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## DISCUSSION PAPER

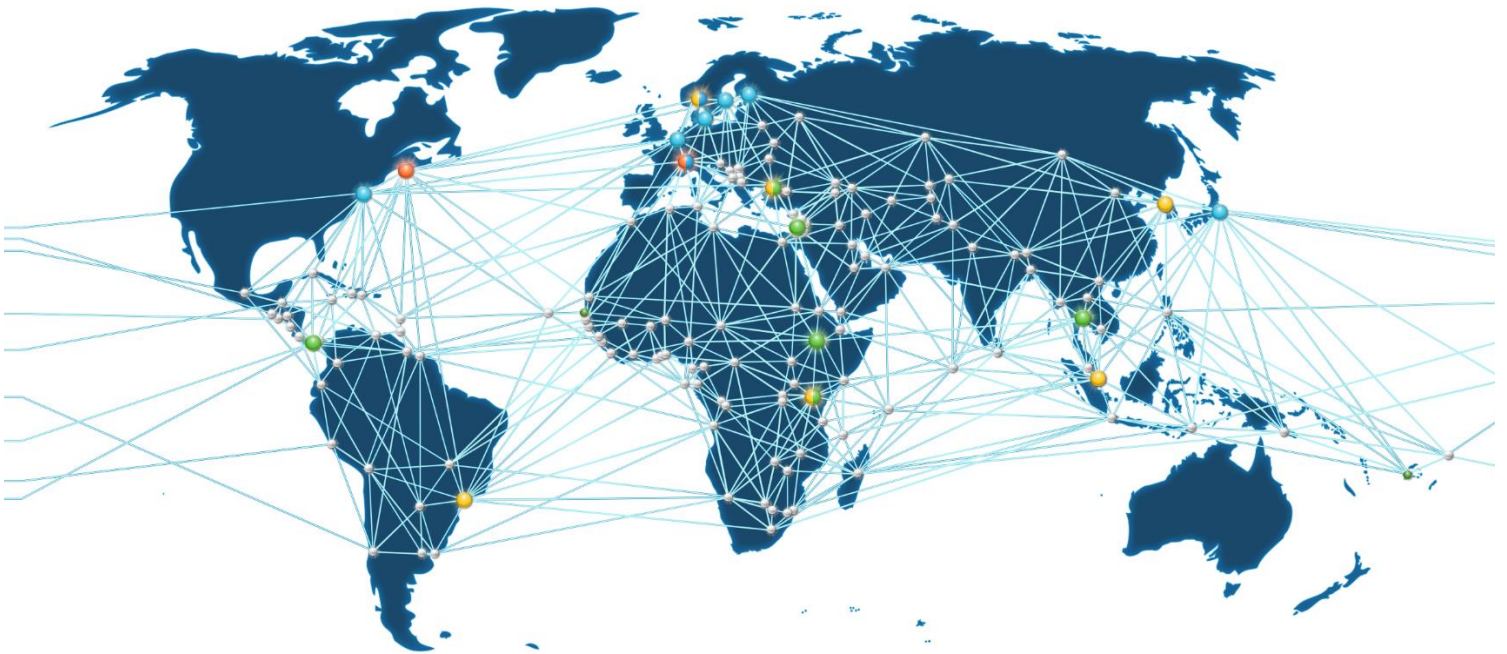
# THE NEXUS BETWEEN COVID-19 AND CONFLICT:

Assessing the impacts of the pandemic on peace and development

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# Introduction

## *Executive summary*

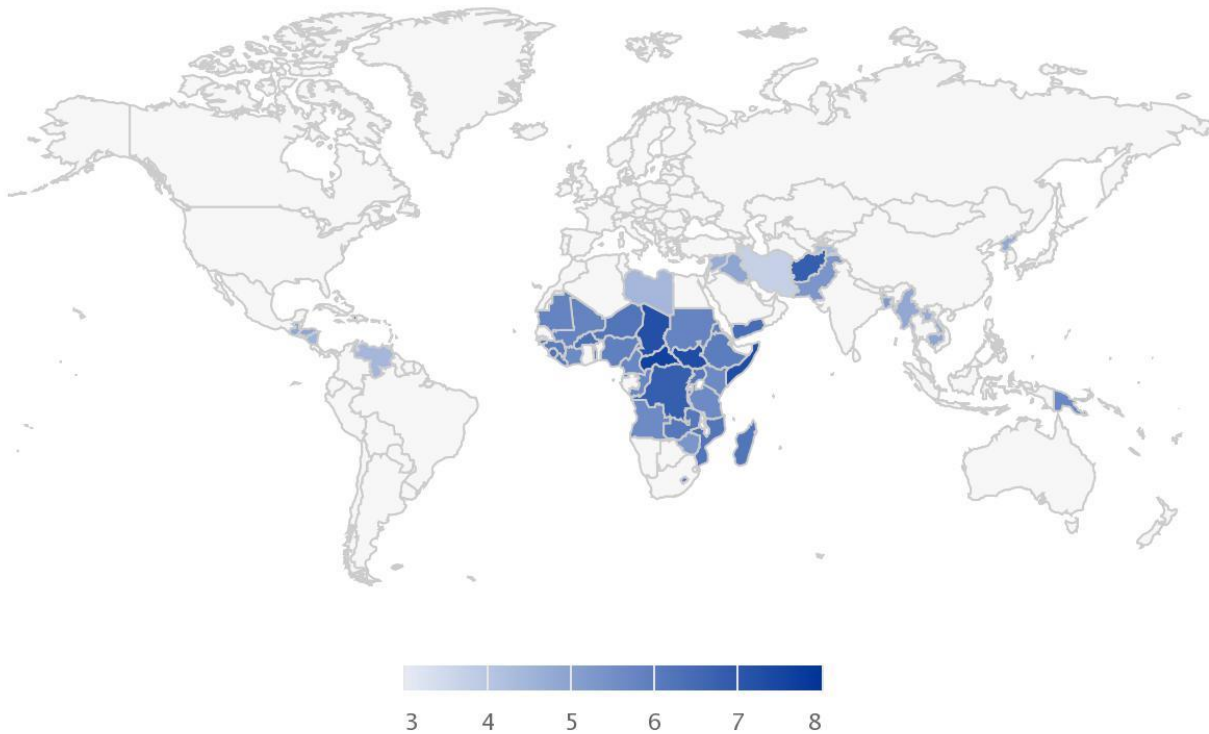
As the global death toll from the ongoing COVID-19 passes two and a half million one year after the World Health Organization declared a pandemic, countries are being affected by the virus far beyond human mortality. The secondary impacts of the pandemic are acute in conflict-affected contexts, where they are impeding pathways to peace and development. Data gathered by UNDP through its on-the-ground assessments beginning in mid-March 2020 and data insight conducted jointly by the g7+ and UNDP indicate emerging trends related to the pandemic's impacts on peace and development across the spectrum of conflict.

*The importance of the Leave No One Behind agenda has never been clearer. The pandemic has reinforced the need for collaboration across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus founded on a common vision of pursuing lasting peace and sustainable development.*

The highest rates of COVID-19 infections are found in contexts that—in most cases—also have the highest burden of violence. Insurgency has not declined to the extent as would be expected. Gender-based violence is on the rise. Social cohesion is being stretched thin as riots, protests and mob violence increase. Non-state armed groups have used the diversion of security forces to the pandemic to recruit and step up attacks and undermine the legitimacy of the state. Attacks against health and aid workers, both of which already set records in 2019, continue to rise alongside the pandemic.

COVID-19 has impacted conflict dynamics, too. Globally, violent conflict has declined since the start of the pandemic. In fragile states overall, violence has similarly declined, with 30,000 fewer violence-related fatalities than the same period in 2019 (a decrease of 30 percent). This decrease has been reported by organizations operating in-country as well. The UN Mission to Afghanistan reported that violence against civilians in Afghanistan has declined by 30 percent during the pandemic. Nevertheless, COVID-19's impact appears to be influencing conflict dynamics. Although the incidence of violent conflict between states has decreased over the past ten years, intrastate violence between armed groups and the state reached its highest point last year. State oppression has increased globally by approximately 30 percent during the pandemic and in some fragile settings, such as the Sahel region, armed violence against civilians by state actors is on the rise. Although some armed groups initially agreed to the Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire, the International Crisis Group has noted overall that the call has not led to a reduction in violence.

The importance of the Leave No One Behind agenda has never been clearer. The pandemic has underscored the need for strengthening state institutions and fostering stability. It has reinforced the need for collaboration across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus founded on a common vision of pursuing lasting peace and sustainable development. It has also reinforced the need to integrate multidimensional crisis analysis, including on emerging risks and vulnerability, such as this paper, into our way of working, future-proofing our development interventions to build resilient societies and durable development.



