Human Remains for Patients Under Investigation and Confirmed COVID-19 Cases' now include special considerations to respect religious and cultural practices, and local government units will ensure that any person of Muslim heritage who died as a person-under-investigation or a COVID-19 case will be given a decent burial in the nearest Muslim cemetery, following the appropriate Islamic burial rites. Informed by CEMS, the Philippines team was able to support equal respect for marginalised populations, preserve religious traditions, and prevent potential violence stemming from conflict-insensitive pandemic responses.

The Philippines team also complemented its conflict monitoring work by deploying printed, large-format maps and digital thematic maps, produced through GIS technology, to local government units in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur at the start of the country's first hard lockdown measures, allowing these local governments to craft contextually relevant and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 responses. The large-format maps feature the topographical characteristics of a locality, its built-up areas, rivers, and road systems, while the digital maps provide information on geohazards and conflict incidents from 2011-2019 that the team had gathered through its 10-year Conflict Alert monitoring system. The local government units used the spatial information in mapping out and implementing monitoring, isolation, testing, contact tracing, and relief distribution strategies, to ensure the processes did not exacerbate existing conflict or lead to new ones.

COVID-19 and conflict monitoring led by young people in Kenya

The Life & Peace Institute's Kenya team organised a youth conflict monitoring initiative involving 15 of their peacebuilding partners, including Feminists for Peace, Justice and Rights Centre, Conquering Youth Achievers and the Kamukunji Community Peace Network. The group monitored COVID-19 cases and conflict trends in seven settlements around Nairobi where violence was occurring but was being overshadowed by the pandemic. The young peacebuilders found significant cases of gender-based violence and a notable increase in violence experienced by men. Losses of livelihood and economic insecurity had resulted in rising petty crime rates and mental health issues, including depression and suicide attempts attributed to the pandemic's impact. This timely data was shared virtually among the peacebuilding network in weekly dialogues. The young people then used social media platforms to raise awareness about violence in their communities and highlight relevant phone numbers for support, alongside COVID-19 health and safety guidance. In addition, the team provided water, food, masks and support for those in need and used their data to inform gender-based violence response organisations of cases and to support access to safe houses for survivors.

Peacebuilders have also been able to use their existing networks to understand the impact of COVID-19 on communities under stress, maintaining a focus on conflicts that risk being overshadowed by the pandemic, as well as understanding and addressing sensitive issues such as mental health and domestic violence. The experience of the Life & Peace Institute's partner network working in settlements around Nairobi highlights the importance of local peacebuilders in supporting communities to deal with the increased incidence of mental health challenges, domestic violence and petty crime.

As with other peacebuilding methodologies, the pandemic has created new challenges for generating conflict analysis. The use of digital technologies to gather evidence and information has its limitations. Access to the internet restricts participation and, in some cases, has limited the sensitivity of the issues that are able to be discussed. The experience of the Life & Peace Institute in Somalia illustrates one way practitioners have sought to overcome this challenge – researchers combining online surveying with telephone interviews, in collaboration with partners on the ground. The limitations of technology-based approaches, however, highlight the need for peacebuilders to continue to collaborate with governments and the humanitarian and development sectors in advocating for increased access to technology for excluded and marginalised communities. Reports from organisations contributing case studies also highlight the additional challenge of providing mental health support to researchers and interviewees. This is good practice when researching sensitive topics in conflict contexts in order to mitigate the risk of (re)traumatisation of the interviewee during the research process and to support interviewers to process the information to which they are exposed. Challenges in accessing online counselling and support services during lockdowns has, in some contexts, limited the types of research that can be carried out and avenues of relief for participants.

3. Supporting conflict-sensitive public health and humanitarian responses, vaccination and long-term recovery

How governments, external agencies, the private sector and civil society deliver public health and humanitarian interventions responding to COVID-19 in conflict-affected contexts is critical. If delivered without knowledge of existing conflict dynamics, including a gendered understanding of who holds power and who does not, well-meaning actions could exacerbate tensions, deepen divides or even directly lead to violence.[6] Where access to resources and inequality are recurring drivers of conflict, sudden influxes of aid can sow further seeds of distrust, a pattern historically repeated in multiple conflict settings. This applies to the immediate, public-health-focused response to COVID-19, as well as to future vaccination programmes, both of which will be heavily reliant on relationships of trust between healthcare providers and service users.

