

# Fighting COVID-19, Building Peace – a civil society perspective

What Local Peacebuilders say  
about COVID-19, Civic Space,  
Fragility and Drivers of Conflict



CIVIL SOCIETY  
**PLATFORM**  
FOR PEACEBUILDING  
AND STATEBUILDING



## Context

[The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding \(CSPPS\)](#) is a global network of civil society organisations (CSOs) supporting peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings, jointly striving for inclusive societies and sustainable peace. We operate in more than 25 fragile and conflict-affected countries. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have kept in close contact with the members of our network to learn about their individual circumstances, activities, challenges and accomplishments. We have conducted two surveys, one in late March and another in late May, and have held in-depth interviews that are chronicled in our series of articles on local action against COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> We have also collected further information through meetings of our CSPPS membership and our Executive Committee, as well as through regular exchanges between the CSPPS Secretariat and various members. Following our first survey, we issued a statement calling for a whole-of-society and conflict-sensitive approach to combatting the pandemic and its effects.<sup>2</sup> This message has been integral to our advocacy, including to the tripartite [International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding](#) of which we are the civil society constituency (the other two constituencies being donor governments and fragile states). The present report builds upon that initial statement and ties together our outputs and various data accumulated over the past few months in order to provide a comprehensive outlook on the lived experiences of local peacebuilders as they face down COVID-19 and its consequences. It is essential that such frontline perspectives inform the policy and programming of all stakeholders of peace.

## Overview

This report is divided into four sections. The first explores how the pandemic has affected civil society's capacity to operate. It covers both practical matters, like the inability to visit communities in person, as well as the issue of shrinking civic space. The second section describes and analyses how local peacebuilders view the pandemic as occasioning violence and stimulating drivers of conflict. The third discusses the dearth of coordination between government and civil society, as the latter remains excluded from shaping most strategies, plans and measures deployed against COVID-19. The final section provides a short overview of the kinds of activities that CSOs have been undertaking during this period. The report concludes with reflections and recommendations to help our partners and other stakeholders of peace tackle the issues identified in the report.

## Approach

The distinctive approach of this report is twofold. First, the report serves to relay the perspectives and insights of local peacebuilders only – its drafters have striven to minimise their own imprints. Where analysis is conducted, it serves only to identify patterns. The contents of this report therefore seek to present the authentic viewpoints of the CSPPS members who have contributed their perspectives, some of whom have requested anonymity. Second, this report is not limited to the immediate or near-term implications of COVID-19 for peacebuilding, civic space, fragility and drivers of conflict. It equally looks beyond the pandemic to examine its potential longer-term aftereffects.

<sup>1</sup> See our series "[CSPPS Coordinated Response to Support Local Action](#)".

<sup>2</sup> "[CSPPS Statement: A Whole-of-Society, Conflict-Sensitive Response to COVID-19](#)"  
CSPPS 9 April 2020.



# 1

## Operating Environment and Civic Space

CSPPS members report two distinct forms of challenges that undermine their abilities to promote sustainable peace in fragile and conflict-affected settings. First, health and safety-related precautions against the spread of COVID-19 hinder their abilities to conduct peacebuilding activities, for operational reasons. In-person contact, crucial to effective, local peacebuilding, is constrained if not entirely prohibited, while at the same time, funding has become scarcer and capacities to work from home are frequently limited. Second, several members report shrunk civic space occasioned by government actions varying in their levels of severity. These range from purposeful oppression, to narrow-minded aversion against critique, to neglecting established processes of collaboration with civil society.



## 1.1.

# Operating Environment

All CSPPS members who have kept the CSPPS Secretariat apprised of their conditions report pressures on their capacities to operate. Though these pressures are not uniform, with some members reporting lesser difficulties than others, overall, they are severe, as they more often than not curtail operations in the short and medium terms with potential long-term consequences.

The primary difficulty, which all members report to greater or lesser extents, is the inability to carry through pre-planned or ongoing peacebuilding projects. Local peacebuilding often involves the painstaking, gradual and sustained work of building relations of trust – with and between communities, leaders and government officials – for which repeated face-to-face interactions are frequently indispensable. But in-person gatherings have generally been prohibited, and even where small meetings or gatherings have continued to be allowed, restrictions on travel between localities often preclude them. All members report efforts to continue their work as best they can remotely, yet gains and outputs are deemed inferior. This is compounded by poor internet connectivity and supply of electricity in homes in many parts of the world, making for frequent disruptions and slow responsiveness. Several members also report that such operational challenges have hindered the capacities of civil society to coordinate in the face of the pandemic.

