

COVID-19 EFFECTS ON PEACE AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS

THE NEED FOR PREVENTION PREVAILS

Katariina Mustasilta



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- Armed conflicts around the world have continued largely unabated, irrespective of the global pandemic. Despite influencing conflict-affected contexts, the pandemic has not (thus far) been a gamechanger regarding conflicts.
- Both non-state and state actors have tried to seize opportunities stemming from the pandemic measures for their own benefit. This, along with changes in the footprint of peace-building efforts, has threatened human security.
- In the long term, socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic pose the gravest threats to peace. The socioeconomic fallout can induce conflict by undermining the social contract and social cohesion, particularly in contexts with conflict legacies, deep inequalities, and high external economic dependencies.
- The EU has multiple tools that it can deploy in its external action to mitigate the conflict-inducing repercussions of the pandemic. Taking preventive action requires a long-term perspective, even amidst the unfolding crisis.



KATARIINA MUSTASILTA

Postdoctoral Fellow

European Union Research Programme

Finnish Institute of International Affairs

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It has been over a year since UN Secretary-General António Guterres first called for a global ceasefire to allow for Covid-19 relief efforts in conflict-affected contexts. More recently, the UN Security Council reiterated the call and demanded a humanitarian pause in local conflicts to allow for vaccine distribution. These initiatives have largely failed to invoke sustainable cessations of violence around the world's varied conflict zones. How have peace and conflict dynamics evolved under the influence of the pandemic and what can we expect from them in a post-pandemic world?

This Briefing Paper takes stock of the conflict trends during the first pandemic year, identifies the main ways that the pandemic has been linked to conflict outcomes, and discusses the implications of these for conflict prevention needs and opportunities. Conflict prevention is discussed particularly in the light of the EU's renewed structures and instruments aimed at strengthening its peace, security, and development efforts outside its borders.

The paper argues that while the pandemic has not been a gamechanger for conflict dynamics, the responses to it and its broader consequences, particularly its socioeconomic repercussions, pose a considerable threat to peace in the long term. The global distraction and the pandemic policy measures have catalysed shifting opportunities for state, non-state and third-party actors, which has left civilians increasingly exposed to human security threats overall. Moreover, the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic have contributed to key push-factors and drivers of conflict escalation. It is these latter, indirect effects that will cause the gravest concern for societal and international peace in the long term.

The Briefing Paper is structured as follows. The first part analyses the key conflict trends in 2020 and the way that the pandemic has influenced state actors, non-state groups and peacebuilding and crisis management opportunities in conflict-affected contexts. The second part turns to the unfolding socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic and identifies how and under what conditions they may contribute to conflict escalation. The third part discusses the policy implications for the EU and its conflict prevention capacities, after which the conclusion summarises the main arguments.

CONFLICT OPPORTUNITIES DURING THE FIRST PANDEMIC YEAR

The dangers related to the pandemic in conflict-affected countries – namely countries undergoing armed conflicts, post-conflict countries and countries under considerable conflict risk – have been a matter of concern for many commentators since the beginning of the pandemic. Beyond fears of the pandemic worsening already-precarious humanitarian situations, analysts warned of disruptions to peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, and the weaponisation of the crisis by armed actors.¹ On the other hand, commentators also hoped that the crisis would provide opportunities to incentivise conflict de-escalation, as reflected in the global ceasefire calls.

Global data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) provides an overview of the evolution of conflict trends in 2020 in the shadow of the pandemic.² The overall picture suggests that both the fears over large conflict-sparking effects and the hopes for conflict-ameliorating effects of the pandemic were somewhat overstated (for now). Generally, armed conflicts have continued along the same path as the one they were on before the pandemic: the intensity of state-based armed violence somewhat decreased, much of this being the result of a de-escalation in battles in Syria and Afghanistan, and the maintenance of lower levels of fighting in Iraq. Furthermore, armed violence continued to cluster increasingly on the African continent. In fact, there was a worrying increase in the intensity of armed violence in Africa in 2020, deriving from non-state armed violence affiliated with violent Islamist extremism, but also violence between informally organised communal groups and a rise in violence against civilians.

