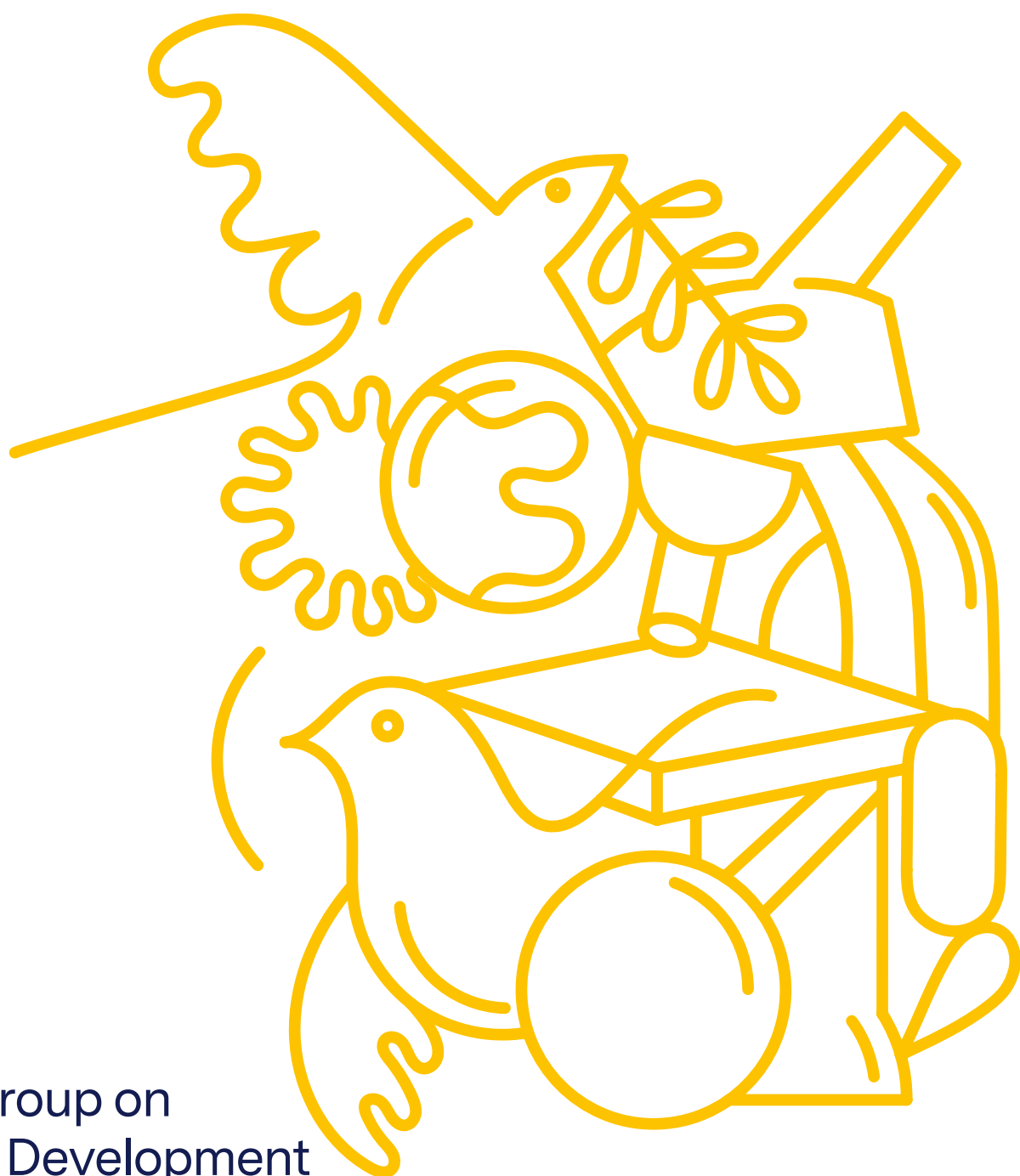


FriEnt **Coming  
to peace with  
COVID-19?**

Study  
Dec 2020



Working Group on  
Peace and Development

# Imprint

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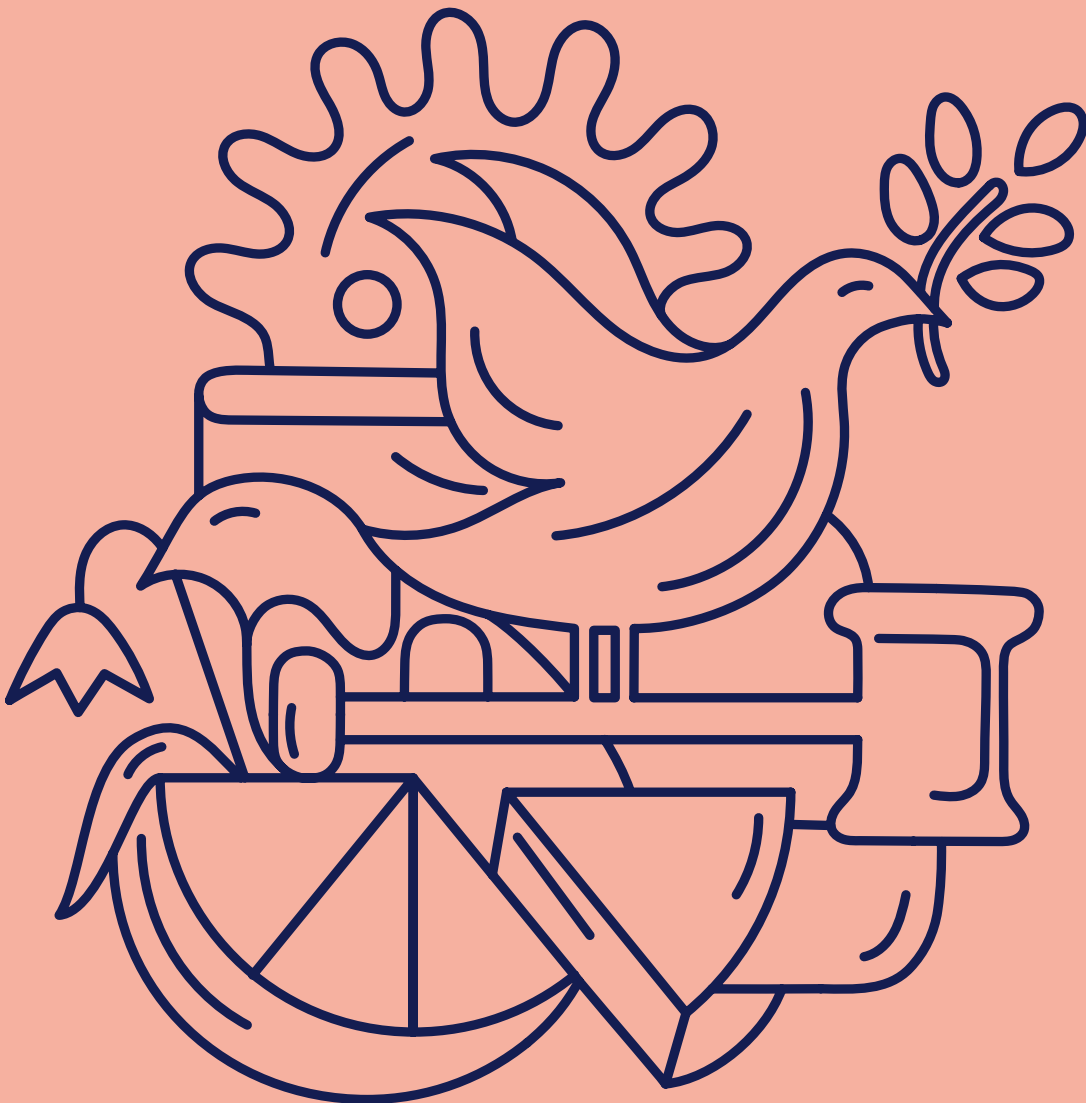
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# How the pandemic is affecting global efforts to promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies



More than nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic, its immediate impacts and the relevant response measures have become a permanent, cross-cutting topic for governments and citizens alike. Overall management of the crisis appears rather biased, however. While health hazards and economic effects are primary concerns, it is remarkable that the social and political implications of the COVID-19 crisis seem to receive far less attention – even though the pandemic has had severe consequences for the very core of international relations and for the underlying principles of social cohesion and political decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis with multiple dimensions that go beyond health and the economy, including significant consequences for the promotion of peaceful, just and inclusive societies – the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16). Although the global South and particularly fragile states are hit hardest, the consequences affect all parts of the world.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a currently underrepresented perspective on how the implications of the pandemic affect the objectives of SDG 16, and the guiding principles of the 2030 Agenda. Emphasis will be given to the implications for local and national peacebuilding efforts as the mainstay for the promotion of peace and social protection and as guidance for external support and cooperation. The analysis incorporates the findings of a survey<sup>1</sup> among peace groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), transnational networks, and local partners of the German Civil Peace Service (CPS) who work in different areas, such as transitional justice, trauma work, land conflicts, mediation and the protection of human rights. In a joint initiative of the Working Group on Peace and Development (FriEnt) and the GIZ Governance and Conflict Department SDG 16 Focal Person, contributions from four global peace networks and 27 partner organisations from 13 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Middle East have been collected and contextualised with data and information from publications