Ensuring public health providers and humanitarians have access to robust, nuanced conflict analysis, as detailed above, is central to a conflict-sensitive approach. Just as important is the ability and willingness of these actors to adjust approaches in response to what the analysis tells them. By working alongside, or embedded within, humanitarian and healthcare agencies, peacebuilders can deliver conflict analysis in a way that is accessible and useable, and support agencies to adapt or redesign approaches accordingly. Donors can also play an important role in incentivising conflict-sensitive programme design and supporting flexible and adaptive project management strategies. Truly conflict-sensitive approaches will enable actors not only to mitigate harm, but also to deliver improvements to social cohesion and reductions in tensions through their interventions. They will enable healthcare providers and humanitarians to build the all-important relationships of trust with the plurality of communities that they seek to serve.

Using their networks and dialogue-facilitation skills, peacebuilders can also help to disseminate public health messaging among the communities in which they work. An example from Kyrgyzstan highlights how religious institutions have worked collectively with the Ministry of Health to share public health messaging with their constituents to counter misinformation and ensure all communities have access to accurate information.

Continued collaboration between peacebuilders and public health actors will be vital during COVID-19 vaccination programmes in conflict-affected states. Prospects of vaccination have brought hope to many, yet the vast infrastructure, funding and organisation required to implement a safe and equitable global inoculation programme faces multiple obstacles, particularly for those in conflict-affected contexts. The International Committee of the Red Cross estimates that more than 60 million people live in areas controlled by non-state armed groups with implications for access and risk to healthcare workers and agencies.[7] Polio vaccination teams operating during the Ebola outbreak in Liberia in 2014 were repeatedly attacked, while Pakistan, which has never fully eradicated polio, has seen high numbers of health worker casualties while attempting to immunise children in the northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In both examples, attacks were driven by fears and rumours within local communities, grounded in general institutional distrust as a consequence of years of conflict and neglect. Similar challenges are highly likely to be encountered during a COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, necessitating careful design and implementation. Who is

able to receive the vaccine, their geographic location and their socio-economic status will be important indicators of success or failure. The knowledge and networks that peacebuilders can provide in these areas have the potential to significantly reduce risk and support healthcare workers and governments to build trust in the vaccination programme.

The impact of COVID-19 extends beyond physical health. Over the course of the pandemic, we have become more aware of the complex short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 and how these differ from country to country, community to community and human to human. For communities who have experienced violent conflict, lockdowns and other layered hardships have the potential to compound pre-existing trauma related to conflict.[8] As such, peacebuilders, adept at understanding and responding to the psychosocial impacts of conflict, have also adapted their approaches to respond to the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns. The experience of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Never Again Rwanda demonstrates the detrimental impact lockdown has had on the mental health of conflict survivors and the role a local peacebuilding organisation can play in response.

Reducing the vulnerability of religious communities in Kyrgyzstan

The COVID-19 situation in Kyrgyzstan is tense on a number of levels, splitting society along different fault lines – political, economic, social and religious. A diverse range of influential state and non-state actors from across Kyrgyzstan have come together to reduce the vulnerability of religious communities to COVID-19 through sensitive messaging and mitigating secular-religious tension in virtual spaces, helping to connect religious communities to wider secular society.

In an extraordinary example of true collaboration, the Ministry of Health, Muftiyat (Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan), the Russian Orthodox Church, Alliance of Kyrgyz churches, Buddhist community 'Chinson', NGO 'Tendik', Bahai community and others have been working together to promote tolerance and understanding of religious diversity via joint reviews and resolutions, as well as joint dialogue sessions to address the existing and potential community conflicts caused by the pandemic.

This inter-faith working group, with the support of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, has developed conflict and gender-sensitive pandemic communication materials for religious influencers to use to counter misinformation and support social cohesion. These have been matched with conflict-sensitivity guidelines for the government and media actors to ensure that pandemic responses and media coverage of COVID-19 do not exacerbate tensions. Responses from the beneficiaries of the project have been positive, viewing the working group as playing an important role in mitigating the social and political turbulence of the COVID-19 context.

