

International Development Committee of the House of Commons
Inquiry on Humanitarian Crises Monitoring: Impact of Coronavirus

Submission One: The current situation, immediate risks and threats

Written Evidence Submitted by Search for Common Ground

April 17th, 2020

1. Introduction

Search for Common Ground has been a global leader in peacebuilding and conflict transformation for nearly 40 years. We have partnered with Her Majesty's Government to support people building healthy, safe, and just societies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. At any given time, we are running approximately 140 projects supporting peace and conflict transformation efforts. We benefit from, and work closely in, partnerships with the Department for International Development, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the Conflict Stability and Security Fund, as well as other UK non-profits, academics and philanthropists.

Search for Common Ground played a leading role in addressing Ebola outbreaks in both West Africa and more recently in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and a wide range of other humanitarian and development partners. We are presently supporting efforts aimed at addressing the current pandemic in more than a dozen countries, with an intention to deepen our action.

Although our interventions address the immediate, secondary and long-term effects of the coronavirus, in this submission we focus primarily upon the set of immediate challenges particularly in conflict-affected societies. In a future submission we will address the longer-term implications.

2. What are the direct and indirect impacts of the outbreak on developing countries and specific risks and threats?

Coronavirus control measures present a security and stability crisis. Coronavirus presents both a health crisis and a public order crisis. Isolation measures require coordination between local governments, police, military and other security type agencies, and a security-first approach risks putting police and military into positions and contact with stressed out populations, for which they are not adequately prepared. Successfully managing public order crises require building collaboration between youth, civil society, municipal governments, the health sector, faith community and security actors. In many contexts, this collaborative relationship does not exist.

We have already seen the negative effects of a security-first approach. For example, in Nigeria, a soldier was sanctioned for threatening sexual violence against women while enforcing the lockdown in Delta State; in Mombasa police allegedly beat a motorcycle driver to death while he was delivering a pregnant woman to the hospital after curfew; videos documenting alleged security force abuses in Burkina Faso are circulating on social media. These incidents both undermine the wider coronavirus response and challenge the legitimacy of the state and its security forces in fragile contexts.

HMG should both support non-state actors to play a greater role in the coronavirus response, for example by supporting women peacebuilders negotiating health access in Kenya, or youth activists in Guinea explaining coronavirus responses and facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue and public participation in control measures. Additionally, where security forces are deployed in high-risk situations, HMG could support their training in active communication, de-escalation, and cultural and religious sensitivities.

Communicating with conflict-affected communities requires adapted approaches. Suspicion of outside actors is particularly prevalent in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Public information campaigns - including broadcast, print, digital media and community information platforms - can be effective. However, impactful communications strategies require shifting knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Campaigns anchored in information alone are unlikely to succeed in many contexts.

For example, many awareness campaigns employ a “credibility based on authority” approach, featuring expert-interviews and endorsements from national and international institutions. Among communities who do not know, trust, or like their government, or believe that outside experts do not have their best interests at heart, these approaches are likely to backfire. In some conflict-affected societies – particularly among those who have directly experienced violence – communications campaigns should embrace empowerment messaging and avoid triggering “fatalistic” responses. For someone who has seen their life upended by forces beyond their control, the enormity of a massive threat like coronavirus can be disempowering and impede – rather than encourage – action, if not locally adapted and incorporating calls to action that empower and inspire.

Coronavirus control measures will have an impact on the protection of women and children. Stay-at-home orders will have the effect of increasing risks of protection threats, including violence against women and girls (VAWG). Lack of access to resources outside the home and financial stresses, associated with economic and social disruption, are all factors which increase the risk of VAWG. UN Women has called this violence against women and girls the “shadow pandemic”. In Lebanon, calls to women’s helplines have doubled. We have heard anecdotal reports of increased child and forced marriages in multiple societies.

HMG should consider supporting a range of innovative efforts aimed at protecting women and children, adapted to isolation measures, including both those at imminent risk of violence, as well as preventative psychosocial resources to decrease vulnerability. Efforts could include reinforcing private communications channels like telephone and online hotline systems, mass communication platforms like radio call-in shows, or entertainment programming that encourages positive family relationships and gender norms, as well as solidarity in the context of an external threat.

3. What lessons have been identified and learned from previous experience with infectious diseases (for example, Ebola)

In situations of conflict and fragility, health and humanitarian response that is not “conflict smart” and adapted to the local context will often be met with resistance, sometimes violent. The initial responses to the Ebola crises in the Democratic Republic of Congo and West Africa were led by national authorities and international agencies, often designed with little understanding or appreciation of the local dynamics, public opinion, or history. Health and security actors were in turn seen as outsiders by the communities

experiencing the risk, stress, and threats of the disease, many of whom considered themselves to have suffered the oppression of outsiders in the past. Thus, while more than 20 Ebola outbreaks have been successfully contained, the two that occurred in borderlands populated by ethnic minorities and majority-opposition areas quickly got out of control.