“The Ebola outbreak directly affected the stability of the country, and the fear that COVID-19 will do the same, is a probable one. Peacebuilding and statebuilding become ever more pressing in times like these. Holistically involving all aspects of civil society in the response to COVID-19, especially in a nation with over 1500 civil society organisations (CSOs) and more than 900 community-based organisations, is of the essence. In the face of a global pandemic, these organisations are vital in reaching out to the most remote and backward communities, which lack access to resources such as water and electricity, but most importantly, trust in their government.”

Excerpt taken from the article [‘Countering Mistrust in Times of Corona’](#), based on an interview with Liberian CSPPS member Platform for Dialogue and Peace

Where ongoing projects were commissioned by international actors providing restricted funding, such actors have often decided to suspend or significantly reduce project activities. The absence of peacebuilding efforts in this period risks entrenching social cleavages, thereby setting back previous progress and erecting new challenges to peace. Especially seen the fact that COVID-19 interacts with, and most often appears to intensify, violence and underlying drivers of conflict. Moreover, in certain cases, the pandemic has coincided with important national events and processes, such as the presidential elections in Burundi and the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) on the Sustainable Development Goals in several conflict-affected countries. Where peacebuilding-oriented efforts relating to such events and processes have not been able to take place, these are lost opportunities for the promotion of peace that will not reoccur in the near term.

A further key operational difficulty that members report is lesser or no funding for peacebuilding. Funds are often diverted towards COVID-19 response efforts, or simply not forthcoming as commissioning international actors have suspended their own programmes until the pandemic passes. This carries the risk of crippling civil society organisations that rely on projects-based funding as a main source of overall funding. Multiple members report unease or nervousness about their organisational viability, finding themselves challenged in their capacities to meet fixed expenditures like employee salaries.<sup>3</sup>

**“Funding opportunities have become rare or hard to find, and many contracts have been cancelled.”**

Fidèle Djebba, Cameroon

## 1.2.

# Civic Space

Virtually all CSPPS members who have participated in this reporting exercise report constraints on the available space for dynamic civic engagement. These range from active suppression of critique and dissent to more harmless, though disappointing, neglect of civil society. Often, different gradations of constraints operate side-by-side within the same country.

<sup>3</sup>On the question of funding see also Conducive Space for Peace (2020) [Act Now on ‘Localisation’: COVID-19 Implications for Funding to Local Peacebuilding](#).



“Upon the question whether Guterres’ appeal for a global ceasefire has been fruitful so far, Sultan states: *“As the world is busy with the coronavirus, the conflicting parties of Yemen abuse the situation in their favour, rather than taking actions and measures which can bring solutions to the virus.”* Sultan urges for the Riyadh Agreement to be enforced, and for the international community to put further pressure on all the warring parties, whether local or international. *“Especially amidst COVID-19, a nation-wide ceasefire to solve this immense humanitarian crisis should be the priority of everyone involved. This, however, requires voices from inside the country, as well as real pressure from the global level. In order to do so, we need to meet the urgent needs of a ceasefire, mobile resources as well as joint efforts to fight COVID-19 from a holistic perspective.”*

Excerpt taken from the article [‘Facing Two Fronts: COVID-19 amidst the Yemeni Civil War’](#), based on an interview with Yemeni CSPPS member Youth Without Borders Organization for Development

As has been widely reported, including by non-governmental organisations, news media and the United Nations, a number of governments, especially (quasi-)authoritarian regimes, have been actively repressing civil society during this crisis.<sup>4</sup>

At times, the suppression of civic engagement appears to be due to intolerance for critique and perceived rival centres of authority. Other times, the crisis appears to be leveraged opportunistically as a pretext for repression of perceived opposition. The reporting of several of our members supports this analysis. We have been informed, for example, of frustration in Yemen at the declaration of autonomy over the South by the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) on 25 April 2020, as the Council does not allow for public protest, ostensibly to contain the spread of COVID-19. It has been reported to us that one protest against the STC in late May of this year was put down violently by security forces. Our South Sudanese member Vision for Generation (V4G) speaks of press censorship and unlawful detention, whilst drawing our attention to

the arrest of an activist without, it would seem, formal charge.<sup>5</sup> These are but two illustrations from a wider pool of similar reports. Reporting on their own consultations with hundreds of local peacebuilders, one of our INGO members reports that: “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.”<sup>6</sup>

“In the face of the pandemic, the authorities call for all hands on deck to get civil society involved in the response. Nonetheless, the authorities do not tolerate contrary viewpoints or critique of the measures taken. There is therefore a kind of obligation put on civil society actors to get behind the public powers.”