Ensuring conflict sensitivity through psychosocial support in Rwanda

Never Again Rwanda was founded in 2002 to support the healing of Rwandan society fractured from the 1994 genocide. Its mandate has since expanded to encompass work with diverse peace actors to support positive change throughout the country. Never Again Rwanda began to monitor COVID-19 conflict dynamics early in the pandemic and adjusted its strategies to account for the implications on the psychosocial wellbeing of their beneficiaries and overall societal healing. The genocide against Tutsi was commemorated at home this year, bringing up traumatic emotions for survivors. Lockdown measures decreased usual levels of psychosocial support and aggravated stress, confusion and fear for many genocide survivors, further exacerbated by fear of COVID-19 infection and economic insecurity. In Huye District, some genocide survivors began to relive the 1994 genocide, while in Gasabo District, one survivor locked herself inside in fear that the genocide was reoccurring.

Never Again Rwanda's extensive work with diverse categories of Rwandans, including genocide survivors and perpetrators, enabled the organisation to develop strategies which addressed the deep psychosocial effects on their beneficiaries and the fragile social balance, while still respecting government measures. The team used a variety of media and digital platforms to continue peacebuilding activities where meetings were no longer possible. For example, the Genocide Commemoration Conference was reorganised as a televised dialogue through the Rwanda Broadcasting Agency, while the International Day of Peace celebrations were held over Zoom. Ensuring the continuation of these landmarks for peace, in spite of the pandemic, has supported social cohesion across the country.

In parallel, Never Again Rwanda's psychotherapists maintained connections with community-based 'peace agents'[9] through briefing and debriefing sessions using phones to assess the peace agents' wellbeing, guide them on how to continue supporting their respective groups during the COVID-19 period, and jointly identify extreme cases that required individual therapy. The joint efforts produced good results because members whose wounds were revived by COVID-19 were given individual therapy sessions via phone calls. Also, the psychotherapists produced and shared digital healing messages to group members via SMS and WhatsApp.

Never Again Rwanda continues to hold 'Spaces for Peace' in small groups based on proximity with face masks, hand sanitiser and thermometers provided in adherence with COVID-19 restrictions, alongside online webinars for diverse stakeholders to share experiences and research on the societal impacts of COVID-19. These virtual spaces have enabled Never Again Rwanda to integrate current conflict dynamics into existing healing programmes and to ensure the conflict sensitivity of governance response measures to reduce psychological distress among vulnerable beneficiaries.

4. Countering divisive narratives and building bridges across divides

The targeting and 'othering' of particular groups, often those who were already marginalised, were early indicators of the negative impact of COVID-19 on societies, generating a wave of discrimination, racism and misinformation, and compromising efforts to mitigate the spread and impact of the virus.[10] While profiles of victims have varied based on historical grievances and existing societal divisions, targets are generally considered the 'other', with stigmatisation arising out of fear of infection and compromised service access.[11] In some cases, these divisive narratives have been fuelled or legitimised by those in power, and in many cases the othering proliferates online as well as off. Individuals perceived as ethnically Chinese or Asian have been vilified for the virus' inception. Reports emerged from Ethiopia of harassment of foreigners, while in India and Sri Lanka the Muslim minority population has been framed as vectors of the disease.[12] In Lebanon, strained public health and welfare services have contributed to increased animosity towards Palestinian and Syrian refugee communities, while overstretched frontline healthcare workers have reported experiencing stigma themselves.[13]

Media and peacebuilding in Nigeria
The Centre for Social Cohesion, Peace and Empowerment, a grassroots NGO from Borno State, adapted their successful media peacebuilding work to incorporate emerging COVID-19 conflict dynamics. The team used radio programming to disseminate messages of tolerance and patience, involving community and religious leaders, government stakeholders and influential individuals to counter false information and stigmatisation and improve community social cohesion. The work has helped to restore public confidence in health directives and elevate community voices on the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, internally displaced people and people with disabilities.

The recording of a radio programme in Nigeria to disseminate messages of tolerance and patience.

The othering of minority and vulnerable groups and the divisive narratives that perpetuate this are a common feature of many conflict contexts. Peacebuilders already have the tools to support communities to overcome these divides. Evidence gathered for this paper shows how these tools are being repurposed to take into account the impact of COVID-19. Partnerships with media and civil society have been leveraged to disseminate public health information alongside messages in support of social cohesion, helping to repair public confidence in the state. Peacebuilders have also been able to use existing forums to give a voice to otherwise marginalised and stigmatised communities, highlighting the particular issues that these communities face.

