



**Building Capacities for Prevention and Sustaining Peace at the Country Level:  
What can the UN Peacebuilding Architecture learn from the COVID-19 pandemic?**

**16 June 2020, 8:30 – 10:00am (EST – New York time)**

**Meeting Note**

To strengthen implementation of the United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace resolutions, especially at the country and regional levels, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (DHF), the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), and the International Peace Institute (IPI) have initiated a series of roundtable discussions to examine the strategies and pathways towards the operationalization of Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace. The series aims to convene member states, UN staff and civil society representatives working at expert level on peacebuilding and sustaining peace to discuss key thematic areas of relevance to the implementation of Sustaining Peace resolutions and to ongoing processes of reform that aims to make the UN more effective in living up to its prevention mandate.

The roundtable on the impact of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on peacebuilding and sustaining peace took place online on June 16, 2020. Representatives of UN agencies, Member States and civil society participated in the discussion.

In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the roundtable provided a space to discuss good practices and lessons learned from the UN system's efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion covered ways in which the UN peacebuilding architecture could be strengthened as a result of learning from its current COVID-19 response in countries, to inform the 2020 peacebuilding architecture (PBA) review.<sup>1</sup> Participants shared insights on the current COVID-19 response at the field level, including from the perspective of Peace and Development Advisors and development partners, on how COVID-19 has affected the UN's peacebuilding work, and how UN country offices have adapted to address the pandemic in a holistic manner such as by mobilizing peacebuilding capacities at local, national and regional levels around the common goal of sustaining peace.

The pandemic has exacerbated underlying root causes of armed as well as social conflict and placed limitations on existing peacebuilding action. It has also exposed the limitations of the existing understanding of root causes and action to address these at the field level. Participants suggested that the 2020 PBA review should emphasize the importance of conflict prevention and peacebuilding response at all stages of conflict and crisis and ensure that efforts to address health emergencies and natural disasters encompass a strong peacebuilding element.

The following is a summary of the themes, takeaways, and key recommendations raised during the discussion:

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<sup>1</sup> "2020 Review: About the 2020 Review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture" Accessed 8 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/2020-review>

- **COVID-19 as exacerbating threats to peace and security, including human rights protection: need to ensure peacebuilding progress is not lost**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the task of preventing conflict and sustaining peace. Implementation of peace agreements has been delayed,<sup>2</sup> and communal violence has spiked in some regions.<sup>3</sup> UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' call for a global ceasefire has been heeded by some parties, including in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Colombia, Libya, Myanmar, Philippines, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen. However, fighting in some of these contexts has continued<sup>4</sup> and the "initial gains are fragile and easily reversible."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, local peacebuilders, who are often the first responders and work hand in hand with health and humanitarian workers, face significant funding cuts and shrinking civic space, making the peace infrastructures within communities even weaker.<sup>6</sup>

In Mindanao, the Philippines, for instance, the implementation of the peace agreement between the Filipino government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has stalled after notable progress had been made until the first quarter of this year. Participants noted, for example, that COVID-19 has delayed the delivery of expected benefits or "dividends" of peace thus making the de-commissioning of former combatants more difficult. Additionally, the apparent governance vacuum during the pandemic risks undermining citizens' confidence in the national government and exacerbating drivers of conflict. As a result, there are real concerns about a ceasefire collapse.

In the Philippines and beyond, there are also indications that armed groups have taken advantage of the vacuum created by lockdowns to escalate their attacks in order to expand their control over territory or resources. Further, participants noted a spike in communal violence and criminality in Colombia, Nigeria, the Philippines and South Sudan, suggesting a causal relationship with mitigating measures related to COVID-19. This is further challenged by the fact that local peacebuilders, who are often the first responders and work hand in hand with health and humanitarian workers, face significant funding cuts and shrinking civic space, making the peace infrastructures within communities even weaker.<sup>7</sup> Finally, participants emphasized that the pandemic has sometimes spurred securitized discourse and the adoption of militarized policy responses from governments, resembling counterterrorism measures.

The participants suggested the UN system should develop strategies for addressing the shrinking civil society space and empower local peacebuilding organizations to support national response, while encouraging Member States to nuance their responses to reflect on the ways to maintain progress achieved and develop effective solutions to address triggers of violence exacerbated by the pandemic.

- **COVID-19 and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus: need for more rigorous conflict analysis in crisis response**

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in the Philippines, the adoption of the new electoral code – a key component of the peace agreement and of transition to peaceful governance in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao – has been delayed due to the pandemic. (Information provided by young Philippine activist during a dialogue between PBC and grassroots peacebuilders).

<sup>3</sup> According to information provided by GNWP local partners, there have been spikes of communal violence in Jonglei, Warap and Lake states in South Sudan; as well as increase in farmer-pastoralists clashes in Kitgum, Uganda. These have been attributed to the limited presence of government and the UN due to COVID-19, as well as lowered capacities of peacebuilding organizations who usually work to lower tensions, mediate and address root causes of conflicts.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in Colombia, the unilateral ceasefire by the National Liberation Army (ELN) did not prevent an uptick in violent clashes between armed groups. The attacks are attributed to other armed groups operating in Colombia, as well as dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). (Information provided by GNWP local partners).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, "Secretary-General Reiterates Appeal for Global Ceasefire, Warns 'Worst Is Yet to Come' as COVID-19 Threatens Conflict Zones". 3 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20032.doc.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Information provided by GNWP partners.

<sup>7</sup> Information provided by GNWP partners.

Participants noted that COVID-19 and mitigating measures including lockdowns have exacerbated social vulnerabilities, including poverty, lack of governance, gender inequality and violence against women, thus fuelling unrest in certain regions of the world. Providing examples from Guatemala and Nigeria, participants discussed the challenge of striking the right balance between addressing needs related to the immediate health emergency and those arising from the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.

