Persistent Impact: An Urgent Call for a Conflict-Sensitive Approach to the COVID-19 Pandemic

CIVIL SOCIETY
PLATFORM
FOR PEACEBUILDING
AND STATEBUILDING

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List of Abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
COVAX	COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access
CSDEA	Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CSPPS	Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DV	Domestic violence
FCAS	Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (Settings / Situations)
GBV	Gender-based violence
GERDDES	Study and Research Group on Democracy and Economic and Social Development
g7+	A voluntary association of 20 countries that have been affected by conflict and are in transition to longer-term development
IDPS	International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding
INCAF	International Network on Conflict and Fragility
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDG3	Sustainable Development Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
SDG16	Sustainable Development Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
SDG16+	Sustainable Development Goal 16+ is seen as an enabler that will allow us to reach other goals, as it addresses interlinkages between 12 targets from SDG16 and 24 targets from seven other Sustainable Development Goals that directly measure an aspect of peace, justice and inclusion.
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNOY	United Network of Young Peacebuilders
WASH-Net	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Network

PREFACE

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, CSPPS has kept in close contact with the members of our network to learn about their individual circumstances, activities, challenges and accomplishments. In 2020 this work resulted in the report "Fighting COVID-19, Building Peace – a civil society perspective. What Local Peacebuilders say about COVID-19, Civic Space, Fragility and Drivers of Conflict".

Upon seeing the continued and persistent impact the pandemic was having on the work of local peacebuilders and the context in which their work is implemented, we decided to issue a third survey and conduct interviews through which we aimed to document the pressing challenges our members are confronted with one year into the pandemic.

The CSPPS Secretariat would like to express its sincere gratitude to all member organisations and CSPPS focal points that have furnished insights and testimonies to inform this report.

We are also deeply grateful to the reviewers and editors who have worked towards its realisation and finalisation, and hope it can aid in implementing an integrated and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 response and recovery approach as the world moves to build forward better.

Introduction

Context

The [Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)](#) is a member-led international network bringing together more than 800 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from the Global North and the Global South, supporting conflict and crisis prevention, peacebuilding and statebuilding in over 30 fragile and conflict-affected countries. We are the constituency representing civil society within the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS). The IDPS is a tripartite, international network, comprised of CSPPS, the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) - consisting of 30 OECD countries as well as international agencies and organisations - and the g7+ (an intergovernmental organisation of 20 fragile and conflict-affected countries). CSPPS sustains in-country interventions by ensuring strategic and capacity assistance aiming at amplifying the voice of civil society both within the International Dialogue and outside its realm.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have kept in close contact with the members of our network to learn about how their country contexts, activities, needs, and accomplishments have been affected. CSPPS issued [a statement](#) early on calling for an inclusive, conflict-sensitive approach to the global COVID-19 response.[1] This was the basis for the development of two surveys and in-depth follow-up interviews, leading to the publication of a 2020 report titled [Fighting COVID-19, Building Peace - A Civil Society Perspective: What Local Peacebuilders Say About COVID-19, Civic Space, Fragility and Drivers of Conflict.](#)[2] This message has been integral to our advocacy work, especially in the context of 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).[3]

In the context of the ongoing pandemic, the work of local peacebuilders remains sharply impacted. Based on previous data collection and the dissemination of a new survey, the present report revisits some of the issues expressed in order to map out recurring trends and concerns. We have found that, even after one year of facing the COVID-19 pandemic, the voices of local peacebuilders are still not sufficiently heard by national and international decision-makers, and their lived experiences are not taken into account enough. Therefore, it is essential that we raise their voices once again to ensure the involvement of these frontline perspectives in peace policy and programming.

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[1] ["CSPPS Statement: A Whole-of-Society, Conflict-Sensitive Response to COVID-19,"](#) CSPPS, 9 April 2020.
[2] Dali ten Hove et al, ["Fighting COVID-19, Building Peace – What Local Peacebuilders say about COVID-19, Civic Space, Fragility and Drivers of Conflict,"](#) *CSPPS*, 13 July 2020.
[3] [*International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding.*](#)

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Overview

This report is divided into four sections. The first explores how, one year on, the pandemic continues to affect civil society's capacity to operate. Practical aspects like measures that restrict movement and public gatherings, as well as new reliance on digital technologies, change civic space. Additionally, such restrictions shrink opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between relevant stakeholders. The second section develops these concepts by focusing on the relations between government, CSOs, and local communities. It describes issues of mistrust and political transparency during the COVID-19 pandemic. The third section provides a more in-depth analysis of the exposure of local and vulnerable communities to socio-political, economic, and environmental tensions that have been exacerbated after one year of crisis.

The final section details future plans to look beyond the current crisis towards an inclusive recovery. The report concludes with recommendations on how to structure and implement such recovery efforts. It provides a more hopeful outlook on the opportunities the pandemic has presented, as well as recommendations on how key stakeholders can cooperate with local peace actors to ensure these opportunities are seized.

Methodology and Approach

This qualitative study is based primarily on personal reflections gathered via surveys and interviews with members of our CSPPS network. Our respondents were CSOs mainly from the Global South, and we noted participants from across the African continent, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, as well as Europe. We have also engaged with relevant publications and literature in order to affirm our positioning, and conducted our most recent research over the course of the first quarter of 2021.

This report serves to relay the perspectives and insights of local peacebuilders; therefore, its drafters have striven to minimise their own imprints. Where analysis is conducted, it serves mainly to identify patterns. The content of this work seeks to present the authentic viewpoints of the CSPPS members who have contributed their personal experiences, perspectives, and expertise, some of whom have requested anonymity. As such, it cannot be viewed as a complete appraisal of the current situation and its impact on civil society and civic space. Moreover, this report is not limited to the immediate or near-term implications of COVID-19 for peacebuilding, civic space, fragility and drivers of conflict. Indeed, by examining the impacts of the pandemic one year after its outbreak, we equally look beyond short-term concerns to the 'post-pandemic' period, to examine its potential longer-term aftereffects.