and online resources, including observatories, trackers and dashboards, as well as studies and compilations by academic think-tanks and international organisations.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the survey results also confirm recent observations by the GIZ Department for Governance and Conflict regarding the effects of COVID-19 on governance, stability and fragility – with corresponding conclusions on the implications of the pandemic.

Taken together, the main message becomes very clear: All efforts to ‘build back better’ call for a dual strategy. First and foremost, measures in response to COVID-19 must be in line with existing peacebuilding needs and include a conflict-sensitive perspective. In this context, efforts to leave no one behind and protect those who are most vulnerable also promote social cohesion and resilience, which in turn are safeguards for public security in times of crisis. Secondly, the fight against COVID-19 should not provide entry points for political abuse and authoritarianism. This applies especially to ongoing peace processes and existing warranties for political participation. Otherwise, previous achievements cannot be sustained, and the likelihood of violent conflict will increase. Consequently, combatting the pandemic while also promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies requires taking a firm stance on different levels of cooperation: at the global level for a clear commitment to international solidarity and in support of SDG 16, at national and local level for maintaining social and political resilience while facing the crisis, and on a bilateral and transnational level for providing assistance for crisis mitigation using a conflict-sensitive approach and upholding civil and human rights.

# The pandemic affects all dimensions of SDG 16



Ever since the founding of the United Nations there has been a fundamental recognition that peace and development are mutually reinforcing and interdependent – no development without peace and no peace without development has become the guiding principle for international cooperation. This nexus is echoed by the 2030 Agenda, which considers good governance as an enabling factor for sustainable development. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a fundamental crisis of multilateralism with direct implications for international efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The challenges and risks have multiplied, while the political attention and resources for the promotion of peace seem to be decreasing.

