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COVID-19 IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Reaching Breaking Point

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INTRODUCTION – THE LATEST CRISIS

Virtually no country has been spared by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but some of them – including many fragile and conflict-affected - are hit particularly hard. This pandemic is creating an overwhelming burden on health systems and infrastructure. However, as we have seen with epidemics elsewhere, the secondary impacts on social and economic systems are already outweighing the direct health impacts, magnifying existing poverty and inequality and posing lasting challenges to resilience and peace.

Yet even before we began to see the devastating impact of COVID-19, only 18% of fragile and conflict-affected states were on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Myriad challenges including hunger, extreme weather events, violent conflicts, and poor governance were already holding those fragile places back. Now, those challenges make fragile contexts particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. COVID-19 is not only affecting the health and economic well-being of communities, but amplifying existing drivers of fragility and violent conflict. It is for this reason that the social, political, economic and environmental impacts of COVID-19 will be especially devastating in those fragile places, with long-lasting and far-reaching repercussions.

In a country like Yemen, a widespread outbreak of COVID-19 on the scale seen in countries in East Asia, Europe, or the United States would be catastrophic for people already living through the worst man-made humanitarian crisis in the world. The Horn of Africa is facing the worst Desert Locust invasion in over 25 years, endangering the food security of millions. Lebanon is facing one crisis after another with wildfires, civil protests, and a growing economic and banking crisis.

Responding to the impacts of COVID-19 in fragile and conflict-affected states is intrinsically complex. We must not only respond to the health and economic impact of this crisis, but work in addressing the existing drivers of fragility, including violent conflict and poverty. Otherwise together they will quickly fuel social, economic and political instability, thus furthering the vicious cycle. But we have an opportunity here, to deliver a response that not only helps communities cope with this crisis, but strengthens their resilience, and leaves communities and systems better prepared to tackle the next, inevitable shock.

COVID-19 AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER

Mercy Corps' analysis of the secondary impacts of the pandemic shows that among some of the most severe and long-lasting impacts will be those on food security, employment, local markets, gender equality, and sustainable peace.



COVID-19 & Climate Change: The Double Threat

In many places where Mercy Corps works COVID-19 and climate change create compounded hazards. For example, floods - which are increasing in frequency and intensity because of climate change – as well as their resulting impacts, can increase water-borne, vector-borne, and communicable disease outbreaks and infections, while damaging critical infrastructure required to maintain and access health facilities, putting even more pressure on health systems. At the same time, the negative economic impact of COVID-19 related lockdowns on households is affecting their ability to prepare for, respond to, or recover from floods or other natural hazards. Those threats could be exacerbated as some resources are diverted away from climate adaptation to the response to more direct impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.



LOOMING HUNGER PANDEMIC

Even before COVID-19 hit, global hunger was on the rise, driven by violent conflict, extreme weather events and the arrival of pests and plagues in many fragile contexts. At the start of 2020, [135 million](#) people required humanitarian food assistance to meet their basic needs. Food security is now one of the areas most directly and dangerously impacted by COVID-19 and related measures, as people lose purchasing power, and agriculture markets and supply chains are disrupted. For example, border restrictions and lockdowns have been slowing harvests in some parts of the world, taking livelihoods away from seasonal workers while also constraining transport of food to [markets](#). As a result, the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report estimates that by the end of the year, impact of COVID-19 might push an *additional* [132 million](#) to the brink of starvation. Communities affected by conflict, whose lives and livelihoods are already under immense pressure, will be especially hard hit.

In the longer term, the combined effects of COVID-19, the measures adopted to control it and the global economic downturn could - without urgent and large-scale action - result in consequences for food security of a severity and scale unseen for more than [half a century](#). This “hunger pandemic” could lead to three dozen countries facing famine. In a country like Yemen, [listed](#) most fragile state for the second year in a row, alarms have already been raised about an imminent risk of famine and potentially [360,000](#) severely malnourished children dying unless they continue to get treatment and aid is increased. In East Africa and the Horn, the combination of COVID-19, Rift Valley Fever (RVF), and desert locust is putting food systems under unprecedented stress, with the number of hungry people likely to [more than double](#) by the end of August.