The pandemic has also presented peacebuilders with an opportunity to bring people together across conflict divides around the common goal of stopping the spread of the virus. Peacebuilders have adapted traditional methodologies based on face-to-face contact and taken dialogue processes online. There are, however, limitations to this approach, including issues of inclusion and exclusion linked to access to technology, and the effectiveness of online dialogue in situations of high tension and where people are coming into a dialogue process for the first time.[14] The peacebuilding sector's own lack of experience and expertise has also been a barrier, being somewhat further behind the humanitarian and development sectors in the adaptation to digital approaches. However, where it has happened, as a short-to medium-term measure, convening online has proven to be effective in many instances, as the case studies from Kashmir and the Mano River Region show.

Fighting misinformation in the Mano River region

Search for Common Ground and its partners in the Talking Drum Studio programmes in the Mano River region have collaborated on media programming for over two decades. Previously the teams advanced programming for the Ebola response, stabilisation and recovery, and already have a strong listenership among groups that were neglected by most anti-Ebola media campaigns, including lower classes, rural communities and women. In Sierra Leone, the team produced a new COVID-19 radio communications campaign through a network of women and youth peace ambassadors to ensure that the most marginalised are the central voices of the COVID-19 response. In Guinea, they are working with radio and TV studios, alongside an extensive network of institutional, community, civil society and media partners in Conakry and N'Zérékoré to disseminate key COVID-19 prevention messaging and fight misinformation, with their programmes reaching five million people across the country. To promote conflict sensitivity and social cohesion through rumour management, the team also partnered with a network of journalists to publish 34 articles on the socio-political situation and the pandemic, reaching 46,000 Guineans.

A virtual disaster response mechanism in Kashmir

The Kashmir Initiative Group (KIG) brings together thought leaders from both sides of the Line of Control, and across multiple political and geographical divides, to develop opportunities to build peace and trust among divided communities. COVID-19 has heightened stigmatisation and strained community relations across the region, as well as increasing hostilities between India and Pakistan. The group usually meet face-to-face just a few times a year, though the pandemic has prompted the KIG to consider new and innovative ways of working together. To adjust to the rapidly evolving context, the KIG collaborated with technology developers and health experts to tailor an online platform originally intended as a virtual disaster response mechanism. This virtual space allowed partners on both sides of the Line of Control to access and share updated and contextualised information about the pandemic. It provided resources and guidance to slow the spread of the virus, using the support and connections of a community of experts. The platform is a feat in the Kashmir context, where it is still extremely risky to meet, even virtually, across the Line of Control, particularly after the suspension of trade across the Line of Control in April 2019. Developing a joint response to the pandemic in the Kashmir region has been a practical way of both helping to prevent the spread of the disease and building trust and confidence between communities.

As the continuing economic downturn creates increased tensions between citizens and states, and increased competition for resources between individuals and communities, there is the potential for division and polarisation to become more pronounced. Peacebuilders will need to continue to use their networks to mobilise against this division and continue to learn how to navigate the perils and potentials of undertaking this type of peacebuilding online.

5. Building trust and accountability between citizens and state

One of the long-term impacts of the pandemic will be the extent to which it challenges the prevailing social contract between citizens and states. Where trust is undermined, or virus-containment measures deemed inadequate, biased or disproportionate, the state-citizen contract can be further eroded, diminishing peacebuilding gains and heightening tensions over the mid to long-term. Over the last year, Amnesty International has found that states across Europe have adopted measures which further marginalised groups facing discrimination prior to the pandemic, including cases of militarised quarantines in Roma settlements in Bulgaria and Slovakia, and mandatory quarantines of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Cyprus, Greece and Serbia.[15] Worldwide we have seen an increased centralisation of state power, with many countries calling up their security forces to enforce social isolation measures. In too many cases, security forces have used brutality to enforce lockdown measures, exposing underlying issues of trust and accountability, with significant risks posed for women. There have been numerous reports of human rights abuses,

from lockdowns characterised by police brutality and prison deaths in Iran and the Philippines, to high death tolls from security forces enforcing containment measures in Uganda and Nigeria. At the same time, traditional avenues to express grievances have been narrowed or closed all together, with some 23 countries postponing national elections and almost twice as many postponing subnational votes.[16] The deteriorating economic situation is likely to further challenge the state-citizen contract, strengthening key political grievances that can induce conflict.