Mouldjide Ngaryngam, Chad

Apart from cases of glaring, violent repression, several CSPPS members moreover report shrinking civic space in other ways. For example, two member organisations, Centre d’études sur la paix, la sécurité et le développement en Afrique (CEPSEDA) in Chad and one other member in a different country, report that any collaboration with government authorities on combatting COVID-19 requires withholding criticism – even constructive, well-intentioned critique. The shrinking civic space during this crisis is not limited to the issue of fighting the pandemic. In Nigeria and Papua New Guinea, respectively, our members Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa (CSDEA) and Peace Foundation Melanesia report, with some degree of frustration, that their governments have prepared their VNRs without the input of civil society, despite contradictory assurances at the start of this process. In South Sudan, V4G expresses weariness that the pandemic is delaying the implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, especially its provisions for civil society participation.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g.: Roth, Kenneth [Human Rights Watch] (2020) [“How Authoritarians Are Exploiting the COVID-19 Crisis to Grab Power.”](#) *The New York Review of Books* 31 March; CIVICUS (2020) *Civic Freedoms and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Snapshot of Restrictions and Attacks*; Guterres, António [United Nations] (2020) [“We Are All in This Together: Human Rights and COVID-19 Response and Recovery.”](#) United Nations Secretary-General; Editorial Board (2020) [“Would-be autocrats are using covid-19 as an excuse to grab more power.”](#) *The Economist* 23 April.

<sup>5</sup>Emmanuel, Okot (2020) [“Activist detained for ‘poor governance’ criticism”](#) *Eye Radio* 21 May.

<sup>6</sup>Conductive Space for Peace, Humanity United and Peace Direct (2020) [COVID-19 and the impact on local peacebuilding.](#)

# 2

## Violence and Drivers of Conflict

Almost universally, our members who have shared their views with us report upticks in violence, instability and other drivers of conflict, notably corruption, mistrust and severe, endemic precarity. Our members express worry that their societies may as a result become more fragile and that long-term consequences will continue to be felt after the pandemic.

**“Soldiers tend to harass and even beat citizens during the curfew hours.”**

Anonymous Peacebuilder in East Africa

Our members are preoccupied mainly by violence and abuse perpetrated by security forces, ostensibly as part of enforcing safety measures to stall the spread of COVID-19. Members throughout our network report rampant cases of abuse, including harassment, beatings (including to death) and brutality, vandalism, abductions, extortion, violations of property rights, arbitrary arrest, and unlawful detention, causing fear and anxiety among local populations. At the root of such widespread abuse appears to be overly securitised responses to the pandemic, with security forces deployed to enforce lockdown measures, including curfews, employing violence and abuse of authority with disturbing degrees of impunity.

**“The country is militarised; we get the impression that we are living through a state of war, not a health emergency.”**

Anonymous Peacebuilder in West Africa

Besides abuse from security forces, our members also report increases in other forms of violence. Some members, especially in South Sudan and Central African Republic (CAR), report escalations of intercommunal violence and of clashes between armed groups, which may be connected to the pandemic for it offers a window of impunity. A civil society leader from India who currently works in South Sudan told us that this moment is ripe for intercommunal reprisal attacks, as security forces and monitoring agencies are distracted or lack the ability to access certain communities and localities.<sup>7</sup> For a time, following the UN Secretary-General’s appeal for worldwide ceasefires, the pandemic appeared to offer a window of opportunity to deescalate conflicts with a view to facilitating stable settlements. CSPPS backed the appeal and joined the civil society-led global ceasefire campaign, but the UN Security Council failed to leverage the opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>See also: International Crisis Group’s *CrisisWatch* of May 2020 on [Central African Republic and South Sudan](#).