# Implications for the 2030 Agenda

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic calls for global cooperation and solidarity, joint management of the crisis seems a distant reality. Analysts observe an ongoing crisis of multilateralism and an increase in nationalism, a development that entails growing challenges and risks for democratic governance, social protection and the rule of law due to a lack of peer pressure and international control. More importantly, the UN system as a whole has been negatively affected by the pandemic<sup>3</sup>. While several UN agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions have set up support programmes and response plans in reaction to the pandemic, financial contributions from member states remain low. Global efforts for achieving the 2030 Agenda have also been significantly impaired. The devastating effects have been clearly stated in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020: 'The pandemic abruptly disrupted implementation towards many of the SDGs and, in some cases, turned back decades of progress.'<sup>4</sup> As stated in the report, the COVID-19 crisis further exacerbates existing disparities and inequalities, which is a worrying development for the promotion of peace and the objectives of SDG 16. Recent estimates forecast a significant increase in extreme poverty and hunger as a consequence of COVID-19. This negative development might push up to 100 million people into extreme poverty, while many countries that are affected by severe food crises are also experiencing violent conflict, which continues to deteriorate.<sup>5</sup>

# Implications for peace and conflict: ‘How COVID-19 gave peace a chance, and nobody took it’<sup>6</sup>

Although the COVID-19 crisis as such is not a cause of violence, it appears to act as a driver of conflict and an obstacle to peace.



In the early days of the pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire. Unfortunately, this plea has largely fallen on deaf ears. In theory, the initiative has been widely endorsed with approving declarations from 110 heads of state, broad civil society support, and even support from 24 armed groups.<sup>7</sup> In practice, however, the great majority of conflict actors did not turn their words into action. In some cases, the rates of organised violence actually increased, such as in Mexico, Iraq, Mozambique, and Brazil.<sup>8</sup> While on a global scale, the overall level of violent conflict has not changed significantly since the beginning of the pandemic, some types of political violence have increased considerably, most notably a surge of state repression, including violent assaults on civilians and a dramatic increase in militia attacks, especially across East and West Africa.<sup>9</sup>



Although the COVID-19 crisis as such is not a cause of violence, it appears to act as a driver of conflict and an obstacle to peace. Survey respondents as well as a variety of peace observatories and research projects have detected three general trends: first, an aggravation of existing conflict dynamics, including the intensification of social tension, and an increase in violent confrontations; second, the instrumentalisation of response measures for curtailing political and civil rights, and political repression; third, a suspension or deterioration of ongoing or initial peace processes.

### **Aggravation of existing conflict dynamics**

Survey results suggest that in several countries, existing conflict dynamics and patterns of inequality were exacerbated by the implications of the pandemic. Examples include a resurgence of land conflicts in Uganda, tensions between host communities and refugees in Lebanon and confrontations between ethnic groups in Kenya. As one respondent from Uganda put it, 'COVID-19 has generated new conflicts on a wider spectrum.' Or as a peace worker from Kenya noted along the same lines: 'Discrimination in the distribution of support and aid could lead to an increased rift between ethnic groups that can ignite old animosities or lead to new conflict lines.' While these are telling examples of political non-action or of a lack of conflict sensitivity, a second category of policy reactions to the pandemic can be linked to tendencies of state repression and political violence.

**“ It seems evident that the government regards human rights and the peace process as the least important topics which can be dismissed first in the current situation.**

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A local peace worker from Guatemala

### State repression and violent response measures

The survey results provided insight into several country cases where governments and state security forces used the pandemic as a pretext to seize control, including acts of violence and suppression against civilians. Examples include imposing severe restrictions on indigenous groups in the Philippines, forced displacements of local farmers reclaiming access to land in Guatemala and Uganda as well as harassment and violence against rights activists and political opponents in Kenya, Ethiopia and Bangladesh. In a similar vein, the recent OECD's States of Fragility report<sup>10</sup> confirms that pandemic response measures taken by governments in some fragile contexts have even increased poverty, inequality, social fragmentation and political oppression. While the COVID-19 virus does not discriminate, the political responses surely do.

### Deterioration of peace processes

As these developments illustrate, the pandemic seems to trigger discrimination and exclusion—a negative effect which also has consequences for political dialogue and peacebuilding. In many countries, ongoing or initial peace processes have come to a standstill or even been completely abandoned. As a consultation with local peacebuilders revealed, peace programmes in Somalia, Kenya, Cameroon and DR Congo have been cancelled.<sup>11</sup> This alarming trend has been confirmed by survey respondents from the Philippines, South Sudan and Guatemala. In South Sudan, where conflict management had just reached a critical stage, the pandemic has severe implications for the peace process. According to a local survey respondent, the international community seems to be too absorbed with domestic problems to intervene, whereas the country activities of UN agencies are limited by COVID-19 restrictions: 'Hard-to-reach areas have been pushed further out of reach, giving room to tribal conflicts to go on unabated affecting women, children and the elderly.' In Guatemala, the government is using the COVID-19 crisis as a pretext for dismantling state institutions and mechanisms that were specifically created for implementing the peace agreements and attending to affected groups of society. As one respondent stated: 'It seems evident that the government regards human rights and the peace process as the least important topics which can be dismissed first in the current situation.'

As an aggravating factor, the COVID-19 pandemic has severe implications for the operability of UN peace missions—including restrictions of movement and interaction, which is especially relevant for confidence-building measures, as well as constraints on mission activities such as political dialogue, election support and monitoring. Thus, the foundations for international peacekeeping are quaking at precisely the time where there is an increasing need for multilateral support.