Civil resistance has re-emerged across the globe after falling in the initial months of the pandemic. Concerns related to the socio-economic effects of lockdowns, perceived governance failings and gaping inequalities are being expressed the world over.[17] Working to rebuild or maintain public trust in governments will be critical given the effects of the virus and lockdowns. The examples collected for this paper indicate that effective work in this area involves the creation of spaces for people to voice demands and concerns peacefully and avenues for state authorities and citizens to problem-solve together. It also involves supporting civil society to hold states to account and effectively represent and advocate for the needs of those most heavily impacted by COVID-19 and lockdown measures. In Tunisia, as in many contexts, this has involved work centred around the provision of healthcare, advocating for better access to and provision of healthcare for poor and marginalised communities and supporting state agencies to improve outreach to those who need it. Given the economic impacts of the pandemic in many states, there is clearly also a role for peacebuilders to play in facilitating dialogue between citizens and states on economic recovery approaches and how these can help address structural causes of conflict and violence.

Participatory local governance in Tunisia

The challenges facing the Tunisian healthcare sector far predate the outbreak of COVID-19, although the pandemic has served to heighten regional disparities, social inequalities and the depletion of health services, particularly in the interior and border regions where rates of school dropouts, poverty and unemployment are often twice as high as the interior. Youth in marginalised neighbourhoods in Kasserine, Tataouine and Douar Hicher often face high unemployment and minimal social protection, where healthcare services are either inaccessible or unresponsive to specific needs. Given Alert Tunisia's experience in bottom-up mechanisms of participatory democracy and youth inclusion, the team developed a project to respond to young people's exclusion from healthcare, informed by input from three youth networks and medical doctors. 'Youth-friendly Healthcare Services' provides an interactive mobile application that allows young people to assess nine different kinds of healthcare facilities, which subsequently introduced positive changes stemming from the recommendations made. The youth networks have since been able to engage objectively with relevant healthcare authorities on the quality of services, discussions they were previously excluded from.[18] Building upon the success of this initiative, Alert Tunisia, local civil society and partners produced a social media campaign, '#Health_is_a_constitutional_right'. The campaign aims to guarantee citizens' rights to health through public policy and to support civil society to democratise health governance. Activities have included short, awareness-raising videos shared across social media, virtual dialogues, and work towards a real-time public health responsive platform connecting peer medical professionals.

Security and justice in Nepal

Since Nepal's federal reform in 2015, Alert has been supporting their partners, MAHURI Home and Samagra Jan-Utthan Kendra, to build relationships between local communities, security and justice actors and newly elected representatives in the Southern Flatlands region. Through continued social and political dialogue, they have advocated for inclusive budgeting and accountable service provision with a particular project focusing on enhancing relationships between community members and local security and justice institutions through a 'Community Scorecard'. This process began with local communities scoring police and judicial committees on predetermined indicators and those service providers scoring their own services too. All actors then came together to discuss the scores and develop a common roadmap for action to increase the ratings over time, reviewing implementation progress at set intervals. This action plan has represented an important social accountability tool for all actors and is set to continue even once the project is over.

Although the pandemic hit shortly after this activity, the lockdown truly illustrated the impact of this work on the relationship between the police and community with all stakeholders witnessing increased cooperation, compliance and trust throughout the restrictions. MAHURI Home and Samagra Jan-Utthan Kendra were able to continue their work online, developing a security and justice webpage for all working municipalities, which displayed current facts on the status of security and justice in relation to the scorecards, recent judicial verdicts, public service announcements and awareness campaigns on both COVID-19 and the increasing instances of gender-based violence stemming from the lockdown. Through their close ties with local communities, MAHURI Home and Samagra Jan-Utthan Kendra were able to undertake research into the experiences and challenges of Nepali police, providing them with hygiene kits and PPE to respond to their needs during the pandemic and the police began to reach out to the community more than ever before, using public miking systems and door-to-door awareness campaigns to inform communities without internet access of health measures to keep them safe during the pandemic.