-) In **South Sudan**, which is highly dependent on cross-border trade with Uganda and Sudan and has limited infrastructure to support domestic movement of goods, we saw reduced availability of key food items. Traders in the remote county of Rubkona reported significant changes due to restricted movement across the border with Sudan, including reductions of more than 50% in supply of items like onions, sugar and wheat flour.
-) In **Ethiopia** a Mercy Corps assessment from June found that in the Somali region:
 - 75% of households have reduced the frequency of eating, and 21% have reduced portion size.
 - Retailers selling essential food items report that expenditure has declined by an average of 52%.
 - The price of essential food items on average increased by 13% between early March and the middle of May.
-) In **Yemen** rates of child starvation are on the rise. Already high prices for food and other essential items have been going up due to COVID-19 restrictions. For example, prices of commodities are rising due to increased transportation costs, as trucks take longer routes to deliver food in order to avoid checkpoints and additional taxation.
-) In **Lebanon**, WFP reported in June that 50% of Lebanese, 63% of Palestinians and 75% of Syrians felt worried they would not have enough food to eat over the past month, with those who have lost their jobs being more distressed than others.
-) In the **DRC**, due to borders closing and availability of essential goods, important impacts on market prices and exchange rate have been noted. An average market price increase of 38% in April and May was registered, with temporary price increases of up to 80% in some markets in South Kivu.



LESS JOBS, MORE INEQUALITY

The longest lasting global impacts from COVID-19 will likely be economic, with a recovery expected to be slow and uneven. The vulnerable groups Mercy Corps works to serve in fragile and conflict-affected states, including informal workers, will face the greatest setbacks. The IMF [reported](#) in June that the economic crisis sparked by the pandemic has had more negative impact than anticipated, sending world GDP plunging 4.9 percent this year and wiping out \$12 trillion over two years. People all over the world have felt the impact of the immediate loss of work and income from policies adopted to mitigate COVID-19 transmissions. In fragile and conflict-affected states, pre-existing crises such as violent conflict and social unrest make people particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 restrictions and economic uncertainty.

According to Mercy Corps' [COVID-19 Rapid Market Impact Report](#), micro-enterprises and those who operate in the informal economy, disproportionately women, youth and displaced groups, are hit particularly hard, as they lack formal registrations and connections to adapt their businesses and they do not benefit from any social safety nets or unemployment schemes. In Jordan for example, during lockdown, more formal businesses had channels that allowed them to access exemptions and permits to continue operating compared to their smaller, informal counterparts. [According to WIEGO](#), Additional challenges commonly faced by informal workers during this crisis include police harassment and brutality, increased health risks, including mental health challenges, loss of housing and forced evictions. For women working in the informal sector, the increased burden of unpaid care work and rise in domestic violence present additional challenges.

-) In **Ethiopia**, business operations are being crippled by the COVID-19 crisis. According to Mercy Corps' rapid enterprise survey undertaken in the Somali region:
 - 95% of surveyed enterprises reported a reduction in profits, mostly caused by a decline in demand and increase in transportation costs.
 - 30% of enterprises have been affected by challenges in accessing key production inputs.
 - 24% of enterprises were forced to lay-off workers and these numbers may increase, as only 11% of business owners reported having the capacity to maintain their current payroll for more than six months into the crisis.
-) In **Zimbabwe**, we noted that while large-scale formal abattoirs are more easily able to access travel permits to move livestock to processing facilities and onward for distribution to supermarket chains, small licensed butcheries relied on unregistered and informal transporters who were unable to access movement permits, thus cutting off their supply and compromising their ability to operate their businesses.
-) In **Iraq**, an assessment on the economic impact of COVID-19 on agriculture and financial services showed that 75% of respondents experienced loss of income with 83% of wheat and barley farmers and 67% of vegetable farmers reporting having no income at all. 77% of vegetable farmers have said production has decreased, and that they anticipate losses this year, either due to the inability to sell on time, damage to their crops, or having less variety of crops to produce.
-) In **Lebanon**, the majority of businesses outside the food and health industries closed at the beginning of the crisis and most sectors are experiencing very high unemployment. For informal workers, who make up an estimated 55 percent of the country's workforce, there is no social safety net or unemployment scheme to provide benefits to those in need.



VIOLENT CONFLICT ON THE RISE?

COVID-19 amplifies key drivers of conflict such as weak governance, economic inequality and deficits in public trust. [Evidence](#) from Africa suggests that COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate the key drivers of conflicts that are resource-based, fueled by climatic shocks, and structural governance deficits. The risk of conflict will likely increase as the virus continues to spread, in the short term at a local level, through restricted access to resources, and at multiple levels in the medium and long term as economic impacts unfold and populations become frustrated with the government's response. The [2020 Global Peace Index](#) estimates that the impact of the pandemic, in particular its economic consequences, will likely have a severe impact on the way societies function and potentially lead to deteriorations in Positive Peace and increase the risk of outbreaks of violence and conflict.