These crude conflict figures are the outcomes of multifaceted processes and the continuation of gradually evolving conflict trends. The absence of dramatic shifts in the dynamics nevertheless suggests that thus

1 Sian Herbert and Heather Marquette, 'COVID-19, governance, and conflict: emerging impacts and future evidence needs', *K4D Emerging Issues Report*, 34 (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2021); Katarina Mustasilta, 'From bad to worse? The impact(s) of Covid-19 on conflict dynamics', EUISS Brief, 13 (EUISS, 2020).

2 The data come from the UCDP Candidate Events Dataset, version 21.0X, available at <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#candidate>; Håvard Hegre, Mihai Croicu, Kristine Eck, and Stina Högladh, 'Introducing the UCDP Candidate Events Dataset', *Research & Politics*, 2020; see also Roudabeh Kishi, *A year of Covid-19: The pandemic's impact on global conflict and demonstration trends* (ACLED, April 2021).

far the pandemic has not been a gamechanger in conflict dynamics to the extent that it has been in economic activities. Most armed conflicts have continued largely unabated irrespective of the global pandemic in 2020.

Nevertheless, looking into the specific types of conflict actors reveals a more nuanced picture. Various non-state armed groups, which increased their activities overall in 2020, appear to have approached the pandemic as an opportunity to weaken their opponents and advance their own spheres of influence. Violent extremist organizations, such as Boko Haram factions in Nigeria, al-Qaida-affiliated groups in the Sahel, and ISIS in Iraq, expressed willingness to take advantage of their pandemic-weakened local and international opponents and indeed escalated violent attacks in many active conflicts in 2020.³

Some armed groups seem to have also managed to use the shelter-in-place measures and closing of borders to gain more influence over the movement of people and goods. Simultaneously, negative shifts in economic opportunities may have pushed some groups towards more violence. In the Lake Chad and Sahel region, for example, the pandemic's negative livelihood effects on pastoral and farmer groups dependent on access to water and other natural resources have been linked to spikes in inter-communal clashes.⁴

A notable difference between state and non-state actors in the face of the pandemic is that the political and economic responsibility for managing the crisis falls first and foremost on the state's shoulders. Even when a non-state group views itself as a governance actor, the pandemic may have brought it advantages. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has actively communicated its efforts to curb the health crisis in its controlled territories. In Brazil, non-state armed groups stepped up to impose curfews in favelas as the central government continued its passive policy towards the public health crisis.⁵ Whilst the actual capacity of non-state groups to manage the health crisis tends to be low, their rhetoric towards this end can further weaken the credibility of the state.

This is not to say that state actors have not seen and seized opportunities in response to the pandemic. Notably, state repression increased last year around the world, with some of the repression directly linked to the pandemic responses. Multiple governments have

been accused of exploiting the need to temporarily restrict some basic rights – such as the right to movement – to undermine political opposition and suppress any criticism against the state, and demonstrations and protests have been violently repressed across continents. The democratic decline trend continued during the first pandemic year.⁶

Perhaps even more visibly than influencing state and non-state armed actors, the pandemic has influenced peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities. The effects have thus far been generally disruptive. Only a few countries witnessed concrete action by conflict parties in response to the global ceasefire call, and even those actions were short lived. The first waves of the pandemic also delayed and slowed down progress in several peace talks, even when these were ultimately able to continue in the digital realm whenever physical meetings were rendered impossible. A key short-term disruptive effect of the pandemic has been the changed footprint of various international peacekeeping, peacebuilding, crisis management, and development efforts around the world. While steadfast in their commitment to fulfil their mandates, the operational realities for most international missions changed dramatically during spring 2020 as movement on the ground became more difficult and many international staff members were evacuated from the field. In the Sahel, the EU's training and civilian missions went into hibernation during the first pandemic wave, whilst the operationalisation of the European Takuba force was delayed. Besides decreased presence on the ground, many international and local peacebuilding efforts adapted their activities to respond to the public health needs stemming from the crisis.⁷

