THE NEED FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE AND PEACEBUILDING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Research Brief: Lessons from Northeast Nigeria

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Overview

As the COVID-19 pandemic has spread to fragile and conflict-affected contexts, some donors have focused on public health and humanitarian assistance while cutting back on peacebuilding and governance programs, which are not viewed as producing immediate, tangible impacts on the spread of COVID-19. However, when strained state-society relations are part of pre-existing conflict dynamics, responses to COVID-19 that fail to incorporate governance and peacebuilding approaches run the risk of undermining their intended public health goals while also further exacerbating cycles of violence. In such contexts, **long-standing political grievances and mistrust inform the narratives through which communities understand the spread of COVID-19 and responses to it by the government and international actors**. These perceptions simultaneously limit the willingness of communities to comply with COVID-19 public health regulations and can amplify other drivers of violent conflict. This interaction between the COVID-19 pandemic and pre-existing sources of fragility is a threat multiplier, magnifying existing grievances and posing lasting challenges to resilience and peace.

The ongoing crisis in Northeast Nigeria is a particularly relevant context for examining how fractured citizen-state relations, conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic are connected to one another. It also provides a case study for identifying how donor funding and programs should be oriented to address both the spread of the disease and broader governance and peacebuilding goals concurrently.

Mapping the Connections between Governance, Conflict, and COVID-19

Throughout the course of adapting to the ongoing pandemic, Mercy Corps has used observations from program teams in more than 40 countries to identify five pathways through which the spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of containment measures are shaping conflict: 1) deteriorating state-society relations, 2) armed groups seeking to expand their activities and influence, 3) increasing scarcity and economic competition, 4) fraying social cohesion, and 5) proliferating disinformation and misnformation. Figure 1 summarizes the hypothesized connections between COVID-19 and violent conflict that have emerged from an inductive analysis of the lessons from this broad cross-section of cases.[1]

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While the broad cross section of country-specific observations that informed this framework indicate that these five pathways are widespread, our analyses also indicate that not all factors are present or equally important in every case. Northeast Nigeria demonstrates **how pre-existing weaknesses in state-society relations interact with insecurity, economic scarcity, fraying social cohesion, and misinformation** throughout the pandemic and the local response. This case study illuminates three interconnected lessons for donors and implementers responding to COVID-19 in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.
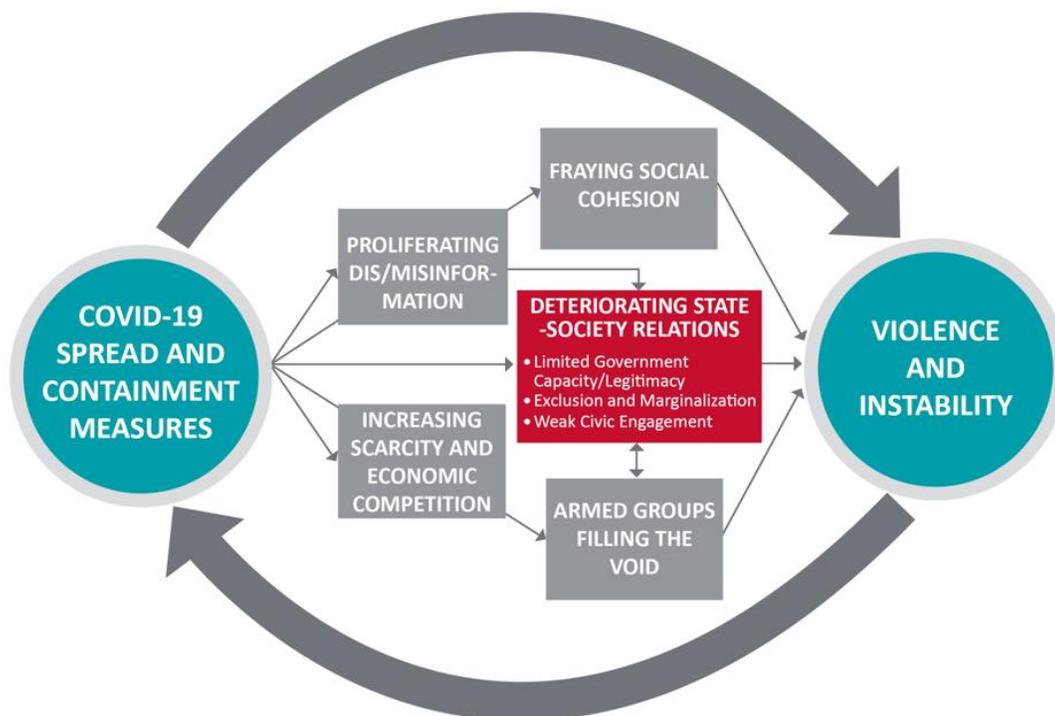

Figure 1. Pathways Connecting COVID-19 and Conflict, With Added Detail on the State-Society Relations Pathway. Source: Inks and Lichtenheld 2020.

Lessons for Donors and Implementers

Lesson #1: Linkages between mistrust in government and other causes of conflict predate COVID-19, but also interact with the pandemic and the response on an ongoing basis.

