

Discussion on the Present Impact of COVID-19 on Peacebuilding & the Upcoming GYPI Call for Proposals

April 2020; Meeting Note

On 16 April, The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), in partnership with the United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), convened an off-the-record virtual discussion with peacebuilding organization representatives from throughout the world. The discussion addressed two interrelated themes: firstly, the Peacebuilding Fund's (PBF) annual Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative (GYPI) funding calls; and, secondly, the impacts of COVID-19 on peacebuilding.

Within this time of unprecedented global challenge, it is essential to reflect upon and provide further consideration for the effects of the unfolding health crisis on the work of peacebuilding organizations and on peacebuilding more broadly. This discussion was a timely opportunity to share insights and perspectives across UN and civil society actors on how they are responding and adjusting thus far. Additionally, the meeting provided space for collective brainstorming on approaches and methodologies to support peace initiatives in the midst of crisis, and to consider ways forward to hopefully maintain longer-term peace and development gains. This document provides an overview of the key themes, issues and ideas that emerged during the discussion, with no attribution to participants given the off-the-record nature of the meeting.

I. Overview of the Discussion

A truly global crisis

The spread of COVID-19 has already proven to have profound and long-lasting implications for societies and requires a fundamental reorientation of peacebuilding approaches to respond to this multi-dimensional threat. It has become swiftly apparent that this is truly a global health and peace crisis.

While this pandemic is affecting countries throughout the world, the challenges peacebuilders are facing are driven by the contexts in which they operate. In adjusting and responding to the reality of peacebuilding in a climate of increasingly complex crisis, responses and programming need to be more nuanced and context specific. This will require holistic approaches that are attuned to the varied needs of local communities. Additionally, efforts will need to be made to rapidly share learning within and across countries and regions.

A generation defining moment

As education systems around the world have shut down in response to the crisis, it is increasingly evident that COVID-19 will be a generation defining event for children and youth. In his policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children, the UN Secretary-General highlighted that 188 countries have since imposed country-wide school closures affecting more than 1.5 billion children and youth.¹

In reflecting on this unprecedented challenge to a generation's education, participants reiterated how responses to curb the impact of COVID-19 need to be sensitive to the needs of children and youth and conscious of the impact

¹ UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Children, 15 April 2020
<https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-impact-covid-19-children>

measures will have on them. Peacebuilders are thus faced with the need to adjust existing youth-focused programming to address the emerging and anticipated effects of this crisis. There may be opportunities to use technology to conduct virtual initiatives or connect with young people through television, radio or social media, but consideration also needs to be given on how to reach those without such accessibility.

The impact of COVID-19 will exacerbate existing risks and threats to peace, security and development

The effects of COVID-19 are already and will continue to inflame existing grievances and threats facing communities and countries, putting long struggled for peace and development gains at risk. Additionally, the health crisis will bring with it new and unfolding challenges that may destabilize nations. On a societal and individual level, the impact of COVID-19 thus far has already shown to be deeply traumatic, bringing with it a range of psycho-social challenges, each with significant implications for building and sustaining peace. It is essential to recall that many communities throughout the world have experienced a range of historical, recent and/or ongoing trauma, which risks now being compounded by the global health crisis.

Communities and victims impacted by conflict are amongst the most vulnerable in society and were identified in this discussion as being particularly at-risk to the increasingly complex web of challenges raised by COVID-19. In some contexts, government responses to the unfolding crisis have exposed the structural inequalities underpinning many societies, and the stark disparities that exist in the ability to access basic services. Reports are emerging that, in some settings, states are taking an increasingly militarized response, leading to clashes and violence. Participants shared examples of measures to exclude vulnerable or marginalized communities from accessing resources, violently targeting minority or other populations, and government steps to restrict civic space and freedoms for civilians. Additionally, colleagues pointed to the noticeable increase in gender-based violence, and a decline in the lack of access to basic services alongside justice and healthcare, which disproportionately affects women and girls. Responses that are not conflict sensitive and risk informed, and that do not incorporate provisions for the most vulnerable and marginalized in society may threaten to undermine the peacebuilding gains made to date and complicate future efforts to build more peaceful and inclusive societies.

Complications in contexts where there is a deficit of trust

COVID-19 also has implications for societies where there is a pre-existing deficit of trust between authorities and communities. In contexts where information from the government is viewed with suspicion by populations, responses to the pandemic must navigate the fault lines created by this distrust. Participants expanded upon how, if not addressed, low levels of trust in national authorities can lead to a rejection of their initiatives, attacks on international healthcare workers and the further spreading of illness. Furthermore, this could exacerbate feelings of marginalization within society and foster skepticism towards government messaging, potentially leading to the further widening of structural inequalities. Thus, measures must be taken to explore how to address such trust deficits between governments, institutions and the people. Additionally, where possible, government or international actors should work with community-based practitioners that already have long-standing relationships with those they serve. As noted by one participant, "it is easier to transfer knowledge than trust."

Impact on peacebuilding organizations

This discussion highlighted how peacebuilding organizations are increasingly finding their traditional toolkit at odds with the realities of this global pandemic. Peacebuilding is an exercise in fostering relationships and developing trust on a societal, communal and inter-personal level. The spread of COVID-19 has directly impacted this in a number of ways as many organizations have paused their programming; international staff have returned to their home countries in some situations; and countless practitioners are now working from home, which can prove particularly challenging in contexts with weak internet and for colleagues juggling familial responsibilities. As the peacebuilding community

works to adapt to these changes, concerted effort will need to be taken to develop new strategies and programming, as well as to adjust existing working methods to align with the current realities.