<sup>8</sup>“The Time for Peace is Now! CSPPS Reiterates Call for Ceasefires to Combat COVID-19 and Urges a UN Security Council Resolution” CSPPS 8 May 2020; for the global ceasefire campaign see [globalceasefire.org](#) (last accessed 11 June 2020); on the failure to leverage the appeal see ten Hove, Dali (2020) “Pathetic: The US Pulls the Plug on a UN Global Cease-Fire Resolution” *PassBlue* 10 May; on the imperative for ceasefires in active conflicts see also de Harder, Charlotte (2020) “Facing Two Fronts: COVID-19 amidst the Yemeni Civil War” and “A Polarised Nation during a Global Pandemic: the Libyan Predicament” CSPPS. The UN Security Council finally passed a resolution on 1 July, as this report went for publication.

“COVID-19, in a country that already has a high record of gender-based violence, will affect the security of women, both economically, as well as physically, and will thus create more tension nation-wide. According to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MGCSP), 1,413 cases of gender-based violence were documented in 2016, with an increased number of 1,685 in 2017 and an even higher total of 2,105 in 2018. A lockdown, as is expected to unfold over the course of the pandemic, is expected to steepen these numbers in an unprecedented manner. As markets and shops will be closed, women will be confined at home, without any source of income and, thus, independence.”

Excerpt taken from the article ‘[Countering Mistrust in Times of Corona](#)’, based on an interview with Liberian CSPPS member Platform for Dialogue and Peace

Furthermore, many of our members report spikes in gender-based violence,<sup>9</sup> including domestic and sexual violence, robberies, aggression in general, and aggression specifically against foreigners and persons of Central/Eastern Asian descent, in connection with lockdowns, the loss of income, idleness and blame for the onset of the pandemic.

In addition to the incidences of violence, our members also report concern about other drivers of conflict exacerbated by the pandemic, namely corruption, mistrust and precarity. Many CSOs report widespread bribery and extortion committed by security forces, marked by arbitrary fines and “taxes” imposed on vendors but especially at checkpoints and roadblocks. One East African CSPPS member reported public disgruntlement over the whereabouts of foreign donations, including surgical masks, which segments of the population believe to have been siphoned off by political elites. Similarly, in Chad, as our focal point there has emphasised, there has been significant controversy over the public health authorities’ contracting of a private foundation affiliated with the president’s spouse, ostensibly to assist with efforts against COVID-19.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>See also: United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*; de Harder, Charlotte (2020) “Fight like a Girl? The Toughest Battles in Cameroon are Fought by Women and Girls” CSPPS.

<sup>10</sup>For more information about this particular controversy, see: Dariustone (2020) “Tchad : l’omniprésence de la fondation de Hinda Déby dérange” *Deutsche Welle* 15 May; “Tchad : comment la Fondation Grand Cœur de Hinda Déby s’est accaparée la lutte contre la pandémie du coronavirus” *TchadConvergence* 19 April 2020.



**“Many believe that the country does not need to shut down and accuse the government of maintaining restrictions to attract donations from development partners.”**

James Laki, Papua New Guinea

Such instances of corruption, both actual and perceived, undermine public confidence in government, which may hamper efforts to combat the pandemic, erode national cohesion and exacerbate fragility. Mistrust in government, as numerous members report, is further fuelled by perceptions of botched responses to the pandemic, as well as by rumours, disinformation and beliefs that COVID-19 is a hoax deployed by elites for enrichment and/or to accumulate power. This is perhaps most notable in contexts where there were considerable pre-existing tensions. In such places, public attitudes about the pandemic are more likely to politicise – that is, to fuse with and become situated in dynamics of adversarial politics.

For example, our member in Guinea-Bissau, Voz di Paz, reports that mistrust of the government about COVID-19 is propped up by divisions arising from the disputed presidential elections of late last year. Udé Fati, our focal point in Guinea-Bissau, speaks of a “strongly impacted social fabric” and a “climate of profound mistrust”. In Central African Republic, rumours circulated widely that the president and legislature have been seeking to postpone elections scheduled for later this year, using COVID-19 as pretext, in order to extend their mandates beyond current constitutional limits. “Reactions were intense,” according to Eloi Kozoundji, the CSPPS focal point in CAR. “Social stability has been undermined and the crisis of confidence between the government and the population has widened.”<sup>11</sup> From Sierra Leone, furthermore, our member Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Network reports discontent over the suspension of accountability laws in the management of the public COVID-19 response fund. A dozen CSOs issued a joint, condemnatory statement, asserting that this undermines public trust in the government.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>On COVID-19 and the question of mistrust, see also: de Harder, Charlotte (2020) “Counter-ing Mistrust in Times of Corona” CSPPS.