In Northeast Nigeria, the core underlying governance factors that fuel conflict include pervasive mistrust in the government, widespread marginalization of a variety of groups, and limited beliefs by community members that they can meaningfully participate in local decision-making and peacebuilding.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, these governance factors interacted with a number of other types of conflict drivers, including strained social cohesion, widespread insecurity, humanitarian assistance that unintentionally sparks conflict by ignoring local beliefs and values, and communications campaigns that fail to address community needs. The COVID-19 pandemic only further fuels these dynamics by reinforcing connections between the political, social, economic, and security dynamics that cause violence and insecurity.

Lesson #2: Strained state-society relations affect how communities and armed groups react to the COVID-19 pandemic and containment measures.

Poor state-society relations are a significant driver of instability in Borno State. Announcements of new COVID-19 cases and government responses serve to reinforce existing beliefs by community members about the untrustworthiness of government and international organizations, who are spearheading the COVID-19 response.

Announcements of new disease cases have fueled rumors that the pandemic is a hoax designed to enrich politicians. Lockdowns are perceived as unfairly targeting religious and cultural gatherings. Behavior change communications by the Borno State Government and INGOs often overlook community beliefs and needs related to the pandemic and fail to collaborate effectively with trusted local actors including doctors and midwives, traditional leaders and religious leaders.

As a result, public health measures are ignored or resisted, behavior change campaigns get distorted into rumors, and patterns of humanitarian aid distribution are used by local conflict actors to further entrench political favoritism and exclusion. These reactions limit the effectiveness of efforts to combat the COVID-19 crisis and intensify many short-term and long-term conflict drivers.

Lesson #3: When responding to COVID-19 in contexts where governance is an underlying cause of conflict, programing should mobilize communities around their lived realities of the public health emergency.

In Northeast Nigeria, Mercy Corps uses an integrated portfolio of trainings, consultations, and dialogue sessions that cumulatively support constructive dialogue, meaningful participation of local communities, and increased responsiveness and accountability by government actors. These approaches are designed to build trust in government and increase civic engagement by creating opportunities for constructive state-society relationships and restoring community confidence in government.

During the pandemic, Mercy Corps has adapted these approaches by adding specific modules on COVID-19 and its secondary impacts to training materials and working with local partners to adapt community engagement and dialogue sessions to allow for social distancing and other measures that reduce the risk of disease transmission. In addition, Mercy Corps is piloting a Rumor Tracker that uses mobile phones and radio to tailor communications campaigns to community perceptions and questions. These approaches use the pandemic as an entry point to help communities reassess their collective needs and grievances related to governance, conflict, and inclusion and to help identify new program activities and adaptations.

Recommendations

It is vital for donors such as USAID's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, the State Department's bureaus in the Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Under Secretariat, and relevant sections of the new UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to **maintain and increase investments towards addressing the governance, conflict, and security factors that are exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, and which threaten to undermine the public health response and long-term peace and stability if not addressed.** At the same time, organizations implementing public health and humanitarian responses (including the WHO, UNICEF, and INGOs) should find ways to **deeply integrate community engagement, dialogue, and conflict sensitivity into their programs.**

To make the most of governance and peacebuilding investments, donors and implementing organizations should:

〉 **Prioritize COVID-19 response activities that strengthen state-society interactions and invest in programs that support two-way communication between communities and government actors**, including:

- o Government-community dialogues,
- o Town hall forums,
- o Community score cards for service delivery,
- o Participatory design workshops for COVID-19 response,
- o Citizen-centered advocacy.

〉 **Begin adaptations and new initiatives with a community-led analysis of the shifting needs, grievance, and conflict dynamics resulting from the pandemic.** This process should include deeply engaging local communities in mapping changing conflict dynamics, basic service needs, governance pitfalls, and potential public health risks. This will ensure that implementing partners can continue investing in communities, while managing concerns around virus exposure. Adaptations should draw on cutting-edge approaches to community-led analysis, including:

- o Participatory analysis and appraisals,
- o Human-centered design processes,
- o In-depth qualitative social science studies conducted by and with community-based organizations.

〉 **Use direct community feedback and technology to design and implement behavioral change communication campaigns.** Donors and implementers should budget for assessments that enable them to adapt messaging so that it is tailored to local cultural contexts and perceptions and therefore effectively promotes behavioral change. Communication initiatives should also embed opportunities for regular community feedback and questions, including:

- o Radio call-in segments
- o Radio listening/discussion groups,
- o Phone-based surveys using text messages or interactive voice response,
- o Town halls that are synchronized with communications campaigns.

〉 **Build local capacities to convene dialogues and public spaces for exchange while also limiting the risk of disease spread.** As pervasive mistrust across a range of relationships continues to undermine the effectiveness of the COVID-19 response and fuel conflict dynamics, restoring these relationships is a precondition for addressing the public health crisis and investing in long-term stability. Dialogue remains an important approach for neutralizing imbalanced power dynamics between government officials, security actors, INGOs, and the communities that they intend to serve. While public gatherings increase the risks of spreading the virus, implementers should work with local partners to manage risk jointly by integrating public health guidelines into facilitation plans, including:

- o Socially distanced dialogue forums,
- o Using videoconferencing applications and social media platforms to convene dialogues virtually.

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