Trends

Changes in Civic Space

In addition to sanitary measures that limit in-person activities, governmental restrictions have had a negative impact on CSOs. As a consequence, local organisations have experienced a reduction of civic space and decreased capacities. To overcome these limitations, new technologies and communication tools have been developed and now play a central role in peacebuilding in times of crisis. This tendency is apparent across our respondents in multiple country contexts.

Governmental Repression and Illegitimate Use of Force

The COVID-19 pandemic reduced civic space for gatherings, demonstrations and protests, limiting all kinds of governmental contestations from the people in the name of sanitary restrictions and their enforcement.[4] According to the g7+ and UNDP discussion paper, *The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Conflict*, demonstrations and protests have increased about 42.2% in 2021 compared to 2020 in context of the new sanitary measures enforcement. Our CSPPS member in Nepal reported that youth protested to fight against the government before and at the very beginning of the pandemic. However, these mobilisations remained forbidden due to COVID-19 restrictions, and were met with violent repression. Civil societies see not only their right to assembly but also to opinion and expression restricted.

As CSPPS members in Nepal and Somalia underscore, governments have at times strongly repressed social demonstrations and enforced restrictive measures on movement and public gatherings through fear and violent repression more than by addressing a clear prevention campaign regarding the evolution of the situation. In the context of COVID-19 enforcement measures, severe human rights violations have been declared, as also warned by Antonio Gueterres, UN Secretary General: "The world is facing a pandemic of human rights abuses."[5] This pandemic could represent a step back for the guarantee of public liberties, such as freedom of assembly and demonstration, as civic space and the possibility for protest have been greatly reduced in some countries. Environmental and human rights defenders are also disproportionately affected by shrinking civic spaces and attacks, further hindering their peacebuilding activities.[6]

Over the last year, increases in excessive use of force and violent repression have been reported during the enforcement of sanitary measures. These abusive uses of force, representing human rights violations like arbitrary arrests or wounding, have been noted by several CSPPS members. A member in Nepal reported that people were more threatened than informed about the COVID-19 measures and that government measures were unclear and not always reliable. In this case, the main enforcement strategy was the use of fear and repression to ensure the population's respect of measures.

Reduced Capacities of Civil Society Organisations

In the context of the ongoing pandemic, CSOs are witnessing a steep drop in international aid, raising the question of their capacity to continue working and implementing significant actions in their communities.[7]

Most of our survey respondents mentioned the reduced aid and capacities as one of, if not the biggest, challenges since the beginning of the pandemic, considering that finding funding was already difficult for CSOs before the outbreak. Being able to continue their work and positively impact their communities is without doubt the main concern expressed by respondents, and these activities have been severely hindered by lack of funding. Additionally, CSPPS membership has identified several other factors that limit civic space and therefore the work of CSOs.

Reliance on Technology and Online Communication Tools[8]

Most of the survey respondents mentioned the crucial role of communication tools to maintain their work and to minimise negative impacts on their activities. Participants relied on radio, television, and the Internet to access COVID-19-related information and campaigns. As the sensitisation campaign against COVID-19 is now a central part of CSOs' work, those communication networks enable them to spread information and to continue working remotely.

COVID-19 hastened the need to have access to new technologies and communication tools in general. This process is accelerating and shows disparate access among the members and within CSPPS member countries. The pandemic has exacerbated the already existing digital inequalities by forbidding access to public technological centres, isolating more than three billion people without technological devices or access to the Internet.[9] This technological divide created a wider gap in terms of economic, social and educational activities, leading the fragile communities to become more vulnerable than ever. The lack of technological devices and access to the Internet led to the absence of information which resulted in a greater exposure to COVID-19 for those

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[4] Dr. Helder Da Costa, Habib Ur Rehman Mayar, and Gregory Connor, "The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Conflict: Assessing the impacts of the pandemic on peace and development," 11 March 2021, 8.

[5] Annie Kelly and Pete Pattison, "A pandemic of abuses': human rights under attack during Covid, says UN head," *The Guardian*, 22 February 2021.

[6] OHCHR, "Brief to United Nations Special Procedures: Global Trends for Women Human Rights Defenders in the Context of COVID-19", May 2020.

[7] Catherine Turner, "One Year On: COVID-19 has made CSO's effectiveness harder on many fronts: A CPDE ICSO study on the pandemic," May 2021, 11.

[8] In this report, we make reference to new technologies and communication tools rather than "digitalisation" in general because the wider respondents mentioned the use of radio and television, which are not tools included in the definition of digitalisation. We will define the communication tools as : radio, television and the Internet generally speaking.

[9] "Fighting the spread of COVID-19 misinformation," Harvard School of Public Health, 9 February 2021.

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vulnerable communities and thus, had a direct impact on health as well. Young people are also overwhelmingly affected by human rights violations in the digital space.[10] In addition to mental harm caused by cyberbullying or online harassment, restricted access to the Internet and concerns over privacy reinforce young people's exclusion in the digital sphere.[11] As youth increasingly rely on digital technologies to communicate and interact with each other during lockdowns, it is critical to uphold their protection in this virtual domain.

During the pandemic, the use of the Internet was central for CSOs' survival and for them to continue their work remotely. The CSPPS membership quickly adapted to the situation by organising a considerable number of online events and meetings, as it is still the case today. This daily use of digital tools marks a new way of working that some members predict will last in the long term.