# Implications for justice and the rule of law

As stated by UN experts, all restrictive measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic must be ‘proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory’.<sup>12</sup> The primary safeguard for meeting these requirements is the rule of law. While a limitation of civil rights in response to serious health hazards can be justified and even provided for by the legislation, these restrictions require legal regulations to prevent abuse and to ensure democratic scrutiny. Alarming, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed that this protective layer is very thin. In line with international observations, the survey results indicate that the rule of law, access to justice and the separation of powers have been suspended, restricted or even openly abolished in several countries—including extensive and unlimited state-of-emergency regulations. A recent study has identified numerous examples of the excessive use of emergency powers with concerning developments in 89 countries, including a total of 22 where restrictive measures are in place without a specific time limit. In five cases the legislature has been dissolved or suspended under COVID-19, namely in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Zambia, India and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>13</sup>

Referring to the rigorous state-of-emergency rule in Ethiopia, a local survey respondent described the regulations as very ‘broad and vague’: ‘In some cases, the government is using the emergency laws to forcefully silence and imprison citizens.’ According to local organisations in Kenya, the courts are not functioning and ‘access to justice is almost suspended (...). With lockdown the police have become more belligerent, and aggressive and human rights violations much more common.’ In Guatemala, local actors state that legal proceedings and the protection of human rights are deteriorating, including threats of legal persecution for human rights defenders.

**Inclusive societies, accountable decision-making and access to information are key pillars of SDG 16. The COVID-19 crisis has seriously endangered previous achievements and caused significant setbacks, which will be difficult to overcome**

## Restrictions on freedom of information

As these examples and many other cases show, an erosion of the rule of law and limitations of access to justice often go hand in hand with political abuse and oppression, including the restriction and control of information—a dangerous trend with serious implications beyond the rule of law. According to the recently published Pandemic Democratic Violations Index, an evidence-based analysis of COVID-19 related measures in 146 countries, ‘restrictions on media freedoms are by far the most common type of violation of democratic standards during the pandemic.’<sup>14</sup> This is particularly alarming since free access to information and political transparency are essential requirements for democratic governance and participation, including parliamentary control and accountability towards the public.



“ With lockdown the police have become more belligerent, and aggressive and human rights violations much more common.

A local peace worker from Kenya

# Implications for inclusion, democratic governance and participation

Political participation requires transparency in decision-making and public access to information, regardless of political affiliation or the social group to which one belongs. While the negative trend of shrinking spaces for civil society has already been denounced for a long time, it seems as if the pandemic has exacerbated the situation even further. As one survey respondent from Kenya put it: ‘The democratic space has been drastically reducing and COVID-19 presents a perfect opportunity to push political [or] personal agendas without fully subjecting them to public opinion.’

In various countries, censorship and restrictions of information include threats and arrests for criticising state responses. International observatories have denounced notable cases in Cambodia and Tunisia, where authorities have arrested and prosecuted journalists, bloggers and activists, or imposed high fines for opposing government measures.<sup>15</sup> In our survey, the severest persecutions have been reported from Bangladesh, where several journalists are facing life sentences for critical reporting.<sup>16</sup> As local actors state: ‘Some draconian provisions of the Digital Security Act are ... being used if anyone criticises the government. (...) It is becoming increasingly difficult for journalists and bloggers to report either about the crisis or mismanagement.’

## State-society relations and political mistrust

While most cases of serious rights violations and oppression occur mainly in countries with pre-existing democratic deficits, there are clear indications that

the COVID-19 crisis is substantially debilitating democratic standards and state-society trust in all parts of the world. Apart from the political implications, this development is also likely to further exacerbate the spread of the pandemic since people who do not trust the government will not be inclined to follow regulations and restrictions for the protection of public health. This tendency can also be observed in many consolidated democracies, as can be seen by the growing influence of conspiracy myths and public protests – although with the important difference that the deteriorating consequences for civil rights and political accountability are much more serious in autocratic systems. This holds particularly true for situations of political tension and upcoming elections. Local survey respondents from Kenya, Uganda and Guatemala gave similar reports on rising mistrust and rejection in state-society relations, with harsh actions by security forces adding fuel to the fire. In Sri Lanka, the military has ‘taken over functions civil officials and medical officials should be fulfilling’, as local actors state. Thus, ‘civilian groups can also fear that any criticism of COVID-19 management will be construed as a criticism of the army.’

“ Some draconian provisions of the Digital Security Act are ... being used if anyone criticises the government.

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A local actor from Bangladesh

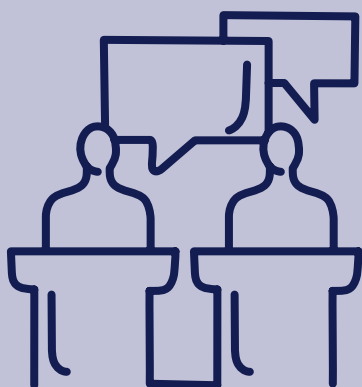
Since the beginning of the pandemic, at least 38 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums.

International Idea

### Political competition, parliamentary control and elections

Meanwhile, in several countries democratic proceedings and political competition are being dismantled or openly sabotaged. In Ethiopia, the government's term of office has been extended by decree<sup>17</sup>, while an abusive instrumentalisation of emergency regulations is used against political opponents. According to a local activist this includes 'stopping members of the opposition party from travelling and putting them in quarantine for a longer period, using such facilities as prisons. It appears that in some cases, the measures adopted are geared more at cementing control and cracking down on opposition figures than at ensuring public health.' In Sri Lanka, the parliament was dissolved in early March 2020 and new elections were postponed for several months,<sup>18</sup> leaving the country without parliamentary oversight over presidential power for a lengthy period.