In sum, for any actor respecting (and able to respect) the public health advice regarding the pandemic, the first year of the global crisis did not facilitate concrete opportunities to bring parties together, but on the contrary complicated logistical, financial and coordination-related challenges. The attention shifted to the public health crisis, and the concrete pandemic measures more readily catalysed unilateral moves and counter-moves than multilateral and coordinated efforts for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. If anything, these shifting opportunities for non-state, state and third parties in conflict contexts can be argued to have left civilians at least temporarily more exposed to threats to human security.

3 Audu Bulama Bukarti, 'How is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?', *Briefing*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, May 2020; International Crisis Group (ICG), 'A course correction for the Sahel stabilization strategy', *Crisis Group Africa Report* N. 299, February 2021; Mick Mulroy, Eric Oehlerich and Amanda Blair, *Covid-19 and conflict in the Middle East*, The Middle East Institute, January 2021.

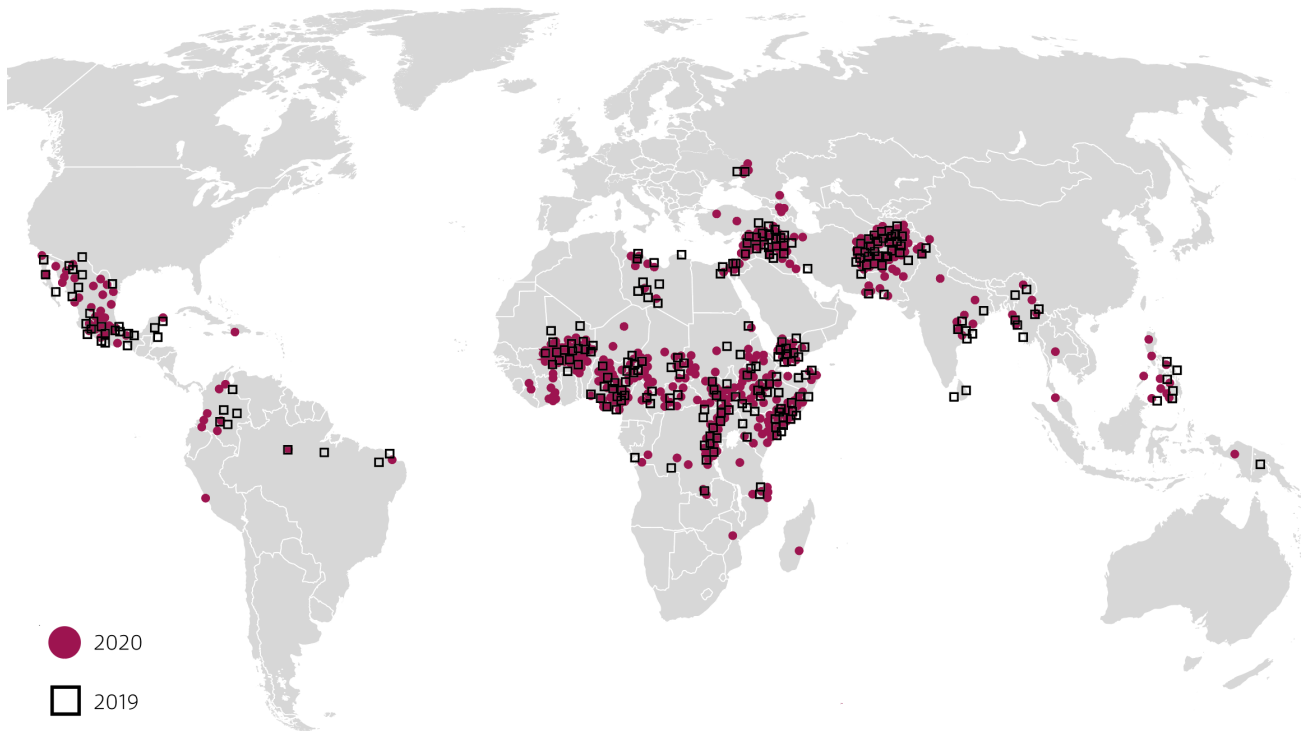
4 Lisa Inks and Adam Lichtenheld, *Advancing peace in a changed world: Covid-19 effects on conflict and how to respond* (Washington DC: Mercy Corps, 2020).

