

COVID-19 and the impact on local peacebuilding



As the impact of the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic grows, local peacebuilders continue working to help communities break through cycles of violent conflict. During the first week of April, Peace Direct and Conducive Space for Peace held a series of consultations asking local peacebuilders how their lives and work have been affected by this unprecedented health emergency, what their communities need, and how they see their role during this time of crisis. These consultations included input from over 400 peacebuilders from more than 60 countries. This report presents key findings and recommendations from those consultations.

“Local peacebuilders work closely with communities and accompany them in peacebuilding efforts. They are trusted mediators, mobilisers, and messengers. Local peacebuilders are responsive to the needs of local communities...This means they are used to integrating different types of needs whether related to peacebuilding, development, human rights, or humanitarian concerns.”

“We must adapt our peacebuilding efforts in order to fight against the virus. Because it is important to let everybody know that no country, no organization alone can fight this virus. We must all put our knowledge together and coordinate our actions.”

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. The COVID-19 crisis and the response to it are exacerbating the underlying roots of conflict, particularly inequality.** In some places, this means violence is being reignited and peace processes threatened. Government responses are not adequately conflict-sensitive.
- 2. Some governments are exploiting the crisis to further their own agendas.** Some governments are exploiting the crisis to further restrict civil society space and increase authoritarian measures. Local peacebuilders fear that it will be difficult to reclaim this space after the crisis.
- 3. The crisis has also provided opportunities to advance peace.** This has taken the form of ceasefire campaigns, local mutual aid, and community-building initiatives, as well as the chance to reconnect as a global community. Local peacebuilders are working to adapt their programs and integrate COVID-19 response.
- 4. Peacebuilders are struggling to sustain their work.** With priorities shifting to COVID-19 responses, local peacebuilders fear reductions in financial support and attention from international donors.
- 5. Social distancing undermines many existing peacebuilding efforts.** Local peacebuilding efforts, which often rely on in-person gatherings and people-to-people approaches, are directly undermined by necessary restrictions on gatherings and social distancing measures. Peacebuilders need support adapting their efforts to maintain social cohesion.
- 6. The crisis is impacting mental health.** Isolation, social distancing, and the stress of the crisis are contributing to increased mental health problems and trauma, which is particularly difficult for people living in conflict affected contexts.
- 7. Young peacebuilders could be at the forefront of building peace and tackling the virus.** Young peacebuilders can play a leadership role in preventing violence, training their communities and innovating new peacebuilding technologies. Young people must therefore be at the core of shaping more resilient societies for the future.



"Beyond just financial resources, I fear that this pandemic can be used by some to curtail important human rights and rights to civic engagement. The protection of young peacebuilders and human rights defenders is made more difficult by the travel restrictions in place. The space for operations of civil society organizations is necessarily affected by the lockdowns, confinements, closed borders."

Local peacebuilders report significant impacts on the conflict dynamics in their communities.

COVID-19 and the response to it are exacerbating conflict dynamics and existing patterns of inequality, interrupting peace processes, and increasing the risks of violence in communities. Existing tensions between groups are exacerbated by physical distancing and by blaming 'the other' for the spread of the virus. In South Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Cameroon, and DR Congo, important peacebuilding programs and dialogues have been canceled. In Colombia, the peace process has been stalled at a critical moment.

Many people live from day to day and have no savings to sustain their living. In some places, people are saying they prefer to die from the virus rather than starvation. The poor, women, disabled, prisoners, elderly, and other marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted by the crisis. Drastic increases in domestic violence, as well as crime rates, are reported as people are forced to remain at home and lose their livelihoods. Children are left without education and parents without the ability to feed their families. Unreliable information flows create uncertainty and fuel fears and stigmatization.

COVID-19 ceasefires are being negotiated in places like Yemen and Darfur, and some armed groups have initiated unilateral halts to fighting in Cameroon and Colombia. However, in other countries social activists have been killed, armed groups exploit the crisis for recruitment, and abuses by security forces have been reported. Racist sentiments are also mounting in countries with existing patterns of polarization, discrimination and exclusion. Gender-based violence is increasing, and victims have trouble finding help as support programs are unable to reach out or conduct in-person programs.

Some governments are framing the crisis as "warfare" and exploiting it to further restrict civil society space and increase authoritarian measures. Local peacebuilders fear that it will be difficult to reclaim this space after the crisis.