This points to a more insidious connection between the pandemic and peacebuilding, and to the importance of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

In this regard, participants reflected on how the UN can effectively address the multi-dimensional peacebuilding challenges posed by pandemics and the importance of supporting policy responses that take into consideration down-stream issues that can undermine recovery.

A few examples of the good practices shared are outlined below:

- In Nigeria, the UN Country Team has worked in an integrated manner from early stages of the pandemic to develop a coordinated response plan, and to **collect evidence on COVID-19 impacts at different levels and aspects of society**. The UN Country Team has submitted reports to the Nigerian Government detailing such impacts and offering recommendations to encourage a multi-sectoral response including a socio-economic recovery plan after COVID-19. The UN Country Team in Nigeria had benefited from its experience in developing **multi-sectoral structures or task forces prior to the pandemic** – such as the Task Force on Boko Haram in Nigeria.
- In the Philippines, the UN Country Team intends to revise the Common Country Analysis and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework to ensure the UN system comes together to address the evolving situation. For instance, it aims to use the **humanitarian response to COVID-19 as an entry point to engage with the security sector**, injecting the importance of community policing in the Bangsamoro region, and of the Security Sector Reform into the discussions and planning on humanitarian action.
- At the global level, the **Peacebuilding Commission has held dedicated meetings on the impacts of COVID-19 on countries and regions**, thus facilitating discussions between multiple stakeholders and actors at different levels to encourage early peacebuilding intervention.

Despite some good practices, participants expressed an overall concern that the long-term effects of the pandemic on peacebuilding have not been sufficiently incorporated into the responses. This is due to the fact that peacebuilding remains a main topic of focus within the UN peacebuilding architecture, but continues to be an “afterthought” across much of the UN system, both at country and HQ level.

Participants emphasized the importance of including a conflict analysis in humanitarian and development responses to COVID-19, as well as to prioritize a peacebuilding approach that addresses conflicts and challenges many of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In this context, it is critical to ensure that both UN and Member States maintain or strengthen their political attention and funding on conflict prevention alongside efforts to respond to the COVID-19 emergency.

- **Locally-led peacebuilding in the time of COVID-19**

Although the roundtable participants represented the UN, Member States and international civil society, they emphasized that the challenges posed by COVID-19 to peacebuilding have been particularly strongly felt at the local level, among grassroots peacebuilders. The COVID-19 mitigation measures – including curfews, lockdowns, restrictions on internal and international travel, etc. – have severely limited the mobility of local peacebuilders and thus their ability to plan and implement their work, as well as to participate in decision-making processes at the national and global levels.

Participants also pointed to the influence of the digital divide in defining who can be included in continued peacebuilding discussions, planning and work. As much of the peacebuilding work has been moved online, it is important to note that only 55% of the households globally and only 19% of households in the Least Developed Countries<sup>8</sup> have access to internet, potentially leaving behind a large segment of local peacebuilders.

Both mobility and connectivity restrictions disproportionately affect women. Globally, women are 23% less likely than men to use mobile internet.<sup>9</sup> They are also likely to be more affected by mobility restrictions, since these are exacerbated by pre-existing patriarchal norms. Moreover, as primary carers in many families and communities, women find themselves faced with a heightened burden of unpaid domestic labor, which limits their capacities to be involved in peacebuilding efforts.

In this context, participants emphasized the importance of using multiple and innovative ways for engaging local communities in peacebuilding response during COVID-19 – including the use of various internet-based platforms, telephone, SMS messages, engaging religious and traditional leaders, leveraging humanitarian actors' access to local communities, etc.

Finally, participants agreed that COVID-19 has highlighted the need for mobilizing more financing for locally-led peacebuilding. They reiterated that the Peacebuilding Fund should revise its procedures to create more scope for funding that goes directly to civil society, including local organizations.

## Recommendations

- 1) **UN Country Teams and missions, under the leadership of Resident Coordinators** should develop joint strategies for COVID-19 response and recovery, thus striking a balance between addressing immediate and longer-term effects of the pandemic. These responses should include a strong peacebuilding component and be gender-responsive.
- 2) **Member States should refrain from militarized and securitized responses to the COVID-19 pandemic**, which are likely to restrict civic space and contribute to aggravating the root causes of conflict. Member States should also use this opportunity to reflect on, and nuance, their discourse on issues such as counter-terrorism (CT), carefully considering the peacebuilding impacts of CT measures.
- 3) **Member States should continue and amplify their financial support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding as a central element of COVID-19 recovery**, and make efforts to ensure that funding is made available to local peacebuilding organizations, including those led by women and youth.

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<sup>8</sup> International Telecommunications Union, "Measuring digital development Facts and figures 2019", available at: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> International Telecommunications Union, "THE STATE OF BROADBAND 2019' REPORT HIGHLIGHTS", available at: <https://broadbandcommission.org/Documents/SOBB-REPORT%20HIGHLIGHTS-v3.pdf>

- 4) **The UN Peacebuilding Architecture should promote and encourage the use of conflict analysis and the inclusion of a peacebuilding focus in humanitarian and development responses to crises like COVID-19.** In this context, it is critical to ensure that both the UN and Member States maintain or strengthen their political attention to and funding for conflict prevention alongside efforts to respond to the COVID-19 emergency.
- 5) **UN System and UN Country Teams should assess and strengthen strategies for the engagement of civil society,** including grassroots women peacebuilders, at the time of COVID-19, taking into account the restrictions on mobility and access to the internet.
- 6) **The Peacebuilding Fund, International Financial Institutions and other donors should amplify their efforts to provide funding for peacebuilding and conflict-prevention led by local civil society, including in particular local women and youth.**