In many areas, responding to the coronavirus requires being “conflict smart,” being sensitive to local resources and capacities, public opinion, history and social context, and working in appropriate ways that builds trust and cohesion. While DFID’s use of its Rapid Response Facility is appreciated, HMG should leverage other mechanisms such as the Conflict Sensitivity Platform that DFID is piloting with Search for Common Ground in Yemen to support the entire humanitarian system to better engage in complex emergencies. HMG should further extend a “conflict smart” approach beyond the health and humanitarian community to address security sector assistance, capacity building, and planning given the public order component of coronavirus response.

The messenger matters as much as the message. In both West Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo, we saw the limitations of certain communications strategies. In both societies, trusted non-state actors played a critical role in turning the tide. This included faith leaders, traditional communicators such as *griots* and *town criers*, social media influencers, soap operas, radio DJs and others who could earn the trust of those suspicious of “official” messages.

People who are sceptical of “outsider” influence are unlikely to accept public service announcements (PSAs) sponsored by the Ministry of Health, or news programming funded by foreign NGOs. More effective communications approaches train and support those who already have the trust of key elements of the community, and integrate a discussion of the health crisis within popular media and communications channels

4. What is the role of the United Kingdom in responding bilaterally and with the international community, to the spread of coronavirus to developing countries?

Assistance should support civil society, local government and other actors. Global crisis response mechanisms, including the UN family of organisations and International Financial Institutions primarily channel assistance to national governments, and particularly the executive arm of these governments. Ministries of Health, of the Interior, of Communications and other central agencies have a critical role in responding to this multifaceted crisis. Yet, in conflict-affected societies, central government capacity is often limited or viewed with distrust by some segments of the population.

HMG can play a particular role in its bilateral assistance and within the international community in ensuring that assistance reaches civil society, community organisations, women- and youth-led agencies, municipal governments, academics, faith-based actors, private sector institutions and others with a particular credibility and capacity to respond. HMG can also support media, civil society, legislatures and other institutions to strengthen public discussion and oversight of resources and other government actions in connection with the coronavirus response.

The United Kingdom can play a leading role in supporting humanitarian ceasefires and related peace initiatives. Although fresh, we have seen some encouraging signs and mobilisation in the wake of United Nations’ Secretary General Guterres’s call for a global ceasefire in the context of coronavirus. Within

these efforts, HMG can work to include supporting grassroots efforts to reinforce public declarations of ceasefires by translating them into “facts on the ground”, and championing efforts via its diplomatic channels, including ensuring woman and youth participation. HMG has a range of tools at its disposal, ranging from DFID’s CHASE unit, the Conflict Security and Stability Framework, its bilateral diplomatic relations and influence within the multilateral system.

This immediate emergency caused by the coronavirus underscores the impact of chronic crises on humanitarian and poverty alleviation efforts. The potentially devastating effects upon the most vulnerable, including those displaced by war should serve as a reminder that chronic political and armed conflicts are the primary driver of humanitarian need and vulnerability. HMG should double-down on its support to peacebuilding and peace-making in places like Afghanistan, Central Africa, Myanmar, the Sahel, Somalia, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere to seek sustainable solutions. An exploration of these issues coupled with an explicit focus on “what works” in such contexts should be explicitly considered in the context of the Integrated Defence Security Foreign Policy and Development Review.

5. What is the impact of the outbreak, and consequential mitigation measures on fund-raising by charities and NGOs?

The outbreak will have serious effects across the non-profit sector. The generosity of the British people and the UK’s role in supporting global civil society represent a key support to its Foreign and Development Policy. Organisations including BOND, NCVO, the Institute of Fundraising, ACEVO, the Charity Finance Group and others have highlighted the critical threat that nonprofits now face due to coronavirus and the related economic slowdown both in the UK and around the world. DFID, the FCO, Treasury and related departments should take urgent measures to address these risks including incentivising charitable giving, ensuring that non-profit organisations benefit fully from assistance packages to UK employers and encouraging flexibility in the cost structure of existing funding agreements.

UK Foreign and Development policy benefits from close collaboration with international and national NGOs, including those established in Europe, North America, Commonwealth countries and elsewhere. A review of the financial health of the charitable and NGO sector and mitigation mechanisms should also include these partners, whose continued partnership helps HMG meet its wider objectives.

The UK Government should balance local adaptation with general directions and guidance. Across the world, DFID and FCO have adopted a place-by-place approach to adapting ongoing programs to the reality of coronavirus, and the attendant security measures and limitations. While the space for local adaptation is appreciated, it also creates uncertainty for organisations that manage programs across geographies and departments, who are leading multiple context-specific program adaptation efforts.

HMG should consider the benefits of more explicitly setting a central, general direction. For example, in the United States, the White House’s Office of Management and Budget issued a series of cross-governmental guidelines, including to USAID and the State Department, designed to alleviate administrative burdens, encourage flexibility within funding arrangements, and laying out guidance as to the allowability of costs to maintain staff and readiness to resume activities where the coronavirus had led programs to pause their activities.