5 Tobias Ide, 'Covid-19 and armed conflict', *World Development*, 140, 2020; Herbert and Marquette, 'COVID-19, governance, and conflict'.

6 See V-Dem Institute, *Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021* (University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2021); Kishi, *A year of Covid-19*.

7 Interviews with peacebuilding and crisis management experts; see also ICG, 'A course correction'.

Lethal armed violence around the world in 2019 and 2020: conflicts continue despite the pandemic



Data source: UCDP Georeferenced event dataset version 20.1 and UCDP Candidate event dataset, year 2020; only events with clarity on conflict type and fatality estimates and with estimated five or more fatalities included.

SOCIOECONOMIC REPERCUSSIONS OF THE PANDEMIC – THE LONG-TERM THREAT TO PEACE

The pandemic disruptions and shifted opportunities will gradually diminish as the stringent measures are lifted and things get “back to normal”. However, their effects on conflict and fragility need to be viewed against the unfolding socioeconomic fallout from the crisis.

The pandemic has delivered a major blow to the global economy, disrupting trade and supply chains, reducing foreign direct investments (FDI) and aggravating debt crises around the world. The context-specific measures to curb the pandemic have further contributed to reduced domestic economic productivity and participation. These international and domestic effects have already catalysed considerable socioeconomic challenges, such as income losses, unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity. In Latin America, for example, poverty and inequality are deepening whilst the region is projected to lag behind in economic recovery. In sub-Saharan Africa, despite regionally lower levels of Covid-19 cases and fatalities, the global economic shock has contributed to wide-scale income losses and has worsened food insecurity. South Asia has been particularly severely hit by the growth in

absolute poverty that is taking place for the first time in the 21st century due to the pandemic.⁸

These socioeconomic effects are projected to unfold for years and even decades to come. They can amplify some of the discussed effects on peace and security and have their own indirect impacts on conflicts. Specifically, the socioeconomic fallout risks contributing to conflict by crippling the social contract between governments and the public, and weakening social cohesion among the various societal groups in a country.⁹

First, negative changes in people’s socioeconomic prospects – worsened income and employment situation, food insecurity, and increased uncertainty over one’s future – generate grievances towards those in power. In the aftermath of the pandemic, polarisation concerning the perceived severity of the crisis and the rightfulness of the responses to it may further boost such political grievances. The social contract is also tested in a top-down fashion as states’ revenues shrink, their concrete governance capacities weaken, and their ability to

⁸ Mikaela Gavas and Samuel Pleeck, ‘Global Trends in 2021: How COVID-19 Is Transforming International Development’ (Center for Global Development, March 2021); *Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of Covid-19* (Congressional Research Service, April 2021).

⁹ On the pathways from the pandemic to conflict, see Francesco Iacolla, Patricia Justino and Bruno Martorano, ‘Do pandemics lead to rebellion? Policy responses to COVID-19, inequality, and protests in the USA’, *WIDER Working Paper*, 57, 2021; Inks and Lichtenheld, *Advancing peace in a changed world*.

co-opt the opposition declines. To recover from the pandemic, states face difficult choices between providing relief and stimulus measures (and accumulating public debt), increasing taxes, and/or adopting austerity measures. These measures can make regimes more vulnerable towards external and internal challengers, and further aggravate grievances. Subsequently, both motivations and opportunities for civil conflicts may grow.