While the postponement of elections is not necessarily a sign of authoritarianism and may well be justified considering the limitations on political campaigns and public gatherings in times of a pandemic, a delay may contribute to a deterioration of trust in a functioning state, aggravate or cause instability, and open the door for political abuse. However, this may also be the case if elections are held under COVID-19 conditions due to health hazards for voters and the impossibility of established democratic proceedings. In any case, the decision on whether to hold presidential or parliamentary elections and referendums is politically sensitive and also depends on the systemic capacities to ensure necessary precautions. Since the beginning of the pandemic, at least 38 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums, while 49 adhered to the scheduled timeframe.<sup>19</sup>



“ It appears that in some cases, the measures adopted are geared more at cementing control and cracking down on opposition figures than at ensuring public health.

A local activist from Ethiopia

# Leaving no one behind? Implications for most affected groups

Protecting the most vulnerable is an essential and indispensable objective for just, peaceful and inclusive societies, and as such for SDG 16. However, the current political climate seems to indicate the contrary. While the implications of the COVID-19 crisis already entail serious consequences for the protection of human rights and basic freedoms, this applies all the more to the weakest members of society. Across countries, the groups most affected are either those with low social and economic status or little political influence. The spectrum includes day-labourers, those working in the informal sector and the unemployed; rural and indigenous groups; religious and ethnic minorities; (returning) migrants, internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees; homeless people; the elderly and people with disabilities; as well as children and youth, and – most prominently – women and girls.

“The indigenous people’s struggle during the pandemic has exacerbated as the government imposed very strict restrictions and easily labels them as rebels.

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A local peace worker from the Philippines



Zimbabwe reports a 73% increase in calls to GBV hotlines since lockdown began; a sharp increase in domestic violence is reported in Iraq, including rape, sexual harassment of minors and suicide related to spousal abuse; Colombia has reported a 153% increase in calls to the national helpline for domestic violence ... believed to be directly linked to isolation measures.

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Global Protection Cluster

### **Gender-based violence against women and girls**

In all countries, those by far the most affected are women and girls, especially due to a drastic increase in domestic and gender-based violence (GBV) as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis. According to UN Women, there is ample evidence of spikes in domestic violence in numerous countries, while international monitoring programmes detect alarming developments all over the world: ‘Zimbabwe reports a 73% increase in calls to GBV hotlines since lockdown began; a sharp increase in domestic violence is reported in Iraq, including rape, sexual harassment of minors and suicide related to spousal abuse; Colombia has reported a 153% increase in calls to the national helpline for domestic violence ... believed to be directly linked to isolation measures.’<sup>20</sup> These trends are also emphasised by survey respondents from Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, who cite lockdown measures and limitations for social support as the main reasons.

### **Hostilities against indigenous people and religious minorities**

Several survey respondents from different countries, including India, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Guatemala, pointed out that governmental response measures were mostly directed towards the urban population and did not consider the needs of the poor, of those working in the informal sector or of rural and indigenous communities. In multilingual states, such as in

Uganda and Kenya and in Central American countries, information about the virus and government communications are not translated into local languages or do not reach rural areas, which further endangers these groups. Especially alarming is the situation in the Philippines, where ‘the indigenous people’s struggle during the pandemic has exacerbated as the government imposed very strict restrictions and easily labels them as rebels once they try to voice their concern or access very basic services during the lockdown.’ In other Asian countries, such as in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, local sources report increased hostilities against religious minorities including ‘false accusations of Muslims spreading COVID-19’ – an allegation that has also been raised against migrants and refugees in different countries, including Honduras, Guatemala and Lebanon. Other reports refer to the dire conditions in refugee camps and the lack of adequate protection in spite of an increased risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

### Discrimination and social cleavages

The social and political consequences are clear: if those most in need do not receive appropriate support, existing inequalities and patterns of discrimination will be further exacerbated, which in turn drives the erosion of social cohesion and state legitimacy. However, in several countries, political measures in response to COVID-19 even add to the burden of the most vulnerable: 'At least 20 countries have enacted emergency measures that disproportionately affect the democratic rights and freedoms of specific groups based on their race, colour, sex, language, religion or social origin in ways that cannot be justified by concerns for public health.'<sup>21</sup> Like a magnifying glass, the COVID-19 crisis shows the dividing lines between different parts of society and the underlying political dynamics. Although the circumstances differ depending on country contexts, the observations of most affected groups are very similar and show that the socio-political reflexes of exclusion seem to be quite universal.

As this fundamental crisis regarding the protection of the most vulnerable demonstrates all too clearly, the need to actively support these groups of society is now greater than ever. As one respondent from Guatemala observed: 'The pandemic marks the change to a new era where human rights are the [only] form of defence for the population and the only way to prevent the feeble achievements of the peace process from being neglected.' However, promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies and protecting fundamental freedoms has become very challenging in times of COVID-19.

**At least 20 countries have enacted emergency measures that disproportionately affect the democratic rights and freedoms of specific groups based on their race, colour, sex, language, religion or social origin in ways that cannot be justified by concerns for public health.**



# COVID-19 and peacebuilding: local efforts and external support



For peacebuilding actors, the COVID-19 pandemic calls into question the very core of their efforts. As local peacebuilding work aims to create trust and relationships, it is based on personal encounters and dialogue. With COVID-19, these ‘people-to-people’ approaches have become impossible, along with other instruments and means for community work and the promotion of peace—not to mention concrete threads for peacebuilding actors and rights activists. Overall, the survey results showed a recurring pattern of challenges and risks for local peacebuilding actors, no matter where they carry out their work.

