Peacebuilding in the wake of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis is deepening social challenges, propelling communities towards the brink, and disrupting economic and political systems. While COVID-19 has, for many, been an experience of meaningful action for the common good, it has also acted as a magnifying glass for violence and its roots in social inequalities and human rights violations. But what does this moment mean for peacebuilding?

This report synthesizes a meeting of the Advisory Board of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform on 'The Peacebuilding field in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic'. The digital meeting took place on 9 April 2020. The report is part of the Platform's 'The Pulse of Peacebuilding' series that that identifies key emerging themes for peacebuilding.

The key messages of this report are:

- Peacebuilding has a role to play in COVID-19 responses. It can contribute to mobilizing grassroots organisations and peacebuilding networks to prevent and resolve tensions that have arisen due to, or been exacerbated by, COVID-19. In addition, where COVID-19 has led to lower rates of violence or increased social cohesion, peacebuilders should work to help ensure these trends are sustained.
- Peacebuilding can play a key role in nurturing new visions for a post-COVID-19 world. Such visons can help translate the collective experience of COVID-19 into collective responses and international cooperation. In places where COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on our societies (both positive and negative) peacebuilders can help shape the critical reimagining and reprioritizing of our societies with a focus on holistic human security.
- Peacebuilding must mobilise to identify and counter xenophobic narratives, in order to counter societal fracturing and build cohesion. This includes, for example, countering xenophobia towards refugee and migrant communities, who face particularly severe impacts of COVID-19, and hate crimes and attacks on people of Asian descent. These harmful actions perpetuate inequalities within communities and are therefore likely to have acute impacts on social cohesion and peacebuilding.

In the following paragraphs, the report summarizes key COVID-19-related challenges, opportunities and implications for peacebuilding organized around nine themes, including trends in violence, global ceasefires, militarized narratives, arms control and disarmament, migration and displacement, health diplomacy, socio-economic impacts, emergency powers and the curbing of freedoms, and climate crises. The report was written by Cara Priestley and Annika Erickson-Pearson. All views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and its 5 partner organizations.

1. Trends in violence

Challenges: COVID-19 is having clear impacts on trends of violence. On the one hand, novel conditions of stress, tension, social isolation, poverty, loss of employment and other negative societal factors have led to, or risk, an increase in violence in many spheres. One risk of violence comes from a lack of trust in governments.[1] Stringent restrictions on public movement ordered by President Macron in France, for example, have exacerbated tensions in Paris' banlieues and elsewhere in France.[2] Fear is also being used to incite violence, as has been seen with a rise in hate crimes and attacks on people of Asian descent.[3]

COVID-19 has seen an extremely worrying increase in domestic violence towards women, in keeping with evidence shows that domestic violence increases during times of crisis and tension.[4] It should be noted that due to underreporting, the real scale of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in this period is likely to be much higher. Some children, particularly those already living in violent family situations, are at an increased risk of violence due to movement restrictions, isolation, and loss of familial income stresses.[5]

Opportunities: On the other side of the coin, in some instances COVID-19 has acted as a unifying force - for example bringing together groups who had previously been in conflict, thus reducing violence. In South Africa an unprecedented truce has been waged between warring gangs in Cape Town, who are now working together to deliver food to people in lockdown.[6] The country has seen a 75% decrease in violent crime since its COVID-19 restrictions.[7]

What does this mean for peacebuilding? One of the long-term impacts of this pandemic is the extent to which it will challenge citizen-State trust; peacebuilding must focus on ways to mobilise grassroots organisations and peacebuilding networks to prevent and resolve tensions.[8] The above trends also underscore the importance of a holistic 'peacebuilding in the home' perspective, resting on the premise that "we cannot achieve stable and peaceful societies if our homes are war zones."[9]

It is important, too, for peacebuilding to consider how it can build on the reductions in violence that have resulted from COVID-19. In the UK, gang violence has "stopped" as members follow coronavirus lockdown rules, but experts have warned that violence will resume once the measures are lifted.[10] The peacebuilding community should focus on building support for local peacebuilding groups to capitalise on increased social cohesion and lower rates of violence, where that now uneasily exists.