Despite these complications, participants also raised the importance of the peacebuilding community in the development and implementation of comprehensive responses to the health crisis. In local settings peacebuilders are often well placed to educate and sensitize communities to the need for robust healthcare measures. Additionally, peacebuilders, due to their local level engagement, deep ties to communities and long-term partnerships, are often perceived as trusted figures and can provide nuanced insights into the needs of communities which can be better inform concerted national efforts to stymie the spread of COVID-19.

Funding peacebuilding in times of crisis

With COVID-19 representing a truly global threat and with many of the traditional donors being directly affected, it is likely that peacebuilding funding will be impacted across the board. As donor-states who provide the majority of peacebuilding funding encounter increasing domestic budgetary and capacity strain, legitimate concerns are forming over the immediate and long-term continuation of funding for conflict affected and developing states. Failure to adequately sustain financial support in such contexts could undermine the positive gains made towards peacebuilding and sustaining peace made thus far. Furthermore, it raises questions of how existing donor-recipient interactions can adapt during times of crisis when strains are placed on all stakeholders.

With regards to peacebuilding organizations, colleagues shared their concerns on how they will fulfill grant contracts and meet reporting requirements given that programming has largely halted. In the long run, COVID-19 poses systemic risks to the financial security of many peacebuilding organizations, primarily regarding their core funding. The pause or complete cancelation of programming and the potential threat of having to terminate employee contracts will undermine hard won gains made thus far and impede future peacebuilding efforts. While the implications of dwindling funds for peacebuilding organizations are far-reaching, it is particularly pressing for smaller organizations, many of whom provide vital programming and resources for the communities they work with. There exists a very immediate need to ensure that, in times of crisis, peacebuilding funding continues and allows practitioners the flexibility to adapt to the changes in programming necessitated by the crisis itself. The impact of COVID-19 illustrates how more flexible funding modalities could help support local peacebuilders and lead to more timely and impactful programming.

II. A time of challenge and opportunity

COVID-19 presents unprecedented global challenges but participants also raised the numerous opportunities for peacebuilders to influence responses and recovery so measures are developed and implemented with a conflict sensitive and risk informed lens. Additionally, colleagues shared the impact of peacebuilders to connect immediate and medium-term efforts with the long-term peacebuilding priorities and needs of societies.

Re-examining partnerships

Responding to COVID-19 can provide an opening to examine and better articulate the comparative advantage of peacebuilding actors during times of complex crisis, and how programming relates to and supports humanitarian efforts. This can result in the embedding of a conflict sensitive and risk informed approach to immediate responses. In the long-term, this can allow for strengthened coordination across sectors that ultimately yields greater results for communities in need.

More flexible funding modalities

With COVID-19 raising concerns over sustainable peacebuilding funding, now is an opportune time to re-assess existing funding modalities and tailor them to be more flexible and responsive, thus sustaining programming during this and future crises. Participants emphasized the significance of increased allocations for core funding by donors as this will provide a financial buffer to ensure organizational survival and continued programming during times of crisis.

Promoting inclusion within divided societies

The necessary responses to COVID-19 (eg. Shelter in place; quarantine; etc.) have an isolating quality, resulting in communities becoming more insular. In divided societies this poses a stark challenge to peacebuilding measures that endeavor to build bridges through inter-community dialogue and interaction. That said, participants shared that this time of crisis has the potential to be a vehicle through which to foster reconciliation. COVID-19's non-discriminative impact provides an opportunity to bring together divided communities in a shared goal of combating the virus. Embedding inclusive peacebuilding approaches within crisis response frameworks could have a significant impact on their efficacy and sustainability and contribute to the development of positive resilience within societies.

Repurposing the peacebuilding toolkit for times of crisis

Faced with this constantly changing environment, peacebuilders could explore how best to adapt existing tools alongside adopting new methods and partnerships to then impact crisis responses. More traditional tools of communication, such as radio and television, were identified as tools peacebuilders could utilize and, in areas with access to reliable internet, social media was pointed to as a key method of continuing dialogue and education.

Embedding peacebuilding principles in crisis response and recovery

COVID-19 is not solely a health crisis but one that is multi-dimensional and requires a whole-of society approach for both response and recovery. During this time of immediate humanitarian need, peacebuilding organizations have a role to play in working with stakeholders to integrate conflict sensitive and risk-informed responses that are grounded in the needs of impacted communities. By uplifting the priorities and perspectives of local communities in humanitarian measures, policies may be more holistic and sustainable. Additionally, through inclusive and peace-centered responses, international and government actors may be able to minimize or prevent wide scale setbacks in peacebuilding gains. This can then contribute to recovery and re-building efforts. Participants noted, though, that in many contexts it will be critical to build back better, meaning that steps need to be explicitly taken to address societal inequalities and grievances present before the onslaught of COVID-19. As a result, it is critical that recovery measures are transformative, addressing the pre-existing risks and challenges and thus contributing to fostering durable peace.

III. About the Quaker UN Office

The Quaker United Nations Office

Since 1947, QUNO has worked with diplomats, UN officials and civil society to support a UN that prioritizes peace and prevents war. Grounded in the Quaker belief that there is that of the divine in every person, QUNO seeks a UN that addresses key drivers of violence including the structures and systems that produce exclusion and injustice; that facilitates and supports change through peaceful means; and whose policies and practices reflect a diversity of voices, such that people around the world can safely and peacefully achieve their potential.