# Challenges and risks for local peacebuilding in times of COVID-19

In general, local peacebuilders are faced with two types of challenges that affect their work under the conditions of the pandemic: at an operational level, limitations and restrictions due to COVID-19 regulations make it necessary to adjust instruments and forms of activity; in terms of content and scope, the political attention to peacebuilding needs may have been diverted or even completely abandoned, while the COVID-19 crisis adds new layers of conflict and risks to an already tense situation. Survey respondents have pointed out a broad spectrum of operational challenges that illustrate the magnitude of problems for peacebuilding actors. Frequently stated examples include direct implications for the wellbeing and the economic subsistence of staff, the retreat of international personnel or loss of external support, limitations for personal interaction or any contact with target groups, problems with technical infrastructure and communication, funding difficulties, as well as a lack of capacities and know-how for new methods of work.

## **Funding and international support**

While local peacebuilding organisations can address some of these challenges with their own skills and resources, others are clearly linked to international partners. As one respondent from Honduras stated with regard to the withdrawal of many international development agencies: ‘An (unintended) sideeffect of this departure is the apparent demonstration of unequal access to safety and health care measures, while there might also be a potential feeling of “being abandoned”.’

While this observation underlines the importance of international support, some organisations are also facing funding difficulties due to the realignment of funds for COVID-19 response measures. However, the overall feedback showed mixed results in terms of financing issues. Apparently, this is especially relevant for small organisations with specific project funding, while others are not affected or are able to adjust programme activities to COVID-19 implications. There are also assessments that assume an increase in funding due to additional budget assignments for anti-COVID-19 measures.

### **New approaches for communication and dialogue**

For other consequences of the pandemic, there is no apparent solution, but there is a need for adjustment and pragmatic acceptance. This applies first and foremost to the impossibility of social gatherings and personal meetings, which is a significant impediment for local peacebuilding work. This is why several organisations have adopted other means of communication and dialogue, ranging from community radios to smartphones and social media. A notable example was reported from Sri Lanka, where ‘partners’ social media pages were supported to help grassroots communities’,<sup>22</sup> and new modalities such as live discussions on Instagram and podcasts on peace culture and hate speech were included in the scope of activities.

Overall, local peacebuilders have shown broad flexibility and great commitment. This also holds true for transnational peace networks and partnerships. According to their survey responses, they will reshape implementation plans for more grassroots-level support or have already adjusted their programming ‘to respond to the most urgent needs of our partners, for example by creating online spaces to discuss the implications of COVID-19 on violence prevention and peacebuilding activities’.

However, in numerous countries peace activists and human rights defenders are under threat, while some govern-

ments are exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to create new realities with severe limitations of civic space and inclusive participation. Against this background, local peace activities in different parts of the world call for international solidarity and support – especially in times of crisis. The need for common action and leverage of expertise has been strongly emphasised and repeatedly put forward by global civil society networks and their member organisations as the best solution for a coordinated and holistic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

**“ An (unintended) side-effect of this departure is the apparent demonstration of unequal access to safety and health care measures, while there might also be a potential feeling of “being abandoned”.**

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A peace worker from Honduras comments on the withdrawal of international staff

# Rising to the challenge: options and entry points for external support

When asked about their needs and priorities for external support, local peacebuilders are very clear about their requests. Not surprisingly, many organisations focus on building their capacities for using digital tools and new communication technologies as well as innovative approaches for media work and other outreach activities. As one activist from Uganda put it, they aim to 'build strong coalitions for greater reach', while others hope to share experiences across regions and to bridge the digital divide between local work at the grassroots level and the international peace community. Similar concerns have been voiced by local actors from the Philippines, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Kenya and the DRC. They also call for flexibility and solidarity on the part of their international partners. This should also help to draw attention to local peace efforts and establish a counterweight to increasing political pressure. As stated by a local activist from Guatemala: 'Our work needs to be made visible in international networks and by like-minded allies.'

While more technical assistance such as training, funding and equipment might be relatively easy to achieve, the political dimension is probably more demanding. Considering the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on democratic governance, human security and the rule of law, 'local peacebuilders fear that it will be difficult to reclaim this space after the crisis'.<sup>24</sup> If these concerns prove true, 'building back better' might no longer be an option. This has been set out very clearly by a local assessment from Honduras: 'The first concern is that the imposed restrictions on civil society, such as public health safety measures, might be extended relatively unchecked, disproportionately and in different degrees depending on the socio-economic and socio-political power of said individuals or actors. These could further reduce due justice processes or initiatives, increase inequality, and limit individual freedom, including freedom of speech and the right to protest.'

“ Our work needs to be made visible in international networks and by like-minded allies.