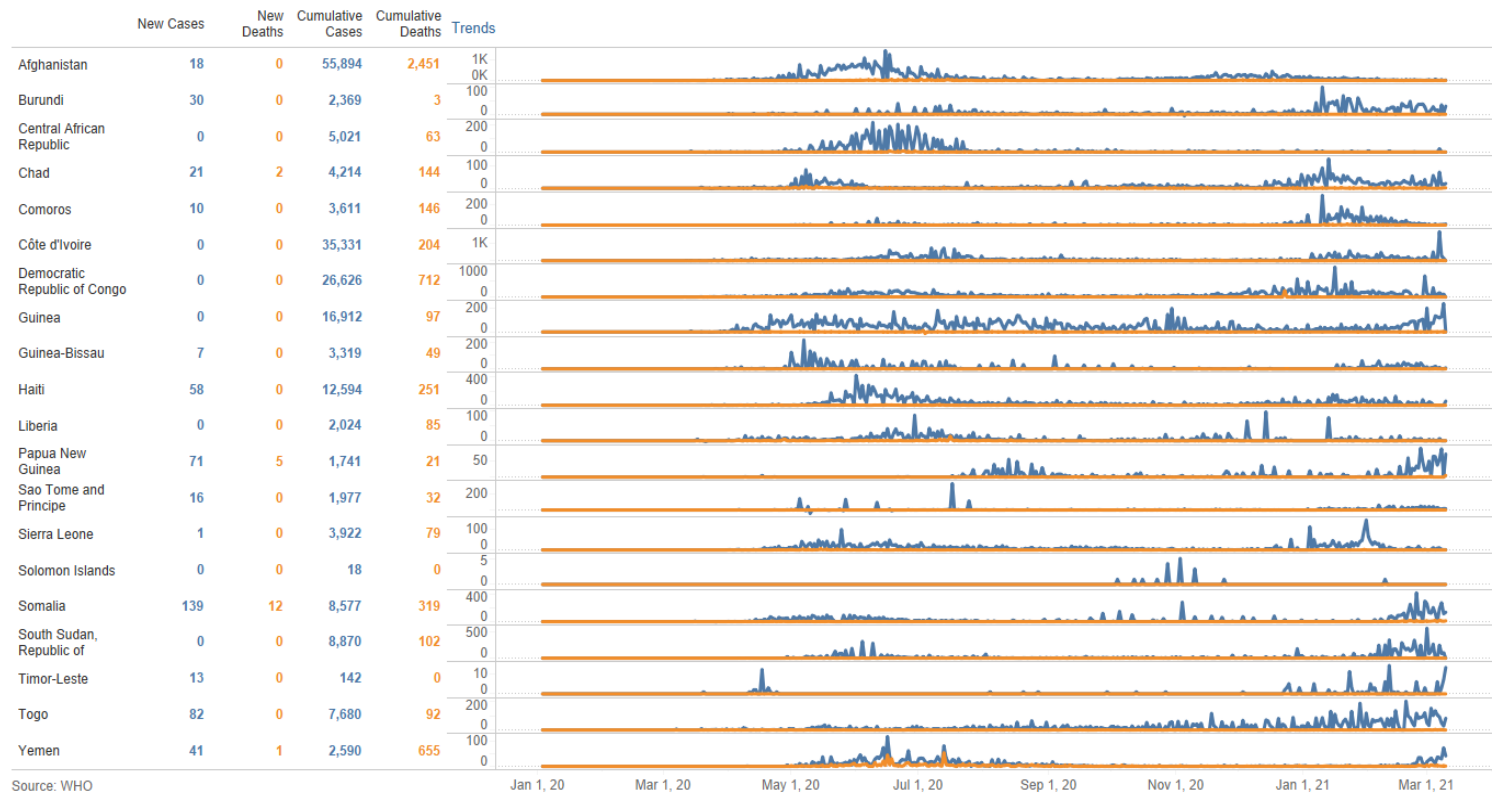
Highcharts.com © Natural Earth

Severity of risk against national response capacity for managing COVID-19 (with 8 as most severe risk; INFORM 2020)

## Introduction

### *Recognizing underlying fragility*

**Conflict-affected contexts are generally more vulnerable to the shocks of the crisis and less able to address the critical components of the pandemic’s impacts.** These include low governance and health system capacities. Even before the shock of COVID-19, most fragile contexts were on track to meet just one SDG – SDG 13 on climate action – and progress was particularly challenged on SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (health) and SDG 5 (gender equality). The World Bank notes the severely under-resourced health systems in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where expenditures are 1.2 percent of GDP compared to 5.9 percent of GDP globally. Comparatively, several fragile contexts are at risk from health and humanitarian impacts of COVID-19 overwhelming national response capacity to the primary impacts of the pandemic and where secondary impacts are also likely to have the most critical humanitarian consequences as detailed below.



The primary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in g7+ contexts

Case study – Yemen

Already the world’s worst humanitarian and development crisis, Yemen is one example of a fragile context in which how quickly and rampant the virus is spreading remains unknown due to the lack of testing and reporting. Yemen’s healthcare system is ravaged. There are three doctors and seven hospital beds per 10,000 people. Because of the war, only around half of the health facilities are operational. Two-thirds of Yemenis have no access to basic healthcare, and half lack access to running water that would allow essential handwashing to keep from spreading the disease. The UN estimates that the percentage of those who die from COVID-19 in Yemen is as high as 30 percent--well above anywhere else in the world. To put this in perspective, the average fatality rate is seven per cent whilst in many more advanced countries it hovers around three per cent.<sup>1</sup>

## Key findings

### *The nexus between COVID-19 and conflict across six dimensions of fragility*

**The COVID-19 crisis is more than a global health emergency.** The G7+ and UNDP have assessed the impact in a number of fragile and conflict-affected contexts including Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Solomon Islands, South Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo and Yemen. We found that the secondary impacts of the pandemic are hitting conflict-affected contexts hard across the six OECD dimensions of fragility—economic, social, human, political, security and environmental.