2. Global ceasefire

Challenges: As has been noted, "the ceasefire call will have little value if it remains a rhetorical device only".[11] In response to the SG's call, COVID19 ceasefires between States and armed groups have been announced, accepted, held and lost to varying degrees across the world. In many cases, despite parties to conflict initially responding positively to calls for a ceasefire, combat either never truly stopped or has since reignited.[12]

Certain areas have seen a significant uptick in violence, but there has also been a decrease in coverage of certain conflicts, and internet blackouts and crackdowns on journalists means that much violent conflict is not currently making international headlines. There is a clear loss of data, both qualitative and quantitative, from certain areas which may impede protection responses.

Opportunities: On 23rd March the UN Secretary General (SG) called for an immediate global ceasefire[13] around the world, in light of the specific dangers COVID-19 poses for conflict affected areas. A statement of support for the initiative now has the backing of over 70 states.[14] Ceasefires do not, in themselves, resolve conflicts - but they do offer an opportunity, for example to facilitate dialogue, to explore initial contact with parties to the conflict or to provide humanitarian space and relief to civilians.[15]

What does this mean for peacebuilding? The call for a COVID-19 humanitarian ceasefire could never be a silver bullet; peace is more than just the absence of war, and without peacebuilding efforts to resolve the underlying causes of violence, a ceasefire will not transform into lasting peace.[16] Peacebuilding must address these dynamics, and consider the ways (established and innovative) that it can respond to the novel conditions at hand. This crisis also calls for conflict sensitivity - peacebuilders must calibrate their work with the new dynamics posed by COVID-19 and forge partnerships, for example with humanitarian actors.

3. Militarised narratives

Challenges: Donald Trump has spoken of a "war" with an "invisible enemy"[17]; Boris Johnson stated "we must act like any wartime government"[18]; Emmanuel Macron has put France on "war footing"[19]. Such militarised narratives have become commonplace, but should be resisted because they entrench an obsolete framework of 'security' and reinforce the militarised mindset that can lead to armed conflict in the first place.[20]

It should also be noted that such metaphors have a real-life impact on peoples' psyches – as seen by the rise in the sale of firearms in the US[21] and Canada[22] in response to the virus. These sales increase the likelihood of deaths from domestic violence and suicide as well as the risk of diversion to nearby countries already facing high levels of violence.[23]

Opportunities: Instead of intrenching military language, peacebuilding should be employing narratives based on human security, wellbeing and collaborative and cooperative approaches to tackling the virus - "a framework of care and solidarity"[24] even. There is an important opportunity to frame a people-centred, human rights-based approach to tackling both COVID-19 and the myriad inequalities faced around the world which it is magnifying.

What does this mean for peacebuilding? Peacebuilding can play a key role in writing and centring a different COVID-19 narrative, where the response to the crisis is not warfare, but holistic peacebuilding. This does not require reinventing the wheel; peacebuilders know and use the necessary language already, and techniques such as non-violent communication are well-known peacebuilding and mediation tools.

4. Arms control and disarmament

Challenges: Although coronavirus is causing some disruption to the arms industry, with a number of arms fairs having been cancelled or postponed[25], in many areas the industry is continuing as usual.[26] The Chinese arms industry, for example, stated that it resumed full production in February.[27] The GCSP has also noted that the distraction of COVID-19 is giving rise to political opportunism with regards to increased nuclear missile tests.[28]

Opportunities: The virus is, however, creating extra scrutiny of the arms industry – particularly its high military cost to governments. Governments are facing criticism for not having sufficiently invested in public health, and for good reason - a study has shown that higher military spending negatively impacts health spending.[29] With military spending reaching 1.8 trillion dollars worldwide in 2018[30], the clarity of what that money could be being spent on is perhaps becoming clearer in the global psyche.

What does this mean for peacebuilding? COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to reconceptualize narratives surrounding security, and to move away from traditional understandings of security by the gun. With COVID-19 drawing attention to the juxtaposition of the defunding of health systems and the money that flows into our military, peacebuilding should consider how it can capitalise on potential increased receptivity to the people-centred 'human security' paradigm - one based on sustainable economic systems, environmental security and the full range of human rights, including the right to the highest attainable standard of health.

5. Migration and displacement

Challenges: COVID-19 poses particularly severe impacts for refugees and migrants, which UNHCR has observed are "driving many refugees and others on the margins of society deeper into poverty and destitution."[31] Despite refugees and migrants living in some of the situations of highest vulnerability to the virus, many countries' pandemic plans do not explicitly account for the needs of such communities, or indeed actively discriminate against them.[32]

With at least three in four countries having imposed partial or complete border closures due to COVID-19[33], the restriction of freedom of movement (and in some cases the suspension of the right to seek asylum) poses both an immediate danger and the potential for concerning long-term effects. There is a clear risk that States may capitalise on the crisis to push through draconian migration policies which may persist, with resulting human rights and peace impacts.