<sup>12</sup>“Suspension of key accountability laws will undermine public trust in the Sierra Leone Government” *CocoRioko* 20 May 2020.



CSPPS - Kabul/Afghanistan

Finally, a majority of CSPPS members report serious concern about the poverty and precarity engendered by lockdown conditions – not only for the immediate repercussions for families lacking means of subsistence, but also for the wider implications for stability and conflict. Members report widespread frustrations in their societies about the economic repercussions of lockdowns, which are intensified by climates of mistrust. Several members report attempts from small vendors to circumvent lockdown rules, which at times lead to violent responses from, and clashes with, law-enforcement and security forces. Crime rates, as aforementioned, are reported to have spiked in numerous places. Economic malcontent in fragile states, where social safety nets are weak or non-existent, risks entrenching fragility and further obstructing the consolidation of peace beyond the short term.

# 3

## Government Coordination with Civil Society

Shortly after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, CSPPS circulated a questionnaire among our member organisations for us to learn more about their circumstances and capacities in dealing with the emergency.



One key recurring theme of the responses was that governments were making little to no efforts at consulting civil society in designing their response measures. We therefore issued in early April a statement calling for inclusive, whole-of-society and conflict-sensitive approaches to combat the pandemic.<sup>13</sup>

**“Unfortunately, the measures and policies do not pay attention to aspects of peacebuilding.”**

Udé Fati, Guinea-Bissau

We have brought this message to transnational and intergovernmental platforms, including the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding of which we are part. At our urging and with our inputs, the IDPS has stressed that response measures to the pandemic ought to be “inclusive, nationally led, conflict-sensitive, [and] attuned to conflict drivers” and should be informed by the perspectives of “various actors, including youth, women peacebuilders and human rights defenders.” The IDPS statement moreover calls for the “protection and expansion of civil society’s operating space.”<sup>14</sup> Governments everywhere, but especially in fragile states, should design response measures that guarantee public health while avoiding the pitfalls of further entrenching social discord and fragility in the process. This requires careful, well-crafted measures that account for an array of political, socioeconomic and intercommunal dynamics at national and sub-national levels, with contextual variations from one community or locality to the next. To achieve this and to avoid fuelling drivers of conflict, engaging civil society in a level partnership is indispensable.

“Civil society organisations have only had the chance to emerge after the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, and they still struggle to have their voices heard. Madi explains how the authorities and security actors tend to perceive civil society organisations as traitors, working against their regimes rather than with them, especially as they collaborate with international actors. CSOs, their members and activists are put in a vulnerable position whenever they speak up, either internationally or towards their own government.”

Excerpt taken from the article ‘[A Polarised Nation during a Global Pandemic: the Libyan Predicament](#)’, based on an interview with Libyan CSPPS member Tamazight Women’s Movement

**“The measures taken by the authorities to stem the spread of COVID-19 create frustrations and discontents which could in the long run pose threats to peacebuilding.”**

Mouldjide Ngaryngam, Chad

Nonetheless, with a few exceptions, our second round of questionnaires in late May indicates that governments have not meaningfully improved coordination with civil society. A majority of CSPPS members continue to report minimal engagement with their respective governments as to the approach to COVID-19, despite efforts to stimulate dialogue and gain inclusion. In Togo, for instance, a notable coalition of CSOs (including the CSPPS members) was formed in early April to advocate for the participation of civil society in both shaping and implementing measures against COVID-19, but they received no response to their enquiries. There is a clear pattern in the reporting of our members. While governments have been setting up structures to mobilise whole-of-government responses to the pandemic – through national commissions, inter-ministerial committees or high-level task forces – civil society is not integrated into these structures. Where some degree of dialogue occurs, it is limited, and for the most part confines civil society to the role of transmission channel to raise public awareness about government guidelines.