In addition to the ways that increasing economic inequality fuels conflict, the loss of social cohesion and misinformation bring conflict risks of their own. Some authoritarian regimes are using the pandemic to justify discrimination and other repressive measures, further eroding citizens' trust in their governments, which is playing into the hands of non-state armed groups, including violent extremist organisations. The pandemic is also already impacting social cohesion, with stigmatisation and scapegoating of minorities, refugees and migrants for example. During COVID-19, as with other epidemics like Ebola, misinformation has consistently increased in most fragile places, and is likely to continue to do so as misleading information, rumours and stigma around the disease persist. In some cases, this can lead to increased tensions, potentially leading to more violence.

-) In **East Africa**, COVID-19 is affecting drivers of radicalisation and recruitment by violent extremist groups. For example, in **Kenya**, recruitment is happening more behind closed doors such as Maskanis, and other groups are forced inside, which makes tracing more difficult by the government. In **Somalia**, Al-Shabaab has set up a COVID-19 treatment centre, seeking to demonstrate its commitment to citizen welfare in contrast to the government.
-) In **Nigeria**, especially the Northeast, deficit of public trust in government has been exacerbated by COVID-19 due to misinformation. There are rumours that COVID-19 testing equipment is faulty and reads every test as positive; that the virus is not real; and that corruption is rife among government and health workers involved in the COVID-19 response.
-) In **Lebanon**, anti-Syrian sentiments were already on the rise towards the end of 2019 as the country's economic situation declined. This has been amplified with COVID-19. Syrian refugees are seen as competitors in the race to secure basic services, employment, assistance and even aid. This is breeding resentment, aggression, and discourse around no longer wanting to carry the burden of hosting.
-) In **Iraq**, underlying and unaddressed community tensions and grievances continue to be exacerbated by COVID-19. Mercy Corps' recent assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion in Iraq highlights 65% of people feel COVID-19 has changed social dynamics in their area. Community mistrust of their government is at an all-time high with 85% of respondents saying that they are unhappy with the government's response.



GENDER EQUALITY: FROM BAD TO WORSE

Existing gender inequalities are already being further deepened as women and girls bear the brunt of the pandemic across every sphere, from health to security, employment to social protection. At the same time, women are largely absent from decision making fora and leadership roles in responses to the pandemic and its secondary impacts. This is especially true in fragile contexts where, in addition to discriminatory gender norms, women can face additional barriers to participation, such as personal security.

In the long-term, failing to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls and to leverage their expertise in this crisis could lead to devastating consequences for gender equality. A recent [study](#) by UNFPA shows that the pandemic is expected to cause significant delays in programmes to end FGM and child marriage, resulting in an estimated 2 million more cases of FGM and 13 million more child marriages over the next decade than would otherwise have occurred.

We learned during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa that the economic impacts of the outbreak and the corresponding public health response placed women and girls at greater risk of exploitation and sexual violence. Past epidemics also illustrated that the efforts to contain outbreaks often divert resources from routine health services including pre and post-natal health care and contraceptives, and exacerbate limited access to sexual and reproductive health care.

-) In **Nigeria**, Government measures have increased women and girls' vulnerability to violence. We have seen a rise in gender-based violence (GBV) both inside and outside the home, while GBV referral and response organisations have more limited resources and capacity than ever to respond. There was a 149% monthly increase in [reports](#) of gender-based violence following the introduction of lockdowns at the end of March. Looking at the three states placed under full lockdown by the Federal Government, the increase is even more devastating. In these three states, the number of cases had rose by 297% by the end of April.
-) In **Yemen**, The specific health needs of women and girls are being affected by the pandemic. UNFPA [predicts](#) that more than 48,000 women could die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth in Yemen due to lack of funding for reproductive health facilities during the COVID-19 response. As COVID-19 and related lockdown measures are [proving](#) to increase cases of gender-based violence, support services for survivors are closing down or facing funding shortfalls. Early and forced marriage are also [reported](#) to be on the rise in Yemen due to the crisis.
-) In **Ethiopia**, when schools across the country closed on 16 March 2020, some 26 million children were left unable to attend school, and women's unpaid care burden increased tremendously. There is a risk that many children will never return to school. Among them, girls face the greater risks of dropping out, as staying home means that they are more vulnerable to child marriage and other harmful practices. For refugee girls, of whom less than 10% are enrolled in school in Ethiopia, that risk is even greater.

RECOMMENDATIONS: BUILDING RESILIENCE AMIDST CRISIS

As COVID-19 starts to erode some of the progress previously made in many fragile places, now is the time to accelerate efforts to deliver the “Decade of Action” for sustainable development, even as we respond to urgent needs. This means remaining focused on fragile contexts and investing in a suite of evidence-based approaches.