Second, the socioeconomic repercussions can weaken social cohesion and increase inter-group tensions within a country. The pandemic aggravates existing inequalities within countries, including real and perceived horizontal inequalities between ethnic, racial, and other socio-political groups. The so called *infodemic*, namely spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories regarding the pandemic, has both contributed to the problem and been driven itself by high levels of societal polarisation. Deepening horizontal inequalities increase the risk of civil conflict onsets.¹⁰ If the socioeconomic fallout continues to disproportionately burden those already marginalised or vulnerable within a society, radical alternatives to the status quo may gain more support. Weakening social cohesion may also lead to outbursts of inter-communal tensions and violence. Indeed, the first pandemic year already witnessed xenophobic and racist inclinations linked to the pandemic and, as discussed, growing inter-communal tensions.

The gravity of the socioeconomic repercussions following the pandemic will differ widely across countries. However, a few conditions are worth highlighting as factors that increase vulnerability towards conflict-inducing socioeconomic effects. Countries with existing armed conflicts or a recent history of conflicts are particularly vulnerable to socioeconomic legacies of the pandemic. Existing conflicts monopolise states' resources and render it harder to effectively mitigate the negative socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic. This can add to the existing political grievances on the ground. Conflict legacies remain strong in post-conflict situations and a changed economic and socioeconomic situation can decrease the commitment to reached peace deals.

Moreover, pre-pandemic horizontal inequalities in accessing economic and political power will become even more threatening in the post-pandemic world. Emerging studies show that the pandemic measures have catalysed civil unrest, particularly in areas with high income inequality.¹¹ Such effects can become ag-

gravated when combined with group-level disparity in political influence over the measures to tackle the pandemic repercussions. Further, countries with high economic dependence on global trade flows and/or primary commodities may be vulnerable to the long-term peace-threatening effects of the pandemic. High dependence on global trade and supply flows translates into bigger initial economic losses during the pandemic, which can have long-lasting domestic tails of negative shifts in living standards. Such external dependencies seem particularly dangerous, as the global vaccine distribution remains sluggish and the recovery process uneven.

None of these conditions deal explicitly with the severity of the public health crisis. The spread and lethality of the virus certainly influence trust towards governments and the economic costs of the crisis. Yet, rather than mobilising conflict directly, their effects on societal peace and security will more likely be combined with horizontal inequalities (facilitating shared grievances) and weakened state capacities to curb overt dissent. The pandemic is a multidimensional crisis and its socioeconomic repercussions will not neatly follow the public health crisis or the initial economic shock. This is not to say that none of the highly conflict-vulnerable countries are among those most hit by the public health crisis. Yet, even when they are, the conflict pathway will most likely involve group-level inequalities, grievances and weakened capacities to contain such grievances.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU'S CONFLICT PREVENTION EFFORTS

The EU, for its part, is in theory up to the task of mitigating the long-term conflict escalatory effects of the pandemic in its external action. The Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, has emphasised efforts against growing inequalities as one of the key priorities of the new Directorate in charge of the Union's development agenda.¹² This prioritisation is timely in the light of the pandemic repercussions. The EU has also been a vocal supporter of the global ceasefire initiative, launched Team Europe to assist its partners in managing the multifaceted crisis, and

10 See Lars-Erik Cederman, Nils Weidmann and Kristian Gleditsch, 'Horizontal Inequalities and Ethnonationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison', *The American Political Science Review*, 105(3), (2011): 478-495.