> "While working within the Covid-19 pandemic posed some serious challenges, by thinking outside the box and being creative we were still able to successfully organise and facilitate many great projects. We have traditionally relied on activities such as in-person networking meetings and advocacy missions. Travel restrictions and ban on large in-person gatherings completely shifted our work to the online domain."
>
> UNOY, CSPPS member in the Netherlands

Restricted movement and physical distancing are factors that revolutionise our ways of working and drive us to create innovative solutions to ongoing problems. New ways of working have been developed, such as hosting interactive online training sessions, creating resources that have been shared more widely.

Several respondents underscored a new and positive impact on a wider and more inclusive mobilisation from youth and women. For instance, COVID-19 information campaigns were shared via the radio, the Internet or television, raising awareness among communities in times of lockdown and limited civic space and travel.

However, one of the major impacts of the pandemic noted by survey respondents is a widening digitalisation gap.

Dissemination of COVID-19 awareness information.
Credit: Association Rayons de Soleil.

> "The increasing use of new technologies and digital communication created a new space "for marginalised voices to make themselves heard and has created ways to enhance civic participation, collective action and accountability". By allowing the marginalized voices to emerge in the community, these communication tools create a new opportunity to increase inclusivity.
>
> Technological innovation has the capacity to create powerful communities that have the power and the opportunity to build more inclusive and just communities."
>
> "Building Back Better in the Digital Era: Local Peacebuilders on Digital Technologies and the Power of Social Media" - CSPPS report, January 2021

This gap has greatly increased depending on geographical areas. A CSPPS member in Zimbabwe, for example, noticed an increased inequality of Internet access between rural and urban areas.[12] Digitalisation thus presents a new aspect of inequality between countries but also within countries, between urban and rural areas. This phenomenon is all the more clear one year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which urgently exposed the need to use technology as an essential tool to continue working.

According to the g7+ and UNDP report, about 19% of the population living in fragile settings has access to the Internet.[13] This gap impacts the work of CSOs and their alternatives of online training, which are the main ways to keep their work effective and to enhance community engagement in times of pandemic.

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[10] Rita Izsák-Ndiaye, "If I Disappear: Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space," *United Nations Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth*, 2021.
[11] Ibid.

[12] Turner, "One Year On," 9.
[13] Da Costa, Mayar, and Connor, "The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Conflict," 7.

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However, communication tools can be controlled by the government and can be turned against its population. These technologies can represent a danger to human rights and be a powerful driver of disinformation, misinformation, surveillance and censorship depending on the use and on the interest of a given government. "In fragile and conflict-affected settings, repressive governments can use these technologies to push their propaganda and undermine grassroot movements and mobilisation. These governments can also use strategies such as Internet shutdowns or Internet access restrictions, like the CSPPS partners in Guinea witnessed during the last elections process."[14] Indeed, as indicated in the 2021 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+, shrinking digital civic spaces and CSOs' lack of data protection are issues that were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.[15]

Some CSPPS partners have observed this limitation of communication tools, depending on their relation with their governments. As analysed in the 2021 CSPPS report on digital technologies, governments can use communication tools and technologies as censorship, surveillance, propaganda or even to reduce Internet access, in the case of Guinea.[16]

Good Governance in Crisis

Mistrust

CSPPS respondents reflected on several reasons to feel mistrust toward the government in times of COVID-19.

The rise of inequality and the inability of the government to protect its population from a sanitary crisis is one of the main reasons for mistrust toward the government. Most of our survey respondents called for a better prevention system and for a stronger answer to the COVID-19 crisis with more investment in health. Closely linked to this is a call to deepen accountability while upholding rights to basic and essential social services. With growing inequality among communities and increasing poverty, the population tends to lose its trust in its government and in its ability to protect. CSPPS members in Rwanda underscored a considerable rise of defiance and mistrust toward the government since the outbreak of the

pandemic, due to the loss of jobs and the spread of hunger in the country.

In addition to the lack of confidence in sanitary measures and in the way of handling the crisis by some governments, mistrust is also a result of the management of the vaccine campaigns. Bribery and unequal access to vaccine shots raised concerns among the population, exacerbating at the same time the feeling of injustice, as outlined later in this report. Ensuring transparency through clearer access to information regarding the pandemic response would increase government accountability and public confidence while limiting corruption.[17]

These different roots of mistrust call for a strengthening of public institutions. Additionally, these institutions should seek to involve civil society actors in planning and decision-making. As one CSPPS member based in Senegal and working in West Africa highlighted, civil society can sometimes be sidelined by the government or negatively perceived as adversaries. However, CSOs have a critical role to play in establishing good governance practices, and especially in coordinating responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Involving CSOs in governance decisions would also help foster stronger institutions.

Strengthening Public Institutions

Building stronger public and government institutions to shape a society and its organisation is one of the three pillars of SDG16 for which CSPPS advocates. This pillar is central as a society continuously relies on its economic, political, and judicial institutions to uphold peace and security. Inclusivity, protection, trust, and effective policies cannot be guaranteed or enforced without bolstering these critical institutions that were weakened during the pandemic. In times of pandemic, the aim of building stronger institutions is to head toward recovery in the most peaceful and inclusive way by promoting good governance, accountability and protecting fundamental freedoms.

As noted by about half of the respondents and also reported in the g7+ and UNDP report, the pandemic has underscored the need for strengthening state institutions and fostering stability as the highest rate of COVID-19 infections are observed in the most fragile contexts such

[14] Delphine Callebaut, "Building Back Better in the Digital Era - Local Peacebuilders on Digital Technologies and the Power of Social Media," *CSPPS Report,* January 2021, 6.

[15] SDG16+ Localisation Consortium, "2021 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+: A Renewed Call for Strengthening Commitments, Partnerships, and Accelerated Action for SDG16+", July 2021.

[16] Callebaut, "Building Back Better in the Digital Era," 6.