Based on our research and experience operating in the most complex crises and environments globally, including Ebola epidemics in West Africa and the DRC, we believe the following will be critical to an effective response in fragile and conflict-affected places:

Supporting local markets

Communities facing crisis situations like a pandemic must find ways to accomplish two related goals: coping with the immediate impacts of the crisis, and recovering some form of stability. Market systems play a vital and complex role in achieving both these goals. In complex crises, market systems suffer, but are also able to adapt quickly to serve local populations. Those market systems can often be more important than aid itself.

- Support the purchasing power of those most vulnerable through cash transfers so that they are able to meet their basic needs;
- Where feasible, support governments to expand and adjust their social protection systems through increased amounts of cash transfers;
- Invest in sub-national market analysis, over time, to understand which sectors and types of businesses will struggle most to recover.
- Support market actors and micro and small businesses to adapt and continue to purchase, sell and deliver food from/to the most affected/isolated areas so that consumers can continue to access affordable food;
- Address the underlying economic barriers that place micro and small businesses at risk by supporting local businesses, financial actors, and other key institutions to improve access to finance, market information, business planning, and other key services at scale.

In **Uganda**, as part of the financial services programme NU-TEC funded by DFID, Mercy Corps works with Equity Bank Uganda to consider how current loan portfolios might offer loan restructuring to clients or expand the scope of its client base to smaller businesses to continue to support liquidity in the rural economy.

Promoting peace and good governance

Violent conflict erodes global sustainable development, prevents progress towards gender equality and exacerbates humanitarian crises. The international community can and should do more to achieve SDG 16 by stepping up investment towards conflict prevention and peacebuilding, as well as addressing key drivers of fragility. The 2018 OECD [States of Fragility Report](#) highlights that less than 2% of official development assistance in fragile states is devoted to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and of those resources, most are directed to conflict response and management, not prevention. This has increasing importance in a COVID-19 world, where disinformation, erosion of public trust, broken economies and more limited access to public services can dramatically heighten the grievances that drive violence against both government and other groups.

- Support and conduct gender and conflict analyses and consistently integrate conflict sensitivity into programme and strategy design;
- Address drivers of conflict and violence - both those that predate the COVID-19 crisis, and those exacerbated by it;
- Ensure that funds that build social cohesion or address the root causes of conflict are not diverted elsewhere, including toward responses to COVID-19 or other emergencies;
- Strengthen government-community connections and influence an effective local government response, including through promotion of trustworthy and reliable information.

In **Northeast Nigeria**, Mercy Corps' team is piloting a rumour and myth tracker to better understand the rumour landscape and enable local leaders to collect and analyse rumours in communities, which will help to develop localised and conflict-sensitive responses.

Investing in climate adaptation

Between 2004-2014, over half of disaster deaths occurred in the top 30 fragile and conflict-affected states. Climate variability and extremes are also among the key drivers behind the uptick in global hunger and severe food crises that have a disproportionate impact in fragile states. Despite this reality, so far the world's so-called "Fragile States" have largely missed out when it comes to support from the international community to build resilience to climate change. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) for example, does not currently prioritise adaptation financing in more fragile states. This is especially relevant during COVID-19, as we already see some resources being diverted away from climate adaptation, and both the pandemic and climate change are reinforcing each other as threat multipliers. Even as we respond to urgent needs caused by COVID-19, we must not ignore the opportunity to implement a resilient and sustainable recovery that also builds resilience to future shocks - including climate related hazards.

- Ensure that humanitarian responses to COVID-19 do not divert funding commitments away from interventions aimed at reducing risks from other hazards;
- Recognise the importance of ex ante or early action and implementing a "Prevent First" policy and mind-set;
- Ensure that 50% of support for climate adaptation to LMICs is in fragile and conflict affected states.

Putting women and girls front and centre

A key lesson from COVID-19 is that while shocks and crises can affect every person and every country, they do not affect them all equally. Fragile and conflict affected states are bearing the brunt of this pandemic and within them, women and girls are especially at risk of setbacks. Failing to address the specific needs of women and girls as well as to leverage their expertise in the response to this pandemic will not only make the response less effective, but also further slow progress towards achieving gender equality, a key accelerator for sustainable development.

- Ensure that all responses to the crisis are gender-sensitive;
- Increase investments in gender analysis, and sex and age disaggregated data;
- Increase investments in interventions that specifically target women and girls and female-headed households, particularly to support economic recovery, maintain sexual and reproductive health services, and respond to all needs resulting from gender-based violence both in and outside of the home;
- Ensure that women and girls are able to participate meaningfully in the design, implementation and evaluation of responses to the crisis.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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