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A local activist from Guatemala

### Need for political support

In view of these risks, international actors are called upon to stand by their local partners and to provide targeted support for the promotion of peace and democratic governance. The voices of local actors need to be heard and taken as guidance for a comprehensive and rights-based approach. This has been clearly voiced by a survey respondent from Sri Lanka: ‘Protect human rights defenders in fragile contexts; prioritise human security in peacebuilding work, even if the state fails to do so; (...) support local actors to work in bringing divided constituencies together, build solidarity; support media freedom, including independent media in all languages; [and] be transparent about your work.’<sup>25</sup> In any case, international assistance and cooperation under the conditions of a global crisis call for two major approaches: on the one hand a strong focus on conflict sensitivity for all measures in response to COVID-19, based on the human rights and the protection of the most vulnerable; on the other hand, targeted support for peace processes, the rule of law and civic spaces. This includes defending what has already been achieved and opposing attempts of political instrumentalisation. The pandemic has triggered an anti-democratic backlash, while peacebuilding actors and human rights defenders have come under immense pressure. Thus, the first step in ‘building back better’ must be to reclaim seized territory. Failing to do so would further exacerbate current negative dynamics and jeopardise future achievements.

“ Protect human rights defenders in fragile contexts; prioritise human security in peacebuilding work, even if the state fails to do so.

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A local peace worker from Sri Lanka

For international actors, this implies exerting political pressure on government partners and setting clear conditions for all support measures in response to COVID-19. This is also in line with local appeals to the international community, as this statement from Ethiopia illustrates: ‘Put pressure on the government to integrate peacebuilding and conflict prevention perspectives into COVID-19 measures, particularly through the inclusion of such actions as funding criteria.’ Although the international development system is not well equipped to adjust rapidly to emerging political crises, most bilateral and multilateral donors have set up specific support mechanisms as a reaction to the COVID-19 crisis. These programmes should take an explicit do-no-harm approach and include clear requirements for the protection of human rights and inclusive participation.

“ Put pressure on the government to integrate peacebuilding and conflict prevention perspectives into COVID-19 measures.

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A local activist from Ethiopia appeals to the international community

# Conclusions and policy recommendations



It has become clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis, but implies serious social and political consequences and major risks for the core objectives of SDG 16, including the promotion of peace, the rule of law, human and civil rights, the protection of vulnerable groups of society, freedom of information and participatory decision-making. While the pandemic as such is not a cause of violence, it appears to act as a driver of conflict and as an obstacle to peace. Emergency regulations have opened the door for autocratic rule; journalists, local peacebuilders and human rights defenders are under threat, while those most in need of protection are the worst affected.

To stop and reverse this downward spiral, international state and non-state actors need to make a concerted effort and take guidance from their local partners. Considering the alarming tendencies and current challenges, the 'ingredients' for 'building back better', seem clear, albeit ambitious:

### — Stay engaged and stay present

As numerous local actors have repeatedly underlined, they value the presence of international staff, both as a sign of solidarity and visible support, and as advocates for peace. This is all the more important since the withdrawal of in-country staff can endanger previous achievements, both due to a decline in impact and scope and to a lack of direct access to socio-political dynamics on the ground, which may potentially jeopardise ongoing peace processes. In this sense, 'leaving no one behind' would take on a new meaning as holding the fort and staying on-site.

### — Make protecting the most vulnerable a priority

both as guidance for international engagement and as a fundamental requirement for partner governments. All COVID-19 response measures need to focus on protecting those groups of society that are most at risk and require specific support. If governments fail to do so, international partners are called upon to reclaim a change of perspective. Protecting all groups of the population remains a primary responsibility of the state and may not be assigned to development partners. However, both state and civil society actors play a decisive role in addressing these needs for targeted support and to improve social resilience.

### — Exert political pressure for the protection of human and civil rights and the rule of law

In numerous countries, fighting COVID-19 has been taken as a pretext for discrimination and autocratic emergency regulations that open the door for the persecution of political opponents, human rights defenders and social activists. International actors are called upon to use their influence and take a stance on reclaiming the rule of law and actively protecting basic rights and freedoms. Although the ways and means for state and civil society actors may differ in this regard, they can use their respective strengths in a combined effort. For civil society actors this may imply creating public

awareness and advocacy work, while state actors may also consider specific conditions for COVID-19 response measures and designated funding. Another option might also be channelling more direct support to local partners and stakeholders, depending on the country context.

### —Don't lose sight of the peacebuilding dimension

All support measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic need to be conflict-sensitive and consider local needs and priorities for political dialogue and peace processes. Fighting the virus should not override political commitments and social efforts for peace and justice. The failure to pursue such efforts may destroy previous achievements for peace and development and trigger new conflict dynamics. The voices of local peacebuilding actors need to be heard and taken into the equation. Otherwise, the dividing lines of society will exacerbate further and increase the risk of violent conflict.

### —Bring local stakeholders on board

Most governmental support measures tend to focus on urban areas and often fail to consider the implications for rural areas, religious and ethnic minorities, or to give attention to local conditions, social tensions and conflict dynamics. International actors, including state agencies and civil society organisations, should be actively working to include communities and local authorities, both as an integral part of national COVID-19 response strategies and for their own partnering approach. This should also be helpful for conflict-sensitive support in response to local conditions and priorities.

### —Be flexible and adjust to local needs

Most local peacebuilding actors have had to adjust their activities and modalities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including changes in content and target groups and new needs for support, such as capacity building and equipment for digital communication and media work. This requires a flexible approach from international partners for channelling and assigning funds as well as for short-term modifications of work programmes, outputs and targets, and further cooperation requirements. International partners need to make sure that their support for local peacebuilding allows for the necessary adjustments with regard to the content and modalities of work as well as for scaling up their investments in digital technologies. This will remain a requirement for all future activities and also implies new opportunities for global networking and exchange, even for small and local organisations. Thus, the international peacebuilding community would be well advised to explore these possibilities for global dialogue and exchange.