"The military is fully in control and using excessive force in minority areas; including attacks on journalists; and not issuing curfew passes for Muslim vendors to operate while allowing others to operate in the area."



Many local peacebuilders are actively adapting and integrating their work to respond to the crisis.

Local peacebuilders are rooted in their communities and used to adapting and integrating programs in response to changing needs. Many are now working to deliver supplies, promote measures to limit the spread of the virus, and keep communication open among communities to maintain social cohesion in the midst of physical distancing. They have a vital role to play as trusted messengers and mediators in the communities, especially where trust in government may be low.

Unfortunately, current responses to the crisis at the international, national, and local levels are not demonstrating conflict-sensitivity or taking an inclusive peacebuilding approach. General lockdowns are leading to horrific increases in violence against women and children. Restrictions on gatherings and travel are impeding peace processes in ways that may reignite tensions or benefit some groups over others. And the economic impacts are most directly affecting the already poor and vulnerable.

“Now the government offices are partially functional, the courts are closed down and the local administration is also partially working. So this is aggravating the conflict because we are seeing raise in theft cases in the rural areas. It is also difficult for peace builders to make any interventions because the government order of working from home”.

“In places like South Sudan where the conflict management had just reached a critical stage (signing of the peace agreement), the COVID-19 pandemic has diverted attention, hence we can expect huge impacts on poorly managed transition and a disconnect between local and national processes since the actors (mainly NGOs) that bridge this gap are hardly in operation.”

Local peacebuilders shared how they are innovating to help mitigate the crisis and continue building peace.

“[In Ghana] our community volunteers go around with their megaphone to encourage people to observe the lockdown and stay indoors, observe the social distancing and remain disciplined to the hygiene protocols. This we are able to do with permission from the local authorities since we understand the community dynamics better.”



"It is yet to be implemented, but members of Local Peace Committees in Kirkuk in Iraq (some being also representatives of the local authorities) will do 'solidarity patrols' in order to raise awareness about COVID-19 and precautions to take, targeting the most vulnerable groups, such as rural communities, and women, as their current situation is particularly concerning... if they were to get sick, they might be unable to receive proper care as instances of women not being treated because it was not socially acceptable for her to be alone and isolated in a hospital have happened in some communities where tribal influence is very strong."

Local peacebuilders understand the conflict dynamics at play in their communities and maintain relationships with different groups, including those who may become more marginalized or vulnerable in the crisis. They also have experience with trauma and psychosocial programming, and they emphasized the importance of creating trauma-informed responses for the immediate crisis and longer-term recovery.

"At the moment we are developing for the communities we work with 1.5-hour online sessions of self care and support where people can share and accept their emotions about the situation, we plan to do it in the framework of the Integrative Community Therapy, I also see that other partner do circles of empathy. There are groups online to share opportunities for different needs of vulnerable groups."

Young peacebuilders can also play a leadership role in preventing violence and helping innovate new peacebuilding technologies. Youth have creative ideas of how to overcome the challenges of lockdown, are skilled with technology and social media, and can strengthen the online capacity of the population.

Local peacebuilders still struggle to mobilize necessary resources, respond to the changed environment, and sustain their operations.

Many local peacebuilders told us they are facing, or expecting, reductions in financial support and attention from international donors, as priorities have shifted to the COVID-19 response. Local peacebuilders see a clear need for greater conflict-sensitivity, gender-awareness, and peacebuilding integration into COVID-19 response efforts, but they are not yet being included in response initiatives by donors. They are trying to adapt their own work during this time of crisis and lockdown as peacebuilding traditionally relies on in-person relationship-building.

Local peacebuilders are asking funders to help them and their communities acquire the technologies they need to continue building community cohesion and resilience. This could mean increased internet access, cell phone time, radio programming, or other communications tools.



In addition, local peacebuilders pointed to the urgent need for flexible, adaptive, long-term support to help mitigate growing conflict and to assist them in the post-crisis recovery phase.

There is a high degree of uncertainty among local peacebuilders on how to sustain their work, now and after the crisis. Many local organizations have no general organizational support beyond activity support, and little means to sustain staff if projects are canceled. Small local organizations are particularly at risk.

“The survival of small organizations and movements is in jeopardy at the moment. When things start opening up again, there is a question of who and what organizations will still be here to continue working. While many countries consider stimulus efforts and donors shift to fund Covid-19 related problems, small organizations are at risk of falling through the cracks of assistance.”

Local peacebuilders can play a vital role in building resilience for the future and leveraging opportunity from crisis.