[17] SDG16 Alliance, "Access to Information Must not Become a Casualty of the Pandemic," *Global Alliance Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies*, 27 May 2021.

as Burundi, South Sudan, DRC, and Yemen, among others.[18] Addressing the issue of weak institutions is crucial as lack of access to justice and transparency are identified as key challenges to exit the ongoing crisis and to build forward better after the pandemic.[19] Antonio Gueterres, UN Secretary General, underlined that the priority in this context is to offer a proportional response to immediate threats while protecting human rights and the rule of law.[20] Stronger institutions would also enable the government to enforce the sanitary measures without having recourse to violence and repression.

Underlying mistrust and weak institutions are just one possible cause for the non-adherence to governmental COVID-19 restrictions.

(Non) Adherence to Governmental Restrictions

Government restrictions are not well-followed for different reasons. First, as mentioned above, misinformation, lack of information, or even disinformation, often spread over social media, are elements explaining the non-respect of the governmental restrictions in some countries. Mistrust and lack of transparency is also a factor of non-respect, in addition to the population not trusting the government about the number of cases or the vaccination campaign.

Moreover, misinformation and unequal access to information on health and safety measures cause social cleavages and unrest. In some instances, populations do not trust the vaccine due to the spread of misinformation on social media. One CSPPS member in Nigeria even states that political elites have been responsible for spreading misinformation in the country. Some state authorities there have gone so far as to ban COVID-19 testing centers and vaccinations, alleging the virus is a hoax. Beyond the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus, misinformation and mistrust negatively impact the social fabric in fragile and conflict-affected settings, which limits peacebuilding and statebuilding activities.

Issues of Political Transparency and Democracy

While some respondents indicated that their government is including and consulting CSOs in their decision-making processes, transparency has been relegated to the back seat as is often the case in times of crisis. This aspect of the crisis is directly linked to the principles of SGD16, which focus on increasing transparency, ensuring public access to information, and protecting fundamental freedoms.

A training workshop for a COVID-19 response project in Yemen.
Credit: Youth Without Borders Organization for Development

Partnership between governments and CSOs significantly supports the implementation of SDG16 in this context. As the CSOs are working directly on the ground, it is critical for them to be included in the decision-making process, and they should be one of the main actors regarding the COVID-19 campaign and awareness-raising. Therefore, they should occupy a central place in the process, which is currently not always the case according to our respondents.

Among the CSPPS respondents, in countries where democratic elections have been held since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, most reported the process being more secretive and lacking in transparency due to the COVID-19 protocols. These situations have major democratic impacts and limit public liberties and could, moreover, lead to general mistrust toward the government.

> "The Central African Republic suffers from a crisis of confidence where the population doesn't trust the government because of lack of transparency regarding COVID measures and their enforcement."[21]
>
> GERDDES-Centrafrique, CSPPS member in the CAR

These issues are central in the context of the work on SDG16 that is aimed towards fighting corruption, increasing transparency, improving access to information and advancing good governance. CSPPS is an active member of the Global SDG16+ Coalition which has called for making SDG16+ a cornerstone of global efforts to realise the other SDGs. In doing so, we recognise that SDG16's emphasis on peaceful, just, and inclusive societies is a key enabler of progress towards the entire 2030 Agenda.

[18] Da Costa, Mayar, and Connor, "The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Conflict," 8.
[19] Turner, "One Year On," 17.
[20] "We need effective institutions to get out of this crisis," *United Nations*.

[21] Translated by the authors.

Exacerbated Impacts on Vulnerable Communities

Economic Vulnerabilities

In our last CSPPS report, we noted that COVID-19 was likely to have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities in fragile and conflict-affected countries.[22] Our partners have confirmed this trend, and one year on, they continue to raise concerns over the challenges and obstacles vulnerable populations face in this regard.

> **"Youth and women have less capital and funds and cannot afford extended lockdowns. Most of them depend on daily income."**
>
> CSDEA, CSPPS member in Nigeria

Some communities do not have the resources to protect themselves against the COVID-19 virus. For instance, access to soap, water, and clean containers is necessary to wash one's hands, which is a critical way to combat the spread of the virus. Some do not have access to these necessities. In addition, the use of face masks in public is often mandatory. But when face masks can cost up to twice a person's daily income, it can be difficult for them to purchase and wear systematically. These issues point to the disproportionate impact the pandemic has on vulnerable communities that cannot implement the necessary measures to halt the spread of COVID-19.

This is problematic in the context of peacebuilding and statebuilding. As mentioned earlier in this report, inequality and disparate access can cause social tensions, mistrust of the government, and a misunderstanding of barrier measures that authorities put in place. Not only does this mistrust affect the response to COVID-19, it also makes it more difficult for CSOs to engage with local communities and to foster social cohesion. This points to the negative impact of the pandemic on social and national cohesion, and demonstrates the need for a cross-sectoral response.

Precarious employment also increases vulnerable communities' exposure to the negative impacts of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused limited employment opportunities, lost livelihoods, and the reduction of income-generating activities, which greatly affect those employed in insecure or informal capacities.

Training of vulnerable women in income-generating activities to face the economic challenges due to COVID-19. Credit: Association Rayons de Soleil.

This impact hits especially hard one year after the outbreak of COVID-19, as youth and women especially continue to struggle finding employment. Restrictive measures that decrease economic activity have been in place for several months, greatly increasing precarity. Women and those working in the tertiary sector are often the most affected by these lost employment opportunities.[23] Governmental measures in response to the pandemic, for example shutting down bars and restaurants, markets, or even small factories and production units, have contributed to massive unemployment.