**“Government institutions do collaborate with civil society, but it is very limited. Collaboration occurs only on awareness-raising.”**

Ahmed Youssouf, Comoros

And, as aforementioned, in some cases collaboration with government institutions requires passive endorsement of, and to refrain from critique about, their measures. CSPPS members from Nigeria to Nepal variously describe government coordination with civil society as “limited”, “slim”, “hardly existing” and tantamount to “neglect”.

<sup>13</sup>“CSPPS Statement: A Whole-of-Society, Conflict-Sensitive Response to COVID-19” CSPPS 9 April 2020.

<sup>14</sup>“Statement on safeguarding peace during the COVID-19 pandemic” /DPS 15 May 2020.



# 4

## Overview of Civil Society Activities



In the main, CSOs in our network report conducting three types of activities: awareness-raising and sensitisation as to the pandemic and safety precautions; distributing aid and personal protective equipment (PPE); and monitoring of how the pandemic affects vulnerable people and of instances of violence and human rights abuses.<sup>15</sup> For the most part, CSOs appear to work independently with minimal coordination with other organisations in their respective countries, though several members report collaboration and coalition-building with varying degrees of institutionalisation.

Virtually all members who have participated in this reporting exercise report undertaking activities aimed at raising public awareness in relation to the pandemic. Objectives include informing people of the risks posed by COVID-19, encouraging abidance by safety guidelines, and countering misinformation. Methods vary, including in-person speeches, distribution of flyers and information sheets, appearances on radio, television broadcasts, online discussions and social media posts. To illustrate, CSDEA in Nigeria has endeavoured to raise awareness in North-eastern communities, by speaking at marketplaces in local languages, equipped with microphones and amplifiers. In South Sudan, V4G reports participating in radio talk shows to counter “hate speech” and spread facts about COVID-19.

Many members moreover report distributing PPE, often alongside awareness-raising activities, as well as aid to struggling households, including food, medication, household items and small cash donations. In Afghanistan, for instance, our member Afghans for Progressive Thinking reportedly raised more than 10,000USD to assist over 120 families that were among the most socioeconomically impacted by the pandemic. In Burundi, Réseau femmes et paix distributed sanitary kits to female vendors in Bujumbura. And in Yemen, responding to an appeal from the Taiz Governorate Health Office, our member Youth Without Borders Organization for Development (YWBOD), supported by UK Aid and CSPPS-member Saferworld, offered support to two public hospitals by providing oxygen tanks, sterilising equipment, PPE and more. YWBOD has also been asked to help train police on how to approach confirmed and suspected cases of COVID-19 in safe and non-violent ways.



CSPPS - Yaounde/Cameroon



CSPPS - Kabul/Afghanistan

“One aspect that civil society is becoming heavily involved in, however, is the eradication of misinformation, and the spread of COVID-19 informative messages to the more remote communities. WhatsApp is proving to be one of the most convenient channels for the purpose of raising awareness, but also local radio stations could be involved in this process.

Moreover, civil society proves to be highly valuable in the process of monitoring of and reporting on actions at the local level, as well as community education. Influencing the delivery space within the government is highly relevant in this situation, in addition to raising the profile of sensitive issues affecting equity, inclusion and citizen participation. The added layer of socio-economic inequality raises the level of complexity of the current situation, calling for a holistic focus on the crisis at hand. Health security is paramount, but other societal aspects such as marginalisation, exclusion, conflict and security are more relevant than ever.”

Excerpt taken from the article [‘A Society is Only as Strong as its Most Vulnerable Members’](#), based on an interview with Sierra Leonean CSPPS member WASH-Net

<sup>15</sup> As this report goes for publication and as COVID-19-related restrictions are easing, several CSPPS members are beginning to undertake projects pertaining to SDG16+ and/or which merge responses to COVID-19 with peacebuilding measures. These forthcoming efforts could however not be discussed in this report.