**Although the average expected drop of 2020 GDP among fragile contexts is roughly the same as the overall global average of four per cent, fragile and conflict-affected settings are not expected to rebound as quickly as their higher-income peers.** The UN has found that several conflict-affected countries are expected to decline twice if not three times the average, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia.<sup>i</sup> Growth forecasts for 2021 are partly driven by the hope that vaccines will help countries recover. Vaccines may not be as readily available to fragile and conflict-affected settings, where, aside from global competition and high costs, logistical considerations related to cold chain supply may impede delivery. In Syria, UNDP found that unemployment has increased by eight percentage points, which is equivalent to around a quarter of a million jobs,<sup>ii</sup> while in Haiti, the UN found that the proportion of economically active women without paid work increased 24 percentage points to 39 percent during the pandemic, while for men, the reported increase is 15 percentage points to 24 percent.<sup>iii</sup>

**Extreme poverty in fragile countries was already on rise in fragile and conflict affected countries.** Two in five people expected to fall into extreme poverty by 2021 due to COVID-19 are living in fragile contexts, and the rate at which extreme poverty is expected to increase in fragile contexts is twice that of non-fragile contexts.<sup>iv</sup> With lock downs, closure of borders and trade activities, more and more people lost their livelihoods. Female headed families find it even more difficult to survive. In Uganda, UNDP found that nearly half of workers employed in informal businesses in the manufacturing sector have been pushed below the poverty line, with a similar trend in the hospitality industry and trading and services, with a disproportionate impact on women.<sup>v vi</sup> In Afghanistan, UNDP expects the poverty rate to rise by 13 percentage points.<sup>vii</sup>

**The decrease in remittances sent to fragile contexts is also pushing people into poverty.** Remittances form a large part of many economies in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. In Somalia, remittances—which are equivalent to Official Development Assistance and comprise one-third of Gross Domestic Product—are expected to decrease by 40 percent.<sup>viii</sup> In Syria, UNDP found that remittances were more than halved during the pandemic to USD \$2 million compared to 2017, leading 1.2 million Syrians to lose what for them is most probably a main source of income.<sup>ix</sup> In Yemen, remittances are projected to decrease by up to 70 percent.<sup>x</sup>

**Domestic resource mobilization has declined in most contexts as tax and non-tax revenue decline as a result of the crisis.** This is particularly noticeable in economies that are largely comprised of natural resources, such as minerals, oil and gas. The decline in commodity price globally means lesser revenue for oil and gas rich countries like Timor-Leste, South Sudan, DRC and others. Timor-Leste lost nearly USD \$1.6 billion dollars in its sovereign wealth fund. In DRC, UNDP found a 20.6 percent decline in mining activity, which negatively impacts on domestic resource mobilization through reduced export tax.<sup>xi</sup> In Equatorial Guinea, UNDP estimates a 40 to 43 per cent drop in state revenue compared to 2019.<sup>xii</sup> Elsewhere, reductions have also occurred. UNDP identified similar estimated declines in the fiscal balance in Sierra Leone (-8.9 per cent).<sup>xiii</sup> In Mali, UNDP found that the loss of tax and non-tax revenue corresponds to 2.7 percent of GDP.<sup>xiv</sup> In addition, small and medium

enterprises (SMEs) that make a significant contribution to local employment in these countries have been adversely affected by the pandemic. The toll on small islands and sectors such as tourism has been particularly dire.

**Food insecurity is rising in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, pushing vulnerable people towards chronic hunger.**