> **"The socio-economic impact is palpable. The most vulnerable and poorest people, those with precarious income-generating activities, are the most affected and often do not apply preventative health measures. […] In this situation, either they resign themselves to barrier measures or they revolt against them."[24]**
>
> GERDDES-Centrafrique, CSPPS member in the CAR

The increase in precarity noted by our respondents is in line with the projections of UNDP and the g7+ that extreme poverty will continue to rise due to the impact of COVID-19, which greatly affects peacebuilding contexts.[25] As we observe these affects one year after the outbreak of the pandemic, it is now more critical than ever to embrace a holistic approach to response measures that will spur a recovery in terms of public health, but also one that leaves no one behind and addresses the issues that the most vulnerable have had to face in the last year. This is why

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[22] ten Hove et al, "Fighting COVID-19, Building Peace," 2.

[23] "Briefing Note: The Economic Impacts of COVID-19 and Gender Inequality. Recommendations for Policy Makers," *UNDP*, 4.

[24] Translated by the authors.

[25] Da Costa, Mayar, and Connor, "The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Conflict," 5.

linking global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic to the SDGs is imperative, as several of our members have noted in their survey responses. Embracing the implementation of the SDGs, including SDG16, through COVID-19 recovery is a significant step towards achieving a holistic recovery that takes into account the glaring failures that the pandemic has exposed in terms of health infrastructure, governmental bodies, and social cohesion. SDG16 has an especially strong role to play in this context as well, by securing strong and just institutions that have been put to the test and, in many cases, come up short. In the same vein, civil society should be seen as a central actor in making these societal and political shifts.

> "We believe that the priority should be around supporting and building the capacities of organizations related to the crisis, such as institutions working in the field of health and those working in the field of confronting gender-based violence and human rights organizations. This should be through networking and building companies between these organizations, especially with regard to the safe use of the internet, building bridges, trust with citizens and the broad popular sectors, supporting the most needy groups such as women, girls, prisoners, etc. This will lead to building a positive peace and ensuring the existence of a civil society capable of dealing with such crises."
>
> Justice Call, CSPPS member in Egypt

Local and vulnerable communities continue to be exposed to tensions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Several respondents highlighted that the security environment in FCAS keeps impacting the life of communities and the capacities of CSOs to work towards peace. Indeed, in some countries, violence persists despite the pandemic and efforts made to respond to the health crisis, leading to a volatile security environment.

In Sierra Leone, for instance, the security situation has generated increased public outcry, and clashes between police and commercial bike riders have led to killings. This is connected to concerns over economic vulnerability, as COVID-19 restrictions have decreased the riders' chances of economic survival. This increases unrest and pushes them to work despite regulations, putting them at odds with the authorities and creating violence. In the case of Nigeria, loss of jobs and livelihoods correlate with high

rates of theft, robbery, and kidnapping for ransom, leading the Nigeria National Assembly to criminalise ransom payments.[26] Thus economic strains due to COVID-19 restrictions aggravate the security landscape, impacting vulnerable communities even further.

Exposure to Gender-Based Violence

During the pandemic, experts have raised the alarm on the sharp increase in domestic violence (DV) and gender-based violence (GBV) across the world. In their recent report, the g7+ and UNDP found that, in certain conflict-affected contexts, DV had risen by as much as 96% since the start of the pandemic.[27] In line with these findings, nearly all of our survey respondents also flagged this topic as a concern in their own settings, and noted the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on women. Several aggravating factors were cited, including lockdown measures, loss of economic activity for women, and the absence of in-person classes at school. These factors increase the amount of time victims spend at home with perpetrators, and can increase the vulnerability of women and children in the face of economic pressures and DV. Certain measures should be upheld for immediate relief of victims of GBV. In an April 2020 briefing note, for example, UNDP emitted several recommendations in terms of health, emergency, and justice services, to ensure victims of GBV had access to these services despite COVID-19 restrictions.[28] As our survey respondents continue to observe GBV one year after such recommendations were published, it is critical that these measures continue being implemented in the short term. In the long term, however, COVID-19 recovery efforts must address these exacerbated tensions. Intersecting economic, social, and sanitary causes require a holistic response.

> "A year after the outbreak in Sierra Leone, women and girls have had to bear the greatest impacts - resulting from a lack in support and security for their well-being and above all with the heightened incidences of sexual abuses from a male-dominant and culturally-sensitive society."
>
> WASH-Net, CSPPS member in Sierra Leone

[26] "Nigeria senate dey consider bill to criminalise ransom payment with 15 years imprisonment as punishment" *BBC News*, 20 May 2021.
[27] Da Costa, Mayar, and Connor, "The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Conflict," 6.
[28] "Briefing Note: The Economic Impacts of COVID-19 and Gender Inequality," 15.

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Innovations

Some of our partners have shared innovative measures to address the issue of DV during the pandemic. For instance, IIDA Women's Development Organisation in Somalia has spearheaded a project that addresses both DV and the COVID-19 crisis. IIDA supports survivors of GBV to make face masks, commonly used to halt the spread of COVID-19. The organisation then purchases these face masks to donate and distribute throughout vulnerable communities. This project supports community resilience on two levels. First, offering employment opportunities to survivors of GBV increases their economic independence and social reintegration. Second, providing masks to vulnerable communities contributes to limiting the spread of the COVID-19 virus while strengthening these populations. Local efforts like these, in the context of community resilience and response, should be encouraged.

Several of our respondents noted another silver lining of the COVID-19 crisis: the pandemic seems to have spurred solidarity and public mobilisation, especially among youth. In some cases, the wider public is more engaged in information sharing and awareness campaigns and the perspective of the youth is more often included in health responses. Though the pandemic has often exposed social cleavages and increased tensions, it is critical to note these positive aspects of solidarity and involvement. This public interest could be catalysed into more positive action in the post-pandemic recovery period, by reinforcing community responses and including more diverse voices.