CSPPS - Freetown/Sierra Leone



CSPPS - Bangui/Central African Republic

“The COVID-19 crisis, which prevents whole families from earning their daily wages in the informal sector, amplifies their despair. Djebba explains how well over 70% of the population depends on daily income from the informal sector to subsist. The current situation sparks fear among the community, especially as women and girls can be recruited, abducted or forced to go into prostitution, either by their families or out of despair. “If women and girls were not already vulnerable enough, COVID-19 is making this situation worse. And we at Association Rayons de Soleil are afraid that all the progress made so far by civil society organisations as well as the government will be lost because of it. The impact will be long-term. And we need to anticipate those long-term effects.” ... “After all, in a situation such as that of Cameroon’s female population, what is the better option for the most vulnerable among them? For some, it is a matter of choosing between the lesser of two evils: either being tortured, threatened and raped on a daily basis by Boko Haram, or the escape of death by suicide, as part of one of their terrorist attacks. Another dilemma some women are faced with is the choice between seeing their families grow hungry and frustrated as their daily income has disappeared because of the pandemic or going into prostitution to be able to provide for themselves and their loved ones. Situations of conflict, exacerbated by COVID-19, confront the most vulnerable of people worldwide with impossible choices to make.”

Excerpt taken from the article ‘Fight like a Girl? The Toughest Battles in Cameroon are Fought by Women and Girls’, based on an interview with Cameroonian CSPPS member Association Rayons de Soleil

Furthermore, member organisations in our network have also striven to monitor conditions on the ground, with a view to utilising the information collected to better respond to the needs identified and undertake evidence-based advocacy. Members have circulated questionnaires, surveyed communities, kept track of human rights abuses and monitored instances of violence. For example, in May, our Cameroonian member Association Rayons de Soleil surveyed 200 women and adolescent girls in four regions of Cameroon, enquiring about domestic, gender-based and sexual violence, as well as about broader matters of the pandemic’s effects on their lives and communities. The findings are detailed in a synthesis report.<sup>16</sup> In Timor-Leste, the CSO Belun is monitoring violence, having identified 63 incidents in April and May, including cases of domestic violence and violence perpetrated by martial arts street gangs.

A majority of members report that CSOs in their respective countries operate in isolation, with minimal or no collaboration between them. Activities appear to be for the most part run in isolation. At least some members have reported that practical difficulties, as outlined earlier in this report, hinder their abilities to coordinate, but such obstacles appear to be only minor reasons for fragmentation and the lack of coordination. Nonetheless, a few members do report cooperation with other CSOs, from ad hoc sharing of information, to building more formal coalitions to undertake joint activities and advocacy. Our Chadian member CEPSEDA, for instance, reports that a coalition of CSOs was formed in April, named Action citoyenne de la société civile contre le COVID-19.<sup>17</sup> Equally, as aforementioned, a coalition was formed in Togo partly to advocate for the involvement of civil society in the government’s strategising against COVID-19.

<sup>16</sup> Association Rayons de Soleil (2020) *Sondage sur l’impact du COVID-19 sur les filles et les femmes au Cameroun*.

<sup>17</sup> See also Nguedmbaye, Moussa (2020) “Tchad : la société civile crée une plateforme dénommée ‘Action citoyenne contre le coronavirus’” *Tchadinfos* 21 April.



“Like a Russian doll, Somalia’s many layers of interlinked crises are revealed in Yassin’s plea, with at its core the unsustainability of our current system. A short-term vision and non-inclusive governance, as well as poor distribution of natural resources can only exacerbate the multiple crises the world faces today. The interlinkages between all facets of life ask for a holistic and long-term vision in order to reach a sustainable and balanced world order. Even in the face of an acute, global health crisis, we cannot forget the other pressing matters that continue to threaten our existence: conflict, climate change, and the persistent inequality within society worldwide. For a sustainable future, where humanity is at peace with itself, as well as our environment, we need fundamental changes. And the forced standstill to our economic and social activities, as we are currently experiencing, could be its awaited catalyst.” ... “Somalia is a perfect example of a country where climate change directly exacerbates conflict and national instability: the increasingly erratic weather, causing flash floods and failed harvests, forces people to seek a source of income or home elsewhere, rendering them vulnerable to trafficking as well as recruitment by militants. Even more simply put, in times of hunger, fights over basic resources erupt more frequently as well as more violently. The world’s current economic system and consumptive behaviour patterns have slowly, but steadily begun to disrupt the lives of the most vulnerable. And it will not stop there, if we do not change our ways. The response to COVID-19, when placed in the bigger picture of a peaceful and resilient world, therefore needs to go hand in hand with environmental action.”