The security and justice sector is another important arena where peacebuilders can help bridge divides between citizen and state. Convening security actors and citizens in dialogue around security governance is an approach which is familiar to local and international peacebuilding organisations alike. It is one which has become more relevant in contexts where the heavy-handed approaches of security agencies are creating or exacerbating communal tensions and security forces are having to deal with increased levels of domestic violence, the policing of which requires strong relationships of trust within communities and collaboration with civil society organisations.

The caveat to the positive role peacebuilders can play in supporting improved state-citizen relations is that, as part of local and global civil society, peacebuilders themselves are subject to state crackdowns on civic space. Occupying similar spaces to human rights organisations due to their

interest in challenging status-quo power dynamics and supporting political reform processes, and often maintaining relations with multiple sides in a conflict, peacebuilders are vulnerable to censure and the restriction of their operations by state actors. The maintenance of civic space globally and in countries affected by conflict must be a priority on the agenda of global institutions and donor governments if civil society is to continue its vital role as watchdog and bridge between states and their peoples.

6. Reducing gender inequalities through responding to COVID-19 and its impacts

The pandemic has deepened gender inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems, which in turn have amplified the impacts of the pandemic. The virus, and responses to it, have had differentiated health impacts for women and men. Data indicates that mortality rates appear to be higher for men at 2.4 times that of women;[19] however, women are more likely to be exposed to the virus because they account for 70% of the health and social-sector workforce globally.[20] Disruptions to sexual and reproductive services have resulted in increased teenage pregnancies and maternal mortalities.[21]

While sexual and gender-based violence has been long acknowledged as a threat to women, unique factors associated with the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and the associated confinement measures have meant the risks of experiencing violence at the hands of family members or public health and security officials have increased, bringing about a significant rise in sexual and gender-based violence around the world. This vulnerability is compounded by pandemic-related disruptions to response and support services.[22] Women's economic and productive lives have also been disproportionately affected over the last year, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile states where women constitute the majority of the informal workforce, often excluded from formal social protection measures.[23] In the Great Lakes region of Africa, female cross-border traders make up 70% of traders. Their livelihoods were particularly affected by the closure of borders as part of lockdown measures. Given that women and girls undertake around three-quarters of unpaid care work, the pandemic has only added to the domestic burdens of caring for children and sick relatives.

There has been increased emphasis on addressing gendered impacts, particularly gender-based violence, within the COVID-19 response literature and in practice. This must, however, go further to tackle the root causes of these inequalities, for these issues did not originate solely within the pandemic. In addition to responding to pandemic-driven increases of gender-based violence, focused engagement with men towards transforming how masculinity is constructed and manifested is essential to resolving the structural drivers of gender-based violence, while work must be focused on long-term advocacy and policies that ensure funds and attention are not diverted away from addressing these structural issues. The case study from Myanmar outlines an approach which combined referral pathways for victims of gender-based violence together with targeted messaging towards men and a large-scale public information campaign. Such initiatives move beyond a reactive coping strategy in the face of increased levels of gender-based violence to initiating a broader dialogue on the structural causes of violence and long-term solutions.

Gender-based violence prevention during COVID-19 in Myanmar

In collaboration with Phan Tee Eain, International Alert Myanmar conducted a gender-based violence prevention campaign via social and traditional media to adapt to the pandemic context. The campaign provided a national online resource consolidating all relevant support hotlines and referral pathways which was accessed by thousands of users, enabling survivors to obtain the support they needed. Alongside this, the team ran a men-focused messaging campaign via Facebook, radio, TV, print media and public transport, which emphasised self-control instead of violence. By using platforms such as sports magazines, where gender-based violence messaging is often absent, and focusing on mental health and anger management issues as an entry point to discussion, the campaign started many honest conversations about gender-based violence during COVID-19. A video featuring five popular musicians and an animation in five ethnic languages reached more than six million viewers. These videos were screened on social media, on public transport services for commuters, and broadcast via radio stations reaching states with less internet access. One of the Yangon TV stations supported the message so strongly that they continued screening it for months after the project ended.

Women market workers queue to be tested for COVID-19 in Kathmandu during a nationwide lockdown in Nepal.