Local peacebuilders share a sense of hope that positive change can be forged from even the most difficult crisis. They see an opportunity to strengthen social cohesion and adopt more transformative,

integrated, inclusive, and innovative approaches to building safer, more resilient communities.

“This crisis is shaking some of the foundations of society and our role is to push for that shake-up to challenge existing power structures that are unsustainable and exclusionary.”

“This pandemic is propelling us to re-examine the way we work, to find creative ways to promote peaceful resolution of conflicts in the regions we operate, and to find additional means to engage and meet our commitments, whether to partners on the ground or our funders.”

The COVID-19 crisis will impact the way peacebuilding and development efforts are done in the future and the role of local actors. Local peacebuilders hold the key to sustained engagement for peace and how best to deal with crisis in their countries and communities. The time to engage them is now.

“A significant shift was already needed in how we approach peacebuilding and community building work. This crisis puts a previous lack of focus on resilience in the spotlight. We feel that there’s never been a more important time for the work we are doing.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CONFLICT-SENSITIVE APPROACHES ARE VITAL.

Governments and international actors should adopt conflict-sensitive, gender-sensitive, and trauma-informed approaches to local, national, and global COVID-19 response efforts. Local and national governments should support and engage local peacebuilders as essential to help design and lead COVID-19 sensitization and response efforts to help mitigate further conflict, prevent violence, adapt and sustain peace processes, and (re)build social cohesion.

2. PROVIDE SUSTAINED AND FLEXIBLE FINANCIAL SUPPORT.

Donors and international organizations should sustain financial support to and partnership with local peacebuilders during the crisis. This should include opening new emergency response funding and, where requested, supporting them in adapting their work. Donors should provide flexibility for rapid program re-design, as well as re-direction of resources to protect core operations and staff. Finally, donors should consider funding smaller networks of local peacebuilders that are forming to leverage greater impact.

3. SUPPORT TECHNOLOGY TAKE-UP.

Funders and international partners should also support local peacebuilders with appropriate technologies they need during the crisis, including increased access to power, phones, internet, radio, online platforms, and other communication tools. This should include supporting the development of innovative ways of reaching local communities during distancing and lockdown. The private sector could make significant new contributions to local peacebuilding with technology support at this time.

4. SUPPORT YOUTH-LED EFFORTS.

International actors, governments, and local organizations should support youth-led peacebuilding and crisis response efforts. This should include providing opportunities for youth to contribute to response efforts and continue their education through the crisis. Donors should guard against stigmatizing youth as part of the problem and engage them as leaders.

5. MONITOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS.

International organizations should monitor and report human rights violations, restrictions on civil society, and indicators of increasing authoritarianism resulting from the crisis and the ongoing lockdowns. International leaders, governments, and the peacebuilding community should speak out against these worrying trends and take concrete steps to hold states accountable for abuses.

6. ADDRESS THE STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF CONFLICT.

The peacebuilding community, international actors, governments and donors should develop programs that address the structural causes of conflict such as inequality and discrimination, which are being exacerbated by the crisis and require long-term solutions. This includes planning now for the extensive post-crisis recovery process that will be required for communities to rebuild their economies and health systems, and to restart education and social life, in more inclusive ways.

7. PROVIDE INCREASED SUPPORT FOR RECOVERY AND TRAUMA HEALING.

Donors, governments, and international actors should provide increased support for psychosocial and trauma healing programs during the crisis and through the recovery process. They should recognize that peacebuilding, community resilience, and reconciliation will be critical elements of a post-crisis recovery process.

8. USE THIS MOMENT TO PROMOTE SYSTEMIC CHANGE.

International actors, governments, funders, and the peacebuilding community should leverage opportunities to mitigate violence, advance peace processes, and promote longer-term positive transformation in societal relationships from the crisis. Supporting initiatives like ceasefires, mutual aid, and cross-community cooperation in the midst of the crisis can prevent immediate violence and contribute to more durable peacebuilding in the future.



Greg Funnell

About Conductive Space for Peace

Conductive Space for Peace is an International Peacebuilding organisation based in Denmark. We work in collaborative partnerships as a connector in facilitating systemic transformation of the global peacebuilding system.

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About Humanity United

Humanity United is a foundation dedicated to cultivating the conditions for enduring freedom and peace. We support and build efforts to transform the systems that contribute to human exploitation and violent conflict.

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Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. We believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts.

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