COVID-19 and violent conflict: responding to predictable unpredictability, by Christine Bell

The World Health Organization is working on the basis that death rates rise when COVID-19 casualties exceed domestic health service capacity. The response is to require "social isolation" and shutdowns of large swathes of society and the economy. So far, media focus has been on the crisis in China, Europe, and the United States. However, the world's poorest countries have little public health care capacity, and often also lack effective central governments with any geographic reach or legitimacy to order – let alone enforce and manage – shutdowns. Unless there are mitigating disease dynamics in other places that are not yet understood, the consequences of the ongoing pandemic on poorer countries will be grim.

At the same time, many of these same impoverished countries are also in the throes of violent conflict. We know from experience that the relationship between armed conflict and crisis is complicated and leads to unpredictable results. If this unpredictability is, however, itself predictable – a "known unknown" – can a "smart" response be put in place? Our ongoing research at the Political Settlements Research Programme suggests that the following 11 baseline understandings are likely to be key in designing the most effective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in conflict-affected regions:

1. Implementing technical solutions is always political, and "conflict lenses" are needed to anticipate the effectiveness of any response

Violent conflict takes place in deeply divided societies, where “the State” is often seen as owned by and serving “one side” of these division(s). Any disease response needs to factor in that any “technical response” will be understood through local conflict sensibilities. Local populations will appraise and measure any response in terms of wider conflict divisions and lack of trust, which will determine how “help” is received. For example, even in relatively peaceful Northern Ireland, disagreement over when the power-sharing government should implement COVID-19 school closures, took on a conflict hue, as Irish nationalist parties pushed for similar timing to the Republic of Ireland, while Unionist parties awaited the response of the British government.

2. Mid-level peacebuilders have unique capacities to bridge and build trust between the state and local communities

Where and whenever possible, combined messaging by local and international “ethical brokers” who are trusted in local communities can be important for navigating lack of trust. During and after the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, networks of local “mid-level” peacebuilders played an important role in building trust for interventions in borderland communities whose experience of the conflict had left them with no trust in the State or its health interventions.

3. Flexible aid may be needed that can bypass the State in contentious areas

Donors may need to provide creative “direct-funding” for local communities, particularly where they are autonomous and oppositional to the state. However, states subject to such bypassing, will likely view this process as a threat to their sovereignty, particularly if the sub-state region has aspirations of becoming an independent state. Hence, aid modalities may themselves need forms of conflict-diplomacy.

4. Crisis management can have “peace dividends”

Moments of crisis can also provide turning points in a conflict, depending on how the parties and international actors behave. COVID-19 itself has already contributed to renewed calls for a ceasefire, and implementation of prisoner releases in Afghanistan. Both were provided for in the recent U.S.-Taliban Agreement, but until COVID-19 evolved into a full blown global pandemic, these provisions were proving difficult to implement. Similarly, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines recently declared a unilateral ceasefire with the National Democratic Front (NDF) to better fight the spread of the coronavirus, although the NDF greeted the call with some suspicion rather than reciprocity. The December 2003 tsunami that devastated Indonesia reinvigorated a settlement process, which was all but dead between the Free Aceh Movement and Indonesian government, resulting in a peace agreement.

5. Conflict parties often seek to make military and political gains, under cover of crisis response

Crises can also be used as cover for military and political gains in a conflict that is continuing. For example, the same 2003 tsunami that arguably helped produce a peach agreement in Indonesia, contributed to dynamics that ultimately saw the peace process in Sri Lanka failing, producing a bloody conflict. In Nepal, the deadly 2015 earthquake pushed the main parties to agree to a permanent constitution, but at the price of narrowing the peace process' wider promise of inclusion to a range of ethnic and socially excluded groups, including women. In Ogaden Ethiopia, famine and delivery of food aid has often been charged as being a vehicle for the Ethiopian military to gain access to opposition-held areas, and pursue destructive policies such as "de-villagization." Local humanitarian agreements in Syria, also stand charged with swapping "bread for surrender." Thus, how crisis response is delivered, and how it enables other agendas, can become independent conflict accelerants, as can perceptions of bias

in terms of which communities' needs are viewed as being prioritized.

6. State and non-State armed actor capacities for mobilization, and their political and military calculations, will be different

During conflict, efforts by international agencies to implement something like a "shut down" will impact very differently on State forces as opposed to non-State forces such as al-Qaeda or the Taliban. In a conflict like Afghanistan, where policing border crossings are key to inserting break points in disease spread, if these are also conflict or rebel-held hotspots, then this will pose added challenges. Local geographies will be affected differently, because crises will affect them differently *and* because they will have different local political settlements between State, non-State and civic actors, which affect their capacity for coordinated responses.

7. COVID-19 may pose unique logistical challenges to current peace processes

There are challenges that may be unique to COVID-19 because of its global scale, and the nature of the crisis.

8. Diplomacy and peacekeeping may become "absent"

The pandemic has impacted on all forms of diplomacy, from Brexit to regional peace processes. Peace processes depend on diplomacy and third party guarantees. In peacekeeping forces and donor country missions, States are withdrawing personnel. The COVID-19 pandemic has already seen a travel ban and ban on social gathering implemented in South Sudan, where the last transition agreement is but three weeks old, effectively bringing its process of implementation and diplomacy to a standstill. The COVID-19 pandemic differs from the Ebola crisis in that with Ebola diplomacy and internationalized responses could continue beyond shutdowns

and immediately affected zones. Whereas with COVID-19, diplomats falling ill, sometimes perhaps as a result of their diplomatic contact, has been a feature of transmission this far. There are innovative ways to use technologies – the two week old Spanish-Catalan dialogue is moving online for example. But, face-to-face contact often has a distinctive trust-building role to play in conflict settings (e.g. Anwar el-Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, which paved the way to the Camp David Accords).

9. Emergency legislation is a response with conflict-dangers

Western states such as the United Kingdom and France seem to be moving toward forms of emergency law that have little democratic or judicial oversight. Where democratic states go, more autocratic, conflicted states will quickly follow. In divided societies, states of emergency have a long history of uneven application to national minorities and political opponents. They are often "synonyms of sustained and extensive human rights violations." There are reasons to work within the confines of human rights law, especially during health crises where use of law really matters. In any country, the risk is that while some urgent powers will be needed for health care provision, the police and executive powers will have wider application. In conflict contexts, crisis often provides a pretext for a long-term executive power-grab of dubious constitutionality or other abuses of exercises of emergency powers. A clear danger is that these emergencies do not end when the health crisis does, but continue indefinitely.

10. Elections are also peculiarly at threat, with specific conflict consequences

The social isolation element of containment also means that the holding of elections is particularly at threat in a context where democratic decay is already a global phenomenon and poses a particular risk for conflicted states. Post-conflict contexts depend on elections to resolve power tussles

peacefully and avoid governmental breakdown, such is now threatened in Kosovo.

11. A lack of international legal confidence

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic provides wider challenges because of the moment in which it arises. We are living in a period during which the currency of international norms, international organizations, and globalized responses, are less popular than even a decade ago. For a crisis that is inherently, cross-border – indeed global – in nature, such increased skepticism of multilateralism render necessary cross border global responses harder to put in place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 threat is unusual in that it is imminent, and globally existential. Countries in conflict have populations who have been facing existential threat for a long time. At time of writing, the U.N. Secretary General has called for a world-wide ceasefire. If illness takes hold in conflicted states, it is possible that this call will be heeded. But even ceasefires require agreements and diplomacy. Creative thinking on how to address coronavirus and conflict together could play a game-changing role in ending unnecessary deaths by disease and warfare in of some of the world's most troubled places.

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