Excerpt taken from the article ‘[Conflict, Climate Change and COVID-19: The Complexities of Somalia](#)’, based on an interview with Somali CSPPS member IIDA Women’s Development Organisation

# Concluding Observations and Recommendations

The pandemic is not only a public health emergency. As CSPPS members indicate unmistakably, it is a multidimensional crisis with complex interactive effects which poses challenges to peacebuilding and exacerbates drivers of conflict. Responses to the pandemic must reflect this complexity and seek to ‘do no harm’, by taking care not to worsen its effects in one domain (e.g. prospects for conflict resolution) when combatting it in another (e.g. public health). Local civil society actors remain steadfast in advancing

the cause of sustainable peace, notwithstanding their reported neglect by governing authorities. This should be met and supported by efforts from governments in conflict-affected states, as well as by transnational actors, including donor governments, INGOs and intergovernmental organisations. We must work jointly to minimise the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on drivers of conflict while sustaining vital peacebuilding and promoting social cohesion.

## **To address key issues raised by local peacebuilders, the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) makes the following recommendations:**

### **Cross-cutting**

- To the fullest extent possible, interventions aimed at promoting public health should integrate elements of conflict prevention and peacebuilding and vice versa. Communities traditionally at odds and political leaders of opposite camps could, for example, be creatively mobilised to work together on tackling the pandemic's consequences. Awareness-raising as to safety precautions could be utilised to combat disinformation and to deescalate mistrust and reprisals. The spirit of the Triple Nexus, which interlinks humanitarian, development and peace efforts, applies equally to public health interventions. And as the UN Secretary-General's appeal for worldwide ceasefires underscores, every crisis presents an opportunity, not only to combat the immediate challenge, but also to build back better and more resiliently. Whether we do or don't is a collective choice, not a diktat of nature.

### **Transnational actors**

- Project commissioning entities should make every effort to adapt, rather than cancel or indefinitely suspend, projects with peacebuilding dimensions. Peacebuilding efforts should not be foregone at a time where drivers of conflict are intensifying.
- Transnational actors, especially intergovernmental institutions, have a responsibility to monitor human rights violations – in concert with local civil society – and put pressure on national governing authorities to ensure that the pandemic is not exploited as pretext to undermine civic space and arrogate authority.
- Transnational actors should more actively protect and expand civic space and civil society, mainstreaming commitment to inclusion and multi-stakeholder governance throughout programming, as well as in bi- and multilateral relations.

### **Governing authorities in conflict-affected states**

- Governing authorities at every level should make every effort to design approaches and response measures on a conflict- and gender-sensitive basis, leveraging the expertise of civil society peacebuilders, including youth groups. Whole-of-government efforts in particular should branch out to become whole-of-society approaches.
- Governing authorities should not deploy overly securitised responses to the pandemic, and should not take advantage of the situation to undermine civic space and heighten authoritarianism. Where governing authorities do not meet their responsibilities to protect, other governing institutions – e.g. national human rights commissions, legislatures, oppositions, devolved authorities – should work actively to turn the tide.
- Aside from active inclusion of civil society into the design and implementation of response and recovery efforts, governing authorities should provide full transparency on the use of COVID-19-related funds. Inclusion in the design and implementation processes, as well as transparency regarding financial policy can aid in increasing levels of trust and national cohesion, especially in a time of crisis.
- Abuse by security forces ought to be averted and monitored. Security forces ought to be instilled with a culture of protection, marked by an appropriate ethos, adequate training, firm command and control, and an absence of impunity. Policies of zero tolerance for gender-based violence especially ought to be adopted and/or upheld.

### **Civil Society in conflict-affected states**

- Civil society organisations should strive to coalesce domestically to strengthen their capacities to coordinate activities, monitor human rights situations and advocate for conflict-, gender- and youth-sensitive responses from governing authorities.
- Where feasible, maintain a focus on peacebuilding or integrate aspects of peacebuilding into COVID-19 response activities. Advocate to funding partners not to forgo the long-term benefits of peace for the sake of short-term redress only.



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## About CSPPS

[The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding \(CSPPS\)](#) is a global network of civil society organisations (CSOs) supporting peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings, jointly striving for inclusive societies and sustainable peace.

Cordaid, as part of its commitment to addressing fragility, hosts the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. The Secretariat is managed and coordinated by Peter van Sluijs, Senior Strategist at Cordaid.

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