The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that previous achievements for peaceful, just and inclusive societies are not set in stone but are fragile and volatile—even consolidated democracies are not immune to abusive circumventions of parliamentary control and public accountability. Consequently, leaving no-one behind and protecting the most vulnerable is also a ‘safety net’ for the preservation of political stability, and for social cohesion and resilience as basic preconditions for democratic governance. It has also become evident that greater efforts are needed if achieving the 2030 Agenda is to become a reality—all the more so with regard to the devastating effects of the pandemic on the implementation of many SDGs, including a deterioration of previous achievements. In this spirit, the overall success of local and international peacebuilding also depends very much on the commitment of global leaders to follow through on their pledge to ‘redouble our collective efforts to build peaceful, just, and inclusive societies through reducing inequalities within and among countries, [and] enhancing our ability to prevent and resolve conflicts.’<sup>26</sup> They would be well advised to suit their actions to their words.

**Consequently, leaving no-one behind and protecting the most vulnerable is also a ‘safety net’ for the preservation of political stability, and for social cohesion and resilience as basic preconditions for democratic governance.**

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted in May 2020. However, most responses refer to broader trends and developments, which indicate long-term consequences and extend beyond a specific time frame.
- <sup>2</sup> As an additional source of local perspectives and practical experiences from civil society organisations, a compilation of case studies of the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) was also used as a reference.
- <sup>3</sup> The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has announced a debt service relief, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/13/pr20151-imf-executive-board-approves-immediate-debt-relief-for-25-countries>, while the UN system has set up different areas and instruments of action in response to COVID-19, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/strategic-preparedness-and-response-plan-for-the-new-coronavirus> (Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 and progress reports); <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/COV00> (COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund).
- <sup>4</sup> United Nations Publications (2020): The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> World Bank estimates as of 8 June 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>
- <sup>6</sup> The Economist, 5 May 2020, <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/05/05/how-covid-19-gave-peace-a-chance-and-nobody-took-it>
- <sup>7</sup> ‘Call Unanswered: A Review of Responses to the UN Appeal for a Global Ceasefire’, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/13/call-unanswered-un-appeal/>
- <sup>8</sup> ‘A Great and Sudden Change: The Global Political Violence Landscape Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic’, ACLED, 4 August 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/04/a-great-and-sudden-change-the-global-political-violence-landscape-before-and-after-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> OECD (2020), ‘States of Fragility 2020’, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ba7c22e7-en>
- <sup>11</sup> ‘COVID-19 and the impact on local peacebuilding’, Peace Direct, April 2020, <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-and-the-impact-on-local-peacebuilding.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> ‘COVID-19: States should not abuse emergency measures to suppress human rights – UN experts’, OHCHR, March 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25722&LangID=E>
- <sup>13</sup> ‘An Update on Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy Four Months After the Beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic’, Policy Brief No. 24, 30 June 2020, V-Dem Institute, available at <https://www.v-dem.net/en/publications/briefing-papers>
- <sup>14</sup> ‘Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy During COVID-19 (March to September 2020)’, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>

- <sup>15</sup> Case references and original sources available at ‘Civic freedom tracker’, <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/>
- <sup>16</sup> ‘Bangladesh: Mass Arrests Over Cartoons, Posts’, Human Rights Watch, 7 May 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/07/bangladesh-mass-arrests-over-cartoons-posts>
- <sup>17</sup> ‘Ethiopia extends PM and lawmakers’ terms, to hold polls within a year’, Reuters, 10 June 2020, <https://cn.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idUSKBN23H1ZV>
- <sup>18</sup> Parliamentary elections were finally held on 5 August with a three-month delay and resulted in a major victory of the ruling Sri Lanka People’s Freedom Alliance (SLPFA), <https://www.parliament.lk/election-2020/>
- <sup>19</sup> Including data from 21 February until 27 September 2020. In some cases, elections have been delayed for several months, while others have been moved to the following year. Examples include the parliamentary elections in Ethiopia (originally scheduled for 29 August 2020, moved to August 2021), as well as parliamentary and presidential elections in Somalia (originally scheduled for 27 November 2020 and before 8 February 2021 respectively). The parliamentary elections have been moved to August 2021). For details see ‘Global overview of COVID-19. Impact on Elections’, International IDEA, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>
- <sup>20</sup> Global Protection Cluster, Report No. 6, 30 June 2020, <https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/2020/06/30/covid-19-protection-risks-responses-situation-report-no-6-as-of-30-june-2020>
- <sup>21</sup> ‘An Update on Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy Four Months After the Beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic’, Policy Brief No. 24, 30 June 2020, V-Dem Institute, available at <https://www.v-dem.net/en/publications/briefing-papers/>
- <sup>22</sup> Unity 4 Humanity, <https://www.facebook.com/U4Humanity>
- <sup>23</sup> CSPPS Statement: A Whole-of-Society, Conflict-Sensitive Response to COVID-19, 9 April 2020, <https://cspps.org/news/cspps-statement-whole-society-conflict-sensitive-response-covid-19>
- <sup>24</sup> ‘COVID-19 and the impact on local peacebuilding’, Peace Direct, April 2020, <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-and-the-impact-on-local-peacebuilding.pdf>
- <sup>25</sup> Case studies carried out by the GIZ Department for Governance and Conflict have also demonstrated the importance of local governments and municipalities as key partners and implementing agents for support activities based on local needs and contexts.
- <sup>26</sup> United Nations: Draft ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the 2020 session of the Economic and Social Council and the High-Level Political Forum on sustainable development, Advance version, 17 July 2020, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26780MD\\_2020\\_HLPF\\_HLS.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26780MD_2020_HLPF_HLS.pdf)