Central to a gender-sensitive COVID-19 response and recovery will be the meaningful participation of women and other vulnerable groups in project consultation and design, with particular attention paid to the voices of women on the frontlines of the pandemic response. In order to achieve this, support to local women's networks and activists in fragile contexts is essential, not least to follow through on commitments to broader gender equality, including the women, peace and security agenda. Interventions that are inclusive stand more chance of effectively responding to conflict and tensions triggered by the pandemic, as well as safeguarding against the reinforcement of negative, gendered, power dynamics.[24] This includes understanding how gender interacts with an individual's experience of the crisis and their vulnerabilities by adopting an intersectional approach to ensure the differential needs of women, men and non-binary gender identities from diverse socio-economic status, ethnic identity, social orientation, location and disability are fully taken into account. The example from Women for Human Rights in Nepal demonstrates the important role that women's rights organisations have played in maintaining a focus on the structural drivers of gender inequality through lockdown, providing economic relief for hard-hit families and supporting women to gain skills and experience that will support them for the longer term.

Work across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus in Nepal

In Nepal, Women for Human Rights (WHR) began work across the 'triple nexus' of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding, to address the immediate gendered impacts of the pandemic, illustrating the benefits of transcending traditional siloes in a multidimensional crisis. WHR provided online workshops to enable women to continue championing human rights during the lockdown, although their programmes began to span humanitarian and development spheres to meet the increasing needs of local communities. The swift economic downturn had a dire effect on people's livelihoods across Nepal, with female daily earners often worst hit. WHR organised diverse livelihood generation activities to enable these women to support themselves and their families throughout the worst of the pandemic. Families within the slum areas of Chhahari, Hattiguada suffered severe food insecurity due to lockdown measures, often struggling to find even one meal a day. WHR organised a foodbank initiative, using the kitchens at their 'Safe Shelter Homes' and provided one hot meal a day for those in dire need. Between 15 June and 9 August 2020, 28,311 meals were distributed. For women in need of a safe space for self-isolation, WHR ran an all-female quarantine centre throughout the pandemic to ensure the security of female migrant returnees and vulnerable local women in Budanilkantha, Kathmandu. The centre was managed entirely by women and provided dignity kits to those in their residence.

Conclusions

Across the world peacebuilders have risen to the challenge of responding to the tensions, new and old, that the pandemic has triggered. With a presence and networks in typically difficult to access conflict contexts and having long-standing relationships of trust with conflict actors and civilians alike, peacebuilding organisations have demonstrated their ability to support effective COVID-19 response strategies, taking advantage of opportunities to bring people together across divides and mitigating the potential for public health and lockdown enforcement measures to do harm.

Peacebuilding in times of COVID-19 is not, however, without its challenges. Peacebuilders have discovered the limitations of technology in ensuring inclusive processes that tackle sensitive issues in difficult contexts. We have realised our own inadequacies in the speed at which we have been able to get to grips with the many creative and innovative ways digital technologies can be used in our work. We have seen foreign aid budgets cut and funding for addressing the structural drivers of conflict and inequality in the long term redirected towards emergency response – and, like the rest of civil society, we have had to navigate contracting civic space and threats to our existence.

The case studies in this paper all highlight the impact

that can be achieved when peacebuilders are given the space and flexibility to adjust programmes to respond to a rapidly changing environment. They demonstrate the vital importance of local peacebuilders in providing analysis of how COVID-19 is interacting with conflict dynamics on the ground and developing appropriate response strategies, at a time when international organisations are grounded in western capital cities. They also demonstrate that collaboration between peacebuilding, humanitarian and development professionals is essential, now more than ever, to provide a holistic response that tackles the complex individual and societal impacts of COVID-19.

The peacebuilding sector must continue to learn about and strengthen its role as part of a multi-sectoral response to the pandemic, in the short to medium term in the context of public health responses and vaccination drivers, and in the longer term in support of social and economic recovery. In many of the contexts where we work, the pandemic has brought with it opportunities to open up and inform debate about the nature of inequality, of access to healthcare and of the fundamental nature of the social contract. We must continue to identify and seize these opportunities to address the drivers of conflict and build sustainable, positive peace.

Acknowledgements

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