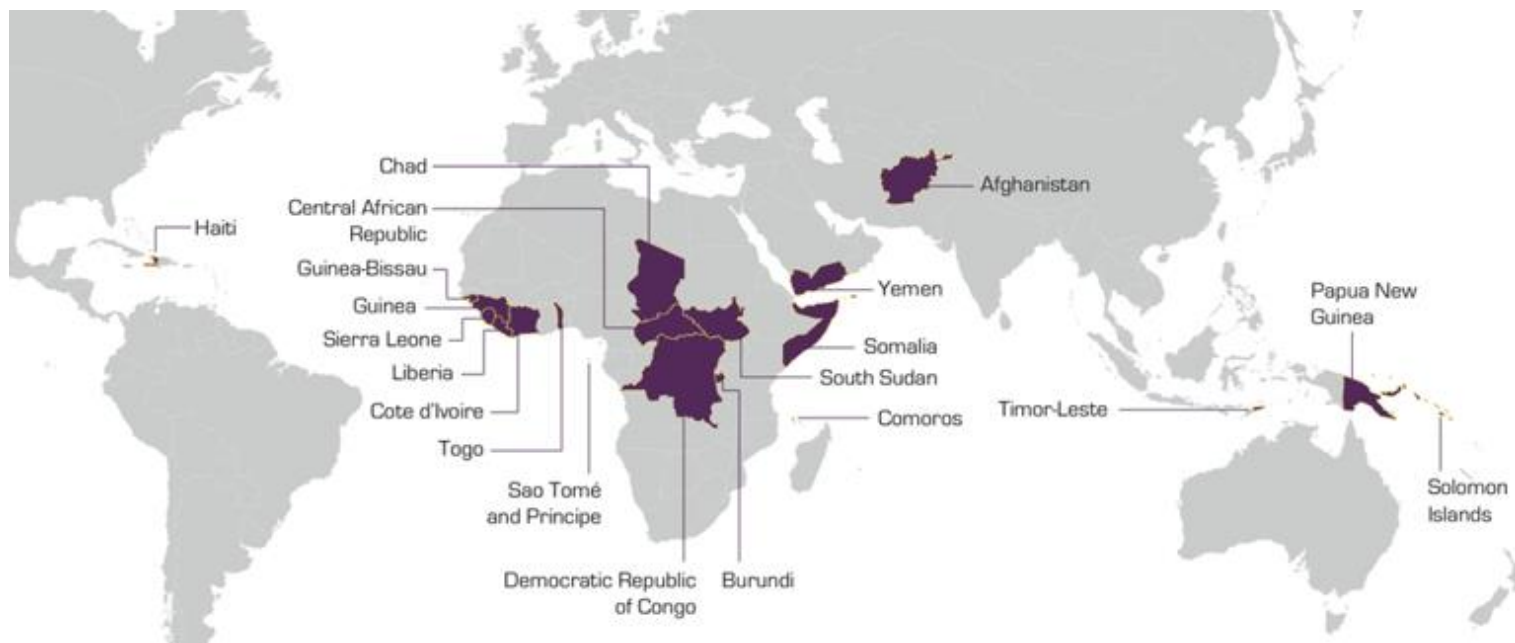
Globally, 121 million people are projected to be food insecure by the end of 2021, with Yemen, Burkina Faso, north-east Nigeria and South Sudan at risk of famine.<sup>xv</sup> Most fragile countries are highly dependent on import of food items with Afghanistan on top.<sup>xvi</sup> As producers cut back on exports, food prices rose in contexts with high food import dependency due to man-made and natural disasters such as Syria, where UNDP found monthly food costs to increase by 240 percent and the number of food insecure people to increase by 1.4 million, and Sudan, where low output and high production during the harvest season caused a staple crop's retail price to more than double during the pandemic.

**Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is on the rise in conflict-affected contexts.** Increased stress and time at home due to government-enforced lockdowns is frequently cited as drivers of this scourge. Local media and human rights organizations have reported increases in domestic violence in over a dozen fragile contexts since the start of the pandemic. In CAR, UNDP found that gender-based violence increased 69 percent since the start of the pandemic. In South Sudan, where women were already facing pervasive gender-based violence, health and safety risks, UNDP found that the rise in social and gender harms as a result of the pandemic have been particularly concerning for intersectional populations including internally-displaced persons and persons with disabilities.<sup>xvii</sup> In South Sudan, UNDP found that girls are being forced into marriage as a result of the deepening poverty.<sup>xviii</sup> The UN reported a 96 percent rise in domestic violence in Iraq<sup>xix</sup> and a spike in Somalia of the number of girls experiencing female genital mutilation during COVID-19.<sup>xx</sup>

**Case study –Syria**

Prior to COVID-19, and in an economy heavily affected by the repercussions of conflict, it was estimated that close to 20 percent of mainly young male Syrians may have fallen back on negative coping mechanisms to 'earn a living'. This includes trafficking and smuggling but also joining one of the sides in the conflict 'for pay'. Although this cannot at this stage be quantified and has not been directly or indirectly surveyed under the UNDP COVID-19 impact survey, it cannot be excluded that more—and in particular young male Syrians—may engage in such activities out of necessity and as a last resort (and if these opportunities occur) because of the continuing depressed economic situation which has further deteriorated over the last six months due to the pandemic and other factors. The option for young unemployed people to resort to negative coping strategies (including conflict-related 'employment') may further fuel the deeper crisis, which, in turn, depresses economic activity and investor confidence.