> "We have observed a positive aspect of COVID-19 in Cameroon: solidarity related to the pandemic. Numerous awareness and support initiatives are being carried out on a daily basis by individuals, companies, the government, and civil society. Efforts are being made to ensure that hygiene measures are respected. In addition, there is a growing interest in consuming local products, which will help develop local industry and limit imports. The respect of hygiene measures such as hand washing has helped to limit the spread of cholera, which is very often recorded and generally causes thousands of victims each year. In addition, it has allowed the development of traditional herbal medicine."[29]
>
> Association Rayons de Soleil, CSPPS member in Cameroon

[29] Translated by the authors.

The project "protecting vulnerable women against COVID-19 in conflict zones".
Credit: Association Rayons de Soleil.

Progress Made Towards Resilient Recovery

One year after the outbreak of COVID-19, global experts and leaders are engaging in a massive vaccination campaign. Our partners in fragile and conflict-affected situations are no exception. Progress regarding the vaccination campaign, however, is heterogenous, and some countries and communities are at risk of being left behind by their counterparts in the Global North. In a May 2021 briefing to the UN Security Council, for instance, it was noted that "low-income countries" had at that point received under 1% of global doses of the vaccine.[30] Among our respondents, nearly half reported that a vaccination campaign had not yet started in their country, or that they had not received any information regarding vaccine accessibility. The other half of survey participants noted that, though vaccination had started in their country and this represented a positive development, they were overall dissatisfied with its distribution.

Many of our partner countries are set to receive the vaccine through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative.[31] Only two of our respondents, however, specifically mentioned the COVAX scheme in their survey answers. Several did identify international support, whether regarding vaccines or funding for peacebuilding or for economic recovery, as a priority to recover from the pandemic. Therefore, we can determine that vaccination is a critical and unavoidable component of recovery that must be completed by other elements. A holistic approach, one that includes socio-economic factors, supports democracy and transparency, and strengthens national cohesion, needs to be advocated for. As a Platform we support the UNICEF plea that Equitable vaccine distribution is a humanitarian imperative. We need a global response to COVID-19 - as no-one is safe until everyone is safe.[32]

[30] "Security Council upholds role of multilateralism in a complex world," UN News, 7 May 2021.
[31] More information on the COVAX initiative.
[32] "No-one is safe until everyone is safe – why we need a global response to COVID-19", UNICEF, 24 2021.

Civil society efforts play a key role in countering misinformation and its negative impacts. In this way, civil society actors combined COVID-19 recovery activities with peacebuilding to ensure a sustainable response. In Sierra Leone, for instance, activities of social cohesion and community building have been critical to bridge the gaps of misinformation and mistrust, while also renewing social fabrics. Through projects like "Community-Based Strategies to Roll Back the Spread and Effects of COVID-19," the CSPPS Country Team in Sierra Leone has demonstrated the impact of the pandemic on every sphere of life.[33] Activities of community strengthening and social cohesion were therefore clearly inscribed in a nexus between COVID-19, peacebuilding, and implementation of SDGs. This clarifies the applicability of CSOs' efforts in the field of peacebuilding to also contribute to countering negative impacts of COVID-19.

The importance of social cohesion in the face of COVID-19 was also highlighted by representatives of government and civil society from Sierra Leone at the recent 2021 FriEnt Peacebuilding Forum. In one session, these participants noted that supporting peace and national cohesion were critical lessons learned from the 2013-2016 Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, and that inclusivity, transparency, and accountability remained critical components of the response to the current health crisis.[34] Speakers reiterated that crises should be managed within the context of the IDPS Peace Vision.[35] Though this framework has been pushed aside to give way to COVID-19 response, the two are intrinsically linked. Peacebuilding is an ongoing process that requires ongoing engagement. It also contributes to sustainable recovery from the current pandemic, by strengthening social cohesion to combat misinformation, for example.

> **"Working collaboratively against the virus deepens community trust in the response process."**
>
> WASH-Net, CSPPS member in Sierra Leone
> "A Society is Only as Strong as its Most Vulnerable Members"
> *CSPPS News Story,* April 2020

Though civil society, in partnership with other relevant stakeholders, has undertaken many such projects to curb the effects of COVID-19, it has become more and more apparent that mass vaccination is the most imperative way through the pandemic. Several vaccination schemes exist, and it is critical that the international community strengthen this response in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to ensure positive, inclusive rebuilding. As the UNDP and g7+ discussion paper reflects, unequal access to the vaccine is likely to be a growing issue in conflict-affected countries, as some governments do not have the financial means to purchase vaccines or ensure their equal distribution.[36] Nearly half of the respondents to our survey also noted access to the vaccine as a priority in order to build forward better, and cited unequal vaccination campaigns as a factor in prolonging economic recovery for lower-income countries. This calls for international solidarity and response, and initiatives like COVAX should be supported. Some countries have taken up this call, the United States, for instance, pledging 500 million doses to COVAX in the upcoming year.[37]

Furthermore, vaccination campaigns must be carried out with transparency and accountability, from international to local levels, in order to limit social upheaval. In the midst of a pandemic affecting the entire globe, we should not recede into isolationism and detachment. This is reiterated by World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who recently stated that the world has reached a situation of "vaccine apartheid", where "the big problem is a lack of sharing".[38] With booster jabs already being considered in some high- and middle-income countries, Ghebreyesus underscores the danger of "countries that have already used most of the global supply of vaccines using even more of it, while the world's most vulnerable people remain unprotected".[39] Global action is needed to address a global crisis, and as such we call on the international community and leaders at all levels to ensure no one is left behind.

Another key element to the global response to this crisis is localisation, especially in the context of mainstreaming SDG16+. Indeed CSOs, with the support of CSPPS, have continued to localise SDG16+ throughout the pandemic period to achieve peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. This objective is imperative to address the rises in violence, the exposure of structural inequalities, and the increase in many forms of discrimination that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Restrictions and lockdowns around the world, crackdowns on civic space, and heightened tensions entrench communities into vulnerability and mistrust. SDG16+, with its interlinkages with health, peace and conflict, socio-economic development, and governance, is the optimal solution to sustainable development and sustainable recovery.

