



**International Rescue Committee response to
International Development Committee's inquiry into:
'Humanitarian crises monitoring: coronavirus in
developing countries: secondary impacts'**

October 2020

Part 1: Economy and food security; economic performance, development and level of ODA (implications for livelihoods and food security and nutrition)

1. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) welcomes the decision of the International Development Committee to hold an inquiry into the secondary impacts of coronavirus in developing countries.
2. As COVID-19 spread, governments responded with stringent restrictions aimed at curbing the proliferation of the virus. Whole countries entered lockdowns where movement was restricted, services were reduced, and businesses forced to close.
3. The economic impact of these lockdowns led the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to estimate a global economic contraction of 4.9 percentⁱ, which would constitute the worst downturn since the Great Depression. They also predict that the economic impact on low-income households will reverse progress made on reducing poverty since 1990sⁱⁱ.
4. The negative impact on livelihoods is experienced disproportionately by women and refugees living in low- and middle-income countries.
5. Refugees are concentrated in sectors most impacted by COVID-19. IRC and Centre for Global Development (CGD) research found that refugees were 60% more likely to work in sectors that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) deem to be ‘highly impacted’ by COVID-19 and the economic downturn, compared to 37% of populations in host countriesⁱⁱⁱ. Refugees often work in the informal sector, which has seen even greater impacts. It is estimated that informal workers will see a 60% decline in earnings globally, with low- and lower-middle-income countries seeing an 82% drop^{iv}. In Jordan, 35% of employed Syrian refugees lost their jobs post-COVID-19 compared to 17% of Jordanian citizens. In Lebanon, 60% of Syrians lost jobs compared to 39% of Lebanese citizens.^v
6. Women are over-represented in the informal economy as a whole, as well as in highly-impacted sectors. According to the ILO^{vi}, 42% of women are working in these vulnerable sectors, compared to 32% of men.
7. [IRC recently conducted a safety audit](#)^{vii} of 852 women from refugee, displaced and post-conflict settings. Women reported a drastic loss of income and savings, leaving them increasingly struggling to meet their own and their family’s basic needs. Across all the 15 countries audited, women emphasised how increased economic hardship heightened women and girls’ exposure to violence and exploitation, both within and outside the home.
8. Contractions in economic activity in response to COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on hunger in countries affected by fragility, conflict and displacement. IRC research published in June estimated that 54 million additional people in developing countries will be hungry in 2020 as a result of economic downturn^{viii} - the IMF’s subsequent downgraded GDP forecast already makes this an underestimate. The research also found that the COVID-19 shock to the economy

could effectively suspend progress towards SDG three of Zero Hunger by 3 years. This will have ramifications across the Sustainable Development Goals.

9. As businesses and informal markets are locked-down, supply chains are affected. This affects agricultural supply chains in particular. Farmers have missed planting seasons either because of an inability to secure key resources or due to lack of labour. For example, in South Sudan, over 11,000 farmers supported by the IRC had to suspend farming activities.

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10. As demand soars, so do prices. In Yemen, for example, the price of the minimum food basket [had increased by up to 35% as](#) of July since COVID-19 outbreaks began^{ix}. Low-income families are forced to go into debt, resort to negative coping mechanisms such as children working, or simply go without.
11. As a result of COVID-19 and its impacts on health and food systems, the number of malnourished children in Yemen under the age of five is projected to grow by 20% within just six months to reach 2.4 million – almost half of all children under five^x.
12. Humanitarian cash transfers are a proven, effective means of improving food security and supporting basic needs. Having cash would mean people affected by the COVID-19 crisis would not be forced to sell their few assets or fall further into debt. Designed well, they will help people survive and get back on their feet and overcome the exclusion of women and marginalised populations.
13. It is vital that the world's donors mobilise funding for an urgent boost in humanitarian cash transfers to prevent a spike in hunger in 2020. Without this short-term humanitarian boost we will pay the long-term price of hunger and poverty, with a domino effect across all the Sustainable Development Goals.
14. In June, we estimated that US\$1.7 billion in additional funding is required in 2020 to support humanitarian cash transfers and prevent more people going hungry in countries affected by fragility, conflict and displacement – US\$760 million of this is required to respond in high refugee hosting developing countries alone.

Recommendation

15. **The UK Government should play a leading role in tackling food insecurity in developing countries by mobilising the international community to provide \$1.7 billion in 2020 and**

beyond to limit the threat of hunger in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and displacement.

16. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office should maintain the Department for International Development's commitment to more than double its use of cash and vouchers by 2025 to 32%.
17. The UK should lead the G20 finance ministers to ensure that the longer term COVID-19 response includes investments in inclusive social safety nets and cash transfers to mitigate the threat of food insecurity. These programmes should be accessible for the most marginalised humanitarian and displaced populations.

Part 2: Treatment of women and children; levels domestic abuse, gender-based violence and exploitation of women and children, including child marriage

18. In the IRC's response to the first part of this inquiry, we warned that women and girls would be disproportionately impacted by the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a rise in gender-based violence (GBV) predicted. Sadly, but unsurprisingly, this prediction has come to pass. There has been a demonstrable increase in violence against women and girls – particularly in the form of intimate partner violence (IPV) as women are locked in with their abusers. The renewed threat to women is exacerbated by an increasing difficulty in accessing services and new areas of risk – including not being able to travel in groups for protection and an increased need to travel to water points.
19. [The IRC interviewed 852 women from refugee, displaced and post conflict settings in 15 African countries across East Africa, West Africa and the Great Lakes region, in addition to 25 GBV experts.](#) Across all three regions 73% of women interviewed reported an increase in intimate partner violence, 51% cited sexual violence and 32% observed a growth in the levels of early and forced marriage.

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20. The women reported how the stress of the lock down and its economic repercussions triggered increased violence by their husbands but also highlighted the new dangers affiliated with checkpoints set up by security personnel to regulate the movement of people. A specific area of concern flagged by women across all three regions was the increased need for water collection

due to the new hygiene practices. 31% of women interviewed reported incidents of harassment and sexual violence on the way to water points; 21% reported harassment at water points.

21. In particular, the GBV sector has been left chronically underfunded throughout this pandemic. GBV accounted for only 0.48% of the overall funding appeal of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) as of August 2020. GBV experts interviewed by IRC reported funding being withdrawn or re-directed to infection prevention. Donor preferences and implementing organisations' requests often failed to prioritise the safety and needs of women and girls.
22. While services overall remained available in the countries included in this report, access was often compromised for a host of reasons, such as new challenges in transport or reduced opening hours. Organisations rarely received additional funding to adapt their programmes and had to divert existing programme resources to pay for additional expenses, such as personal protective equipment (PPE) or handwashing facilities. When asked about reasons why survivors would choose to not seek help, women primarily named the fear of being identified as a survivor of GBV and the related stigma (56%). This fear was considerably exacerbated by movement restrictions and the monitoring of movement through checkpoints and community leaders.
23. The IRC's report showed once again how the voices of women and girls are ignored and their needs neglected in responses to crises. In light of the repeated commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit and the Global Refugee Forum to pay greater attention to the voices of refugees and displaced persons, governments and multilateral agencies cannot afford to ignore the perspectives of the women.

Recommendations

- 24. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office should protect funding for gender-based violence programming during the proposed cuts to UK Overseas Development Assistance.**
- 25. A more accurate understanding is needed of how adequately the humanitarian system is responding to gender-based violence (GBV). The UK should work to ensure GBV funding is accurately reflected in the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) and the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) databases through the use of appropriate of GBV and gender equality codes.**
- 26. As co-lead of the Gender-based Violence (GBV) Action Coalition in the Generation Equality Forum, the UK should spearhead better coding and tracking of allocations and expenditures for GBV to foster transparent and accountable financing for GBV programming.**

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ⁱ June 2020 IMF estimates.

ⁱⁱ 2 International Monetary Fund (IMF), *“World Economic Outlook: A Crisis like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery,”* June, 2020. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} ILO, *“ILO Monitor. 3rd edition.”*

^{vii} International Rescue Committee, *“What Happened? How the Humanitarian Response to COVID-19 Failed to Protect Women and Girls,”* October, 2020.

^{viii} International Rescue Committee, *“The cost of living: COVID-19 humanitarian cash transfers to prevent hunger and hardship,”* June 2020

^{ix} International Rescue Committee, *“Yemen’s Triple Emergency: COVID-19, Conflict, and a Collapsing International Response,”* July 2020.

^x <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/yemeni-children-face-deadly-hunger-and-aid-shortages-covid-19-pandemic-spreads>