**In conflict settings the impact of the digital divide on education has widened as institutions transition to distance-learning.** It is estimated that 463 million children worldwide are at risk of being left-behind due to their inability to access distance-learning platforms with children in fragile settings being especially vulnerable.<sup>xxi</sup> On average, only 19 percent of the population have internet access in fragile settings, despite many governments rolling out internet-based distance learning, and in conflict-affected contexts, where infrastructure is often damaged, it can be even lower.<sup>xxii</sup> In Iraq, UNDP discovered that 10 million children were unable to access education during lockdown measures.<sup>xxiii</sup> In another case, UNDP found that temporary school closures and a lack of digital services in South Sudan led to 1.9 million children and over 27,000 higher-education students having their learning disrupted, including training programmes for critical lifesaving health workers such as midwives and nurses.



*g7+ members*

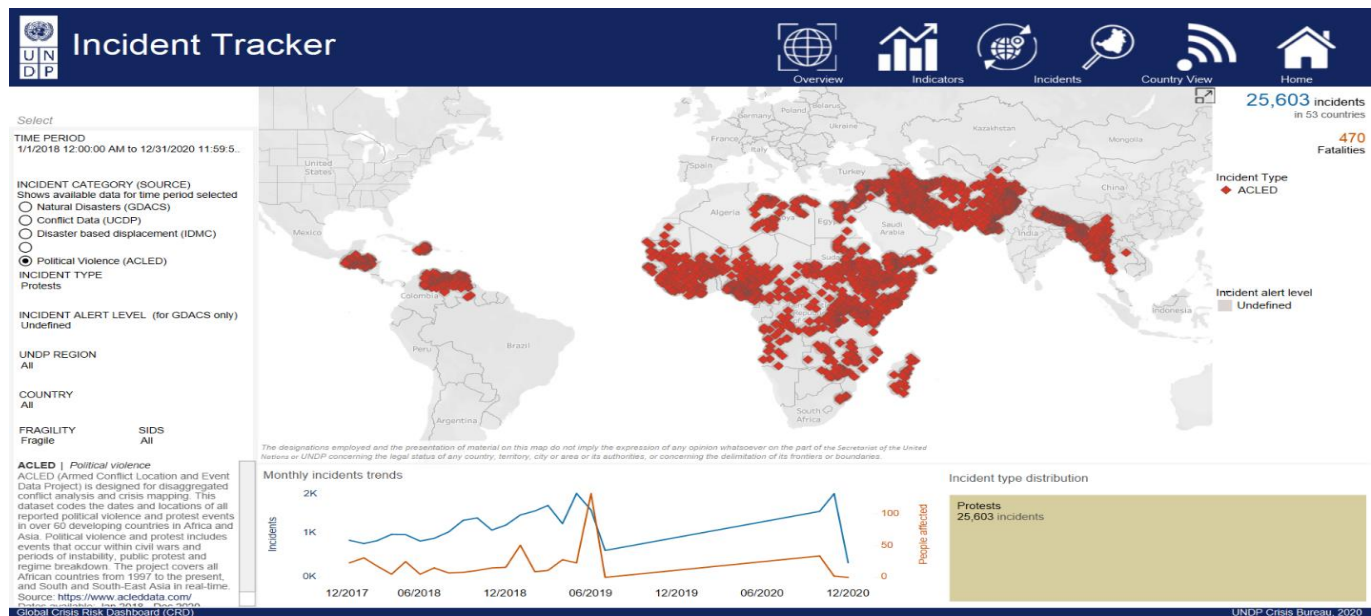
**COVID-19 has affected groups disproportionately and exposed underlying vulnerability to both the virus and its secondary impacts in conflict settings.** Social protection programmes and virus relief typically do not include support for refugee, non-native, and migrant populations. The Inter-agency Standing Committee has noted that protection risks and threats to IDPs and people on the move, including refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, are on the rise with violations in international human rights and humanitarian law, as well as stigmatization and a rise in gender-based violence against IDPs and people on the move.<sup>xxiv</sup> UNDP has found that gender inequality has been exacerbated during the pandemic in fragile contexts. In Haiti, the UN found that nearly half of women surveyed reported not having access to either maternal health or family planning services during the pandemic and that access to health services has become more difficult for 82 percent of households due to closed facilities, lack of resources to cover costs, and fear of contagion in health facilities.

**Social cohesion is being stretched thin during the pandemic as riots, political and mob violence increased substantially.** Globally, protests rose steadily in 2019 to a height in Q4 before rapidly descending in 2020 as lockdowns went into effect.<sup>xxv</sup> However, over the past couple of months as the pandemic continues to impact citizens, protests have spiked,

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rising above the high point of last year. Analysis of the 13 extremely fragile contexts reveals that during the pandemic (from March to September) there was a 42.4 percent increase of riots and protests compared to the same period last year.<sup>xxvi</sup> So far, these protests have been less deadly than in the past, though protest fatalities have tripled over the past couple of months. Mob and inter-communal violence have also increased.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**In fragile contexts, where COVID-19 has shone a harsh light on already existing structural inequalities and intersectional discrimination in societies, protests have surpassed heights set in 2019.** Concerns related to privacy, freedoms of expression, corruption and police brutality have spilled onto the streets and, in some cases, turned violent. UNDP and the African Union found that in the six fragile and conflict-affect countries in the Horn of Africa that implemented lockdown and movement restrictions, there were multiple incidents of extrajudicial killings by police in the enforcement of restrictions. In multiple countries, journalists covering COVID-19- related stories were detained and protests in response to COVID-19-related killings and other incidents were at times met with force by governments.