Opportunities: Despite the exceptional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, some States have taken positive action for migrants and refugees, which are likely not only to slow the spread of the virus but also to enhance community cohesion. Portugal's decision to temporarily regularise the status of all undocumented migrants, allowing them full access to all health and other services[34], and Ireland's implementation of a firewall between government departments to allow migrants and refugees to access services without fear[35], are welcome examples of promising practices in this regard.

What does this mean for peacebuilding? The particularly severe impacts of COVID-19 on refugee and migrant communities perpetuate inequalities within communities, and are therefore likely to have acute impacts on social cohesion and peacebuilding. Increased xenophobia towards migrants and refugees during this time is also likely to impact on social cohesion locally.[36]

Camps housing migrant and refugee communities which are already experiencing outbreaks[37] of the virus are an easy target for scapegoating which can further fan the flames of division in society.[38] Peacebuilding must mobilise to identify and counter such narratives.[39] Peacebuilders must also be cognisant of the potential for destabilisation of communities in traditional countries of origin with regards to host countries returning migrants on masse.[40]

6. Health diplomacy

Challenges: A healthy society is a critical indicator of a country's level of human security, equality and socio-economic stability. Indeed, COVID-19 has shone a light on the already glaring health inequalities across the globe. Worldwide, roughly 150 million people a year face catastrophic health-care costs.[41] In the US, indigenous households are nineteen times more likely to lack indoor plumbing, making basic infection control measures like handwashing problematic.[42]

Such inequalities feed grievances, lack of trust in governments and abuses of economic, social and cultural rights that can spark or feed conflicts. In addition, COVID-19 itself may trigger negative impacts related to health and conflict. Medical resources, such as vaccines, are likely to be scarce in many places. Where tensions already exist between groups, how can peacebuilding ensure that these triggers do not escalate into full scale conflicts?

Opportunities: Much work has been done, including by the WHO[43], on using equitable health outreach as a method of peacebuilding. Healthcare can act as a social cohesion mechanism, as good health is a basic condition that enables people to contribute and participate in a society.[44] A study in South Sudan showed that providing healthcare trainings for people with no medical background could be used to bridge ethnic, political, and religious differences, with clear importance for peacebuilding considerations.[45]

What does this mean for peacebuilding? Research has shown that providing equitable health services to meet people's basic survival needs is essential in creating lasting peace after a conflict[46], as well as reinforcing social cohesion. This should be a moment for peacebuilding to radically shape health policy towards a people-focused, 'whole of system' approach[47] to peacebuilding, which recognises universal and accessible healthcare as both a fulfilment of human rights obligations and a path for peace. It is also an opportunity for peacebuilders to form and build relationships with public health experts and scientific communities in order to strengthen the potential for collaboration on the nexus between health and peace.

7. Socio-economic impacts

Challenges: There are many potential socio-economic grievances that could be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, such as mistrust and senses of injustice over access to health services, decent livelihoods and food insecurity, which may drive conflict. The risk of an economic downturn even more pronounced than the 2008 financial crash is highly likely to create further socio-economic disparity, with resulting risks to human rights and peace. As ever, those already suffering from global inequality have the most to lose. The ILO estimates that 1.6 billion people could lose their livelihoods[48], and Oxfam has warned that more than half a billion more people could be pushed into poverty unless urgent action is taken to assist poor countries affected by pandemic's economic fallout.[49]

Opportunities: COVID-19 has led to some positive future-looking economic models being discussed. Amsterdam, for example, is set to embrace Kate Raworth's 'doughnut' model to mend its post-coronavirus economy[50], and Universal Basic Income is being proposed as a solution to the economic hardship wreaked by the virus.[51] Such initiatives which place people and the planet at the forefront are much needed to create peaceful, flourishing and sustainable societies.

What does this mean for peacebuilding? The impact of COVID-19 on the global economy has strong implications for fragility and social cohesion at the local, national and global scale. 'Business as usual' economic models and crisis management are likely to exacerbate societal tensions, grievances and human rights violations around access to health, livelihoods, food and further underlying fragility factors. Peacebuilding must stay attuned to the potential for denials of socio-economic rights to lead to conflict and create new partnerships to counter this.