11 Iacolla, Justino and Martorano, 'Do pandemics lead to rebellion?'

12 See Riccardo Roba, 'Toward a new paradigm for EU international cooperation', *Commentary*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), January 2021; European Commission, 'European Commission welcomes the endorsement of the new €79.5 billion NDICI-Global Europe instrument to support EU's external action', Press Release, March 19, 2021; on the new external action instruments, see Andrew Sherriff (ed), *Investing in Europe's Global Role: The must-have guide for the negotiations of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027* (Maastricht: ECDPM, 2019).

engaged in global vaccine efforts, although its reputation in the latter has been hampered by criticism against the bloc's export restrictions and opposition to lifting the vaccine patent protections.

Notably, the EU is launching the new multiannual financial framework (2021–2027) with several renewed components that are relevant for conflict prevention. The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe – is organised around three pillars, two of which deal explicitly with conflict prevention, peace and security, and a rapid response to crisis situations, integrating the former Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP). More structural conflict prevention is to be mainstreamed in all activities in the third geographical pillar as well. The EU's efforts to develop its conflict early warning system (EWS) can equally contribute to identifying early signs of a deteriorating social contract and cohesion. Alongside these civilian-led preventive tools, the new European Peace Facility (EPF) is to be operational by July 2021. However, considering the identified threats of increased human insecurity and socioeconomic troubles due to the pandemic, an overemphasis on the EPF – which channels the Union's CSDP support in military and defence sectors and enables better equipping of partners' security sectors – can also risk countering rather than fostering necessary action to prevent the pandemic's escalatory effects.

There is considerable potential in the EU's new tools and structures to mitigate the pandemic's negative repercussions for societal peace. In particular, the new requirement in the NDICI to conduct conflict analyses for fragile states can, if properly implemented, help in identifying long-term conflict prevention needs and ensuring that the EU does “no harm”. Regarding this, it is important for the socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic to be considered in the early warning and conflict analyses in the coming years. As discussed, the pandemic's effects on peace and security do not neatly follow from the public health crisis, and careful analysis is needed to understand the key risk contexts.

Furthermore, supporting societal trust-building and restoring the social contract is necessary for addressing the underlying drivers of contemporary conflicts. The high level of civil unrest during the first pandemic year and the long-term upward trend in civil resistance around the world indicate severe challenges in state-society relations in the EU neighbourhood as well. The EU and the member states need to consider how to respond effectively to situations where state oppression is used against human rights

and democracy defenders, as such situations may trigger or contribute to wider escalatory processes. Finally, conflict prevention requires adopting a long-term perspective, which is difficult to achieve amidst multiple ongoing crises. The EU is itself still at the beginning of the recovery process and much of the political attention is directed inwards. There are also multiple ongoing conflicts that the EU actively engages in, and the need to prevent may seem secondary. However, even with the ongoing conflicts, efforts to support the management of the crisis without addressing the underlying motivators and drivers of conflict are unlikely to succeed in improving the security situation – particularly under the aggravating influence of the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has not led to drastic shifts in conflict dynamics around the world. Rather, it has contributed to existing trends, posed shifting opportunities and challenges to state and non-state actors, and complicated collective peace and security efforts, altogether making civilians more exposed to human security threats.

The fact that the pandemic has not acted as a gamechanger in conflict dynamics thus far does not mean that we should dismiss it as trivial for peace and security. This Briefing Paper has highlighted the threat stemming from the unfolding and long-term socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic, which can contribute to conflict by undermining the social contract and social cohesion. From Mali to Colombia and Syria, group-level inequalities concerning access to political and economic power, combined with poor state capacities to provide equal access to governance provisions, have crippled the social contract and motivated armed conflicts. The pandemic repercussions threaten to contribute to such root causes of conflict.

The pandemic repercussions call for active conflict prevention efforts that address the identified structural vulnerabilities, such as conflict legacies, horizontal inequalities, and external economic dependencies, and that support the peaceful resolution of political disputes. For the EU, or any other actor wishing to contribute to a more peaceful and stable post-pandemic world, the challenge is to invest in preventive efforts even during the crisis. A long-term preventive approach is necessary for the recovery and crisis management measures to produce sustainable benefits – for both external and internal security. /