[33] "2020 Narrative Report to the European Union: Support to the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) 2018 - 2020," *CSPPS Report,* 2021, 17.

[34] "Influencing Local Peacebuilding Policies through Polylateral Political Dialogue: The Case of Sierra Leone," *FriEnt Peacebuilding Forum*, 29 April 2021.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Da Costa, Mayar, and Connor, "The Nexus Between COVID-19 and Conflict," 6.

[37] "U.S. to Buy 500 Million Pfizer Covid Vaccines to Share Globally, Source Says," *CNBC*, 09 June 2021.

[38] "World has entered stage of "vaccine apartheid" - WHO head", Reuters, 17 May 2021.

[39] "WHO calls for moratorium on COVID-19 booster jabs", UN News, 04 August 2021.

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Therefore, CSPPS calls for amplified commitments and partnerships for accelerated action, as issued in other documents like the 2021 *Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+: A Renewed Call for Strengthening Commitments, Partnerships, and Accelerated Action for SDG16+*. Scaling up collective efforts towards SDG16+ implementation further supports the urgent need to respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure an empowered, people-centered recovery. Recognising that one single actor cannot achieve this work alone, CSPPS calls attention to the value of polylateral partnerships like the IDPS and their role towards recovery. The IDPS Peace Vision 2019-21 harbours a clear commitment to protect and expand civic space, and these objectives are particularly relevant in this context. Moreover, tackling issues of gender-based violence, advancing gender equality, and promoting the WPS agenda are, on the one hand, thematic priorities of the IDPS vision for 2021 and, on the other, necessary for resilient recovery.

The emergency response project for the poorest groups against COVID-19 in Yemen. Credit: Youth Without Borders Organization for Development.

Conclusion

Observations

Every crisis presents an opportunity to build forward better. The COVID-19 pandemic is still teaching us many lessons that allow for a comprehensive recovery, especially one that is more inclusive and conflict-sensitive. The current health crisis affirms that the entire world is vulnerable, but that the most affected populations remain those in conflict-affected and fragile settings. In these instances, an additional layer that compounds risk is at play.

This demonstrates the need for a holistic approach to recovery, one that takes into account economic, political, social, and environmental considerations. This is especially true for fragile communities, where COVID-19 has exacerbated conflict drivers.

Recommendations

To address key issues raised by local peacebuilders in the face of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and recovery from it, the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding makes the following recommendations:

1. Leverage SDGs in pursuing inclusive recovery

- Addressing recovery through the lens of the SDGs is necessary for progressing on all the interlinked SDGs, and while strengthening objectives like SDG3, focused on good health and well-being, is appropriate in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, a resilient recovery rests on implementing other actions to support peaceful, just, inclusive societies and a people-centred approach, as elaborated in SDG16.[40] SDG16 can influence the development of a new social contract to build back trust in public and private sectors and to include the most fragile in the recovery process. This is especially important in light of the economic challenges brought about by the pandemic, which have disproportionately impacted FCAS.
- Make SDG16+ the foundation for COVID-19 reset and recovery efforts as urgent action on SDG16+ is an enabler and pre-requisite for accelerating implementation across multiple goals and thus, achieving a stronger, more resilient future for both current and future generations.

2. Renew the social contract between governments and their citizens

- The current health crisis has engendered or exacerbated a number of socio-economic and political crises. Mistrust in governments and state institutions is rampant, and SDG16, which addresses these concerns by advocating for effective and transparent governance, is a key element to response. In this time of expected recovery, governments have a responsibility to uphold SDG16 and address the multi-dimensional aspect of the pandemic. Therefore, CSPPS calls for responsiveness and inclusion on the part of governments, and for the revival of a functioning social contract. CSPPS joins the UN Secretary General in appealing for this government accountability to ensure response and recovery measures are "proportionate, necessary, and non-discriminatory."[41] This can be done by increasing transparency, mainly in spreading clear information about COVID data, COVID measures and vaccination. Another way to increase trust in the government is by increasing social assistance to the most vulnerable through providing food assistance,

shelter, and safety against increasing violence to all fairly and equally.

- Governments are not the only stakeholders in this response. Civil society has played a critical role since the outbreak of COVID-19 and throughout the pandemic. Local peacebuilders have worked tirelessly to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 through reinforcing social cohesion, dialogue, and accountability, while facing incredible challenges themselves. This reinforces the relevance of an approach centered around SDG16. Through joint calls to action like Act Now for SDG16+, CSPPS has advocated for the needs expressed by CSOs, highlighting their involvement in the pandemic to contribute to resilient societies and institutions.[42]

3. Restore civic space

- Developing the link between governments, CSOs, and local communities is a critical way to address the current crises. Shrinking civic space and lack of channels for cooperation and dialogue have increased mistrust and social unrest. This time of recovery should therefore be leveraged for a more constructive engagement between governments and their people. Governments should continue to design COVID-19 response and recovery measures in collaboration with CSOs to avoid negative impacts on aspects of daily life and to ensure all social groups are treated equally. Coordination through local partnerships should also be fostered to create a unified body of CSOs capable of a joint handling of the crisis. Less fragmented CSOs would also more fruitfully coordinate to build constructive polylateral partnerships.
- A coordinated, holistic approach is key, and must involve the international community. International stakeholders should be implicated in this response not as paternalistic actors, but rather as partners of advocacy and lobbying. Indeed, the international community can advocate for the measures recommended above by sending signals to avoid restrictions on civic space, for instance. Indeed, the international community's participation is crucial to support civil societies with restricted liberties. For instance, it can do so by advocating for the measures recommended above by sending signals to avoid restrictions on civic space. The online setting caused by COVID-19 is an opportunity for communities around the world to join efforts and speak up for each others' basic human rights. The international community can and should express solidarity, pressuring the governments using restrictive measures and harming their citizens' freedoms and liberties, as well as ensuring local civil societies' voices are heard.