8. Emergency powers and the curbing of freedoms

Challenges: A fundamental challenge of COVID-19 is the use of emergency powers by governments to respond to the crisis. While some derogations are permitted under Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, there are important restrictions[52] which in many cases are not being adhered to. For example, many States are not notifying the UN of their emergency measures and/or are not including or publishing sunset clauses.[53]

The pandemic itself has caused significant instability: it is vital that government responses to it are clear and human rights-based in order to retain and/or increase peace and stability. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Protection of Human Rights in Counterterrorism has stressed, "emergency powers have an ugly tendency to persist."[54] While certain restrictions may be necessary for containing the pandemic in the short term, we have to be mindful of the dangers of their potential long-term effects.

Opportunities: The crisis has also seen creative adaptation by protestors, with campaigners in Poland having launched "lockdown virtual demonstrations" against bills that would restrict abortion rights and ban sexual education.[55] Chilean activists have projected images of crowds onto empty streets.[56] However, protest movements have in general been severely restricted, and yet with the economic toll and crisis of mistrust in governments rising, the impacts of COVID-19 seem likely to fuel new outrage and repressive State responses.

What does this mean for peacebuilding? Any long-term interference with fundamental rights and freedoms will have serious consequences for peacebuilding at all levels. Ensuring the promotion and protection of civil and political rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and political participation are key to preventing grievances and senses of injustice that can, if left unaddressed, lead to violent conflict.

With some governments exploiting COVID19 to further restrict civil society space, local peacebuilders fear that it will be difficult to reclaim this space after the crisis.[57] The reduction of civil society space also has a gendered impact, with civil society in many parts of the world being disproportionately made up of women, given restrictions on their participation in formal politics.[58] Peacebuilding must give serious consideration to how it can support local peacebuilders to continue their work in some form and rebuild their activities in the future.

9. Climate Crisis

Challenges: While some government's COVID-19 economic stimulus packages are actively spurring sustainable transformations, others are deliberately funding the very industries driving climate change.[59] The latter may lead to a major spike in carbon emissions, as happened after the 2008 financial crisis[60], as well as risking deregulation which is currently being lobbied for by the oil and gas industry.[61]

If this happens, it will have dire consequences for our future trajectory. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that insufficient global response to tackle climate change has us on track for a global temperature rise of 4.8C by 2100[62], with consequences including unprecedented loss of life and livelihoods, ecosystem collapse and species extinction.

Opportunities: COVID-19 has provided an historic opportunity to 'green' our economies and energy systems. While the cost of renewable energy is already lower than fossil fuels in many areas, the fall in oil prices has made oil extraction uneconomic. With prices so low, this is an opportune moment to push for the elimination of fossil fuel subsidies, greater investment in renewable energy and the establishment of decentralised renewable energy systems, which can have a positive impact on peace and energy independence.[63]

In addition, the widespread disruptions and behaviour changes we have seen in pursuit of a common good (the reduction of deaths from COVID-19) has shown that with the requisite political will and trust and buy-in from citizens, sufficient action to stabilize global temperature rise could indeed be taken.

What does this mean for peacebuilding? The climate crisis has well-known and legally established implications for human rights and human peace and security.[64] The difference to peacebuilding of a 1.5C rise in global temperature compared to a 4.8C rise is unimaginable. While climate change does not directly cause violent conflict, it does feed into and exacerbate pre-existing tensions, thus increasing the likelihood of violent conflict. Peacebuilding should continue to push for integrated, conflict-sensitive approaches towards climate change and peacebuilding work, and advocate that any just and sustainable transitions must also be cognisant of peace and conflict dynamics.

About the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a knowledge hub that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of issues and contexts related building peace. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture in New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform's network comprises more than 4'000 peacebuilding professionals working on building peace directly or indirectly. The Platform ensures the continuous exchange of information through seminars, consultations, and conferences, and facilitates outcome-oriented dialogues on peacebuilding practice.

Geneva Peace Week 2020, held November 2-6, will offer an opportunity for a diverse constellation of actors to come together, this year to explore the theme "Rebuilding trust after disruption: Pathways to reset international cooperation". The urgency of peacebuilding priorities in the midst (and aftermath) of COVID-19 has meant that building trust and transforming international cooperation has rarely been so critical.

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