Incidents of political violence in fragile settings before and during the pandemic (UNDP Crisis Risk Dashboard/ACLED)

**Globally, fragile settings risk being left behind as high-resource countries make deals to secure vaccines and invest in their own recovery.** Political instability and international tensions were higher during COVID-19 compared to the global financial crisis or Ebola, according to data collected by the Economist Intelligence Unit. Political trends were already well underway—and in many cases deteriorating—prior to the onset of the pandemic. Yet, in many cases in fragile settings, COVID-19 appears to be an amplifier of such concerns and may have given voice and agency to some state and non-state actors. The gap in distribution of vaccines among countries is a major concern for global recovery and alarming for conflict-affected countries.

**The highest rates of COVID-19 infections are found in contexts that—in most cases—also have the highest burden of violence including Syria, Nigeria, DRC, Yemen, Cameroon, Somalia, Burundi, Mali, South Sudan and Iraq.** UNDP and the African Union (AU) have found clashes and crime to have increased in several fragile contexts. In South Sudan, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a general increase in crime, with a 46 percent rise in Jubeke State. Sexual violence has also increased in fragile contexts. In CAR, UNDP found that gender-based violence increased 69 percent since the start of the pandemic. UNDP and the AU warn

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that socioeconomic disorder from COVID-19 may contribute to instability. In Ethiopia, there has been an increase in protests, clashes and crime, raising concerns over the federal government's capacity to maintain order and unity in the country.<sup>xxviii</sup>

**COVID-19's impact is influencing conflict dynamics.** Globally, violent conflict has declined since the start of the pandemic. In fragile states overall, violence has similarly declined, with 30,000 fewer violence-related fatalities than the same period in

*UNDP and the African Union have found clashes and crime to have increased in several fragile contexts. Sexual violence has also increased in fragile contexts. UNDP and the African Union warn that socioeconomic disorder from COVID-19 may contribute to instability.*

2019 (a decrease of 30 percent). This decrease has been reported by organizations operating in-country as well. The UN Mission to Afghanistan reported that violence against civilians in Afghanistan has declined by 30 percent during the pandemic. Nevertheless, COVID-19's impact appears to be influencing conflict dynamics. Although the incidence of violent conflict between states has decreased over the past ten years, intrastate violence between armed groups and the state reached

its highest point last year. State oppression has increased globally by approximately 30 percent during the pandemic and in some fragile settings, such as the Sahel region, armed violence against civilians by state actors is on the rise. Although some armed groups (e.g. in Cameroon and Colombia) initially agreed to the Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire, the International Crisis Group has noted overall that the call has not led to a reduction in violence.

**Some non-state armed groups have used the diversion of security forces to the pandemic to recruit and step up attacks and undermine the legitimacy of the state.** Of the 10 settings most affected by terrorism, eight are fragile.<sup>xxix</sup> All of the major UN-designated terrorist groups in Africa recorded an increase in activities in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. Al-Shabaab remains the most active in Africa, followed by Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in Western Sahel and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, the latter of which recorded the largest increase in activity, which more than doubled since 2019. In the case of Boko Haram, the number of events from January to September 2020 already surpassed the 2019 total, with over 5,800 people killed by September 2020.<sup>xxx</sup> The Western Sahel has become the most violent region in Africa after Somalia.

**Attacks against health and aid workers, both of which already set records in 2019, continue to rise alongside the pandemic.** Ten fragile states have reported attacks on health-care workers. In August, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported over 600 incidents of violence against health workers between February 1 and July 31, 2020. This disproportionately impacts countries (e.g., fragile contexts) with low pre-existing levels of health-capacity and personnel. Countries such as Sudan have responded by assigning police and military personnel to protect individuals and their families working in the health sectors. The lack of monitoring remains pervasive in contexts with a history of violence towards medical workers, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Northwest Syria, where IEDs have killed 1,000 civilians this year, IED fatalities of aid workers have quadrupled since 2019.<sup>xxxi</sup>

## Looking ahead:

### *The road to peace and development*

As this paper has found, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all the dimensions of fragility. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, it has reinforced the need to deepen commitments to peace and development through recovery efforts. Overcoming the challenges identified in this assessment will require a new and invigorated approach across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. This includes:

1. Stopping the ongoing conflict. The call for ceasefire must be upheld. All parties should pursue and promote reconciliation as a proactive approach to pave the way for peace. COVID-19 is a common threat to humanity. We can address it only when we are united against it and put our differences aside. Fostering peace through dialogue and reconciliation should be a founding pillar of the “building back better” approach in fragile countries. The G7+ group provide a convening forum to gather experiences that can inspire making and building peace through reconciliation and dialogue. Building on such experiences, the UN and G7+ should form a high-level council for mediation and dialogue to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation.
2. Economic self-reliance must be strengthened and promoted through employment generation. This includes ending energy poverty as a means to boosting economic revival. Productive sectors that help in generating employment need to be supported. Governments and donors should help SMEs by providing loans to help protect sectors that are crucial for creating livelihood for people. Multilaterals such as multilateral development banks (MDBs) and international financial institutions (IFIs) have an important role to play. In the course of recovery, it will require sustaining the (pre)existing levels of aid to conflict-affected countries, as well as debt relief/cancellation.
3. [The New Deal](#) principles must guide building back better in conflict-affected countries. Donors, G7+ and civil society should need to reaffirm their political commitments through to use the New Deal principles to foster stability in the post pandemic world. A global forum under the auspices of International Dialogue for Peacebuilding and statebuilding to review these commitments should be convened as we mark the 10<sup>th</sup> year of endorsement of the New Deal.
4. More regional cooperation is needed that must be founded on humane solidarity rather than narrow national interest, guided by political realism. Stagnation on the socio-economic and political front in conflict-affected countries could threaten peace and stability. This poses a further threat to peace and stability in regions. The world is more interconnected than it was decades ago: no one is safe until everyone is safe.
5. While developing a COVID-19 vaccine is the beginning of the end of the pandemic, for conflict-affected countries, the end remains a long way away given the the inequality in access to vaccine. Many cash-strapped governments in these countries cannot afford purchasing vaccines for the entire population. Therefore, the COVAX initiative should be further strengthened to help conflict affected countries—as a priority. Agencies like UNDP can help in these contexts.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, or the UN Member States

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<sup>i</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Afghanistan," UNDP 2020a."Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Iraq,"

<sup>ii</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Syria"

<sup>iii</sup> United Nations Haiti. *Socioeconomic Response to COVID-19*. United Nations, 2020

<sup>iv</sup> OECD (2020), States of Fragility 2020, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ba7c22e7-en>.

<sup>v</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Uganda"

<sup>vi</sup> United Nations Bangladesh. *Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19*. United Nations, 2020

<sup>vii</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Afghanistan"

<sup>viii</sup> International Organization for Migration (2020), "Expected 40 percent drop in remittances threatens Somalia's most vulnerable", Medium International Organization for Migration (2020), "Expected 40 percent drop in remittances threatens Somalia's most vulnerable", Medium

<sup>ix</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Syria"

<sup>x</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Tajikistan"

<sup>xi</sup> Insert UNDP SEIA DRC

<sup>xii</sup> UNDP 2020c. See Rapid macroeconomic assessment of the effects of Covid-19 in Equatorial Guinea,

<sup>xiii</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone" and "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Eritrea"

<sup>xiv</sup> UNDP 2020a. See Analyse rapide des impacts socio-économiques du COVID-19 au Mali

<sup>xv</sup> IASC. *Response to the COVID-19 Reflection – Opportunities and Challenges*. 24 November 2020.

<sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-countries-importing-the-most-food-in-the-world.html>

<sup>xvii</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in South Sudan"

<sup>xviii</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in South Sudan"

<sup>xix</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Iraq"

<sup>xx</sup> United Nations Somalia. *Socio-economic Response to COVID-19*. United Nations, 2020

<sup>xxi</sup> UNICEF 2020a. - <https://data.unicef.org/resources/remote-learning-reachability-factsheet/>

<sup>xxii</sup> <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/survey-national-education-responses-covid-19-school-closures/resource/97ff72db-0876-4820>

<sup>xxiii</sup> UNDP 2020a. See "Assessment of the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in South Sudan"

<sup>xxiv</sup> IASC. *Response to the COVID-19 Reflection – Opportunities and Challenges*. 24 November 2020.

<sup>xxv</sup> See Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com).

<sup>xxvi</sup> See Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com).

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com).

<sup>xxviii</sup> UNDP 2020c. See "The Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Governance, Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa"

<sup>xxix</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace. Global Terrorism Index 2020. [GTI-2020-Briefing.pdf \(visionofhumanity.org\)](https://www.economicshorizons.com/~/media/Files/Reports/GTI-2020-Briefing.pdf)

<sup>xxx</sup> See Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com).

<sup>xxxi</sup> See Aid Worker Security Database. [Aid Worker Security Database Signal Alert: Syria | Humanitarian Outcomes](https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/)