[40] "Opinion: An online UN HLPF will not stop SDG 16+ from backsliding", Devex, 13 July 2021.
[41] "We need effective institutions to get out of this crisis," *United Nations.*

[42] "Act Now for SDG16+: Peace, Justice, Inclusion, and Strong Institutions in a Pandemic," *CSPPS Call to Action*, 18 November 2020.

4. Bridge the digital divide

- Even though it is not possible to guarantee the end of misinformation within a society, it is possible to develop and widely share scientific consensus around facts. Misinformation should be tracked in order to be addressed, and social media platforms should take an active role in developing these capabilities, especially since they are expected to be one of the main actors in preventing and stopping the spread of misinformation. Because this is a huge responsibility, not only should social media platforms be held responsible and improve their efforts, but they should also be consulted and supported by a consensus-oriented group with political and health experts to ensure more transparency in this long term process.[43] In the ongoing context of the pandemic and vaccination campaign, it is crucial that scientists raise their voices and become implicated in the fight against the spread of misinformation by restoring public trust in science.

- To reduce the digital divide and ensure the entire population has access to technology and the Internet (both equipment and network connectivity) in the context of COVID-19, it would be relevant to spot relevant geographical disparities by identifying the most vulnerable communities. Open access to information and knowledge-sharing capacities is key to restoring a flourishing civic space. Therefore, governments, along with telecommunication companies, could work hand in hand to establish as wide an access as possible over a given country. Governments could also open access to these technologies in public places, making sure that sanitary measures are respected.[44] This situation calls for public funding to be used in assisting the most vulnerable communities and ensuring optimal access to devices and to Internet connection. Facilitating access to the internet will inform civil society on COVID trends and vaccinations, but will also allow students to continue receiving their education, which is necessary both for their own development and the country's economic growth.

5. Ensure funding for cross-cutting responses

- The question of funding also needs to be addressed. By focusing on halting the spread of the pandemic, donors have reduced funding towards peacebuilding. Measures to mitigate the negative consequences of the current COVID-19 crisis are therefore limited, and COVID-19 has placed an additional strain on peacebuilding actors. However, peacebuilding efforts are intrinsically linked to post-pandemic recovery, and funding for these activities should be combined with other development

Our respondents cite the impacts of COVID-19 on access to education
Credit: Getty Images.

efforts in order to truly build forward better. Though equal access to vaccines is a critical component to recovery, and one that the international community should support at all levels, it is time to focus on how implementing international goals like the Sustainable Development Goals and the IDPS Peace Vision contribute to successfully rebuilding post-COVID-19 societies. We must seize the opportunities this crisis has presented for further discussions around localisation, shifting power dynamics, and reducing inequality in the world. These concerns can only be resolved through a multilateral, global, multi-actor approach.

6. Call for gender equality

- Barrier measures have had a tremendous impact on S/GBV, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated even further, and peacebuilding progress made in recent years is at risk of backsliding. In order to ensure we as a global community can better respond to the gendered-impacts of the pandemic, while avoiding worsening already existing inequalities, we must make a commitment to realising the Women, Peace & Security agenda, and to adopting a gender-lens that is truly inclusive and participatory when working towards the achievement of the SDGs and 2030 Agenda.

7. Support small entrepreneurs

- COVID-19 has disrupted the global economy. This has contributed to rising unemployment, poverty, and heightened food insecurity rates; small and medium enterprises can play a critical role in ameliorating these indirect impacts of the pandemic, and from sustaining their countries economy - especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings. These small entrepreneurs must be supported in order to counter these economic impacts - one way of doing so, for instance, is in the form of increased credit availability; extending liquidity to Micro-Finance Institutes (MFIs) and working with them to in turn increase the availability of credit to small and affected businesses.[45]

[43] "Fighting the Spread of COVID-19 Misinformation," *Harvard School of Public Health.*

[44] Elisabeth Beaunoyer, Sophie Dupéré and Mathhieu J. Guitton, "COVID-19 and digital inequalities: Reciprocal impacts and mitigation strategies," *Comput Human Behav*, 11 May 2020.

[45] "Economic impacts of COVID-19 in fragile contexts and how SMEs can help", *Cordaid*, 01 May 2020.

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Epilogue

In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the work of the Platform remains sharply impacted. This report is issued to share relevant information on how COVID-19 is continuing to impact the work of CSPPS members. The report identifies a number of persistent trends that need international attention and concerted action. From our end, supporting our members and their efforts remains a key objective for the CSPPS Platform in 2021 and beyond.

We will continue to monitor the impact of the pandemic on the ground while simultaneously calling for a more inclusive, conflict-sensitive response that focuses on the provision of egalitarian support to local action across the globe in the upcoming years. Harvesting and documenting lived-through experiences is an important component of our international advocacy. The recommendations as formulated in this second report will be grounding our future engagement with governments and other international actors.

We need to partner locally and globally to institute fairer and more amplified efforts toward the SDG targets for peace, justice, and inclusion. "Civil society is acting on the front lines as first responders to any crisis. At the same time, civil society is calling for your support for and input in inclusive dialogue processes and collaborative actions"[46] . We thus call upon our international partners to support our journey and walk besides us as we traverse to building forward better. Your support will be crucial to embark on more inclusive processes, support local responses that are grounded in multi-actor partnerships, and realise joint commitments towards a more resilient future.

[46] "Opinion: An online UN HLPF will not stop SDG 16+ from backsliding", Devex, 13 July 2021.

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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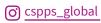
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The CSPPS Secretariat expresses its gratitude to all member organisations and focal points that have furnished insights and testimonies. We are also deeply grateful to the reviewers.