International Labour Organization

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FOR PEACEBUILDING

From crisis to opportunity for sustainable peace

A joint perspective on responding to the health, employment and peacebuilding challenges in times of COVID-19

Summary and key recommendations

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Summary and key recommendations

Besides being the greatest health emergency of our time, COVID-19 is a multidimensional crisis that threatens broader peace and stability. The ILO, the WHO, Interpeace and the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs joined forces in 2020 to examine key policy and programmatic considerations for health and employment interventions responding to COVID-19 in conflict-affected countries. The joint paper outlines practical guidance on how interventions across the *Humanitarian-Development-Peace* Nexus can be adapted to be more effective and integrated, and to ensure they do no harm and strengthen prospects for peace.

The question of how conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive approaches are integrated into health and broader socioeconomic responses will determine their effectiveness and sustainability, as well as their impact on peace and conflict dynamics.

> The pandemic is exacerbating all the factors that drive instability. (…) The rollout of COVID-19 vaccines is generating hope. (…) Those affected by conflict and insecurity are at particular risk of being left behind.
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> ▶ UN Secretary-General António Guterres, in remarks to the Security Council, 17 February 2021

Impacts of COVID-19 on health, employment and peacebuilding

The COVID-19 pandemic is overwhelming health systems, interrupting supply chains, exacerbating unemployment and/or underemployment, and diverting resources and capacities from other health needs. The crisis is aggravating persistent political, social and economic structural inequalities that render some groups more vulnerable than others.

Pre-existing inequities in access to health care and social protection have become more apparent or worsened, further deepening tensions among social groups. Political patronage or even outright political manipulation may determine who can access health care, as means to receive benefits for political gain. In fragile settings, COVID-19 or the responses to it reinforce patterns of grievances that undermine trust and the social contract between citizens and the states.

Containment measures deeply affect economies of conflict-affected states. As labour opportunities are scarce, decent work is further reduced, and households may need to resort to negative coping strategies. As a result, child labour and trafficking may increase. In addition, social protection mechanisms are unable to provide sufficient livelihood support, particularly for those relying on the informal economy. In line with ILO Recommendation 205,[1] employment and decent work initiatives are key to tackling the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 crisis, but also to addressing potential grievances, discrimination and stigmatization over access to resources, livelihoods and health services.

Key recommendations

▶ **Understand the impact of COVID-19** on health care, health-care systems, livelihoods, decent work and peace and conflict dynamics;

▶ Approach a multidimensional crisis with a multidimensional response across the **Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus**;

▶ Commit to **conflict-sensitive, peace-responsive** and tailored policy and programmatic approaches;

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1   *Recommendation 205 on Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience was adopted by the International Labour Organization in 2017.*

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▶ Use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to shift to **locally-led** responses, through participatory and inclusive methods; and

▶ Lay down foundations for **structural changes and build resilience**.

Potential pathways to promote employment, health and peacebuilding in conflict-affected countries in times of COVID-19

Developing and implementing public employment programmes to create livelihoods, support the health response and build trust

▶ Short-term emergency public works schemes can support the health response by upgrading infrastructures for primary health care and water, sanitation and hygiene.

▶ Response policies that create immediate, temporary jobs can be turned into large-scale public employment programmes (PEPs). Existing PEPs can be scaled up quickly, while continuing to provide livelihoods and job opportunities to the most vulnerable, contributing to universal social protection and building needed assets and services.

▶ These investments are best aimed at addressing inequalities in access to health care and other basic services, as well as to productive resources. This can be coupled with additional investment in skills development, employment services and strengthening the business environment that promote inclusive and effective labour-market governance in the longer term – including the social and economic empowerment of women.

Promoting social dialogue and the role of the private sector, workers' and employers' organizations in the response to the COVID-19 crisis

▶ Workers' and employers' organizations can use their trust capital, networks and convening power to facilitate crisis response. They can bring their constituents together beyond divisive conflict lines.

▶ Existing dialogue platforms, including social dialogue mechanisms, can be used or adapted to collect concerns and ideas of local communities, health-care workers, civic and business leaders, as well as representatives of the informal economy and unemployed.

▶ Workers' and employers' organizations can advocate for business continuity and income security and collaborate with government authorities to ensure that occupational safety and health (OSH) measures are adapted to new workplace risks.

Developing workers' skills, particularly in the health sector, to respond to the crisis

▶ Skills development, including social cohesion skills, can strengthen the health response by creating a workforce skilled in contact tracing to prevent further spread of the disease.

▶ Labour inspectors can be trained to design and implement conflict-sensitive approaches to OSH, such as distancing and hygiene.

Supporting local small-scale enterprises and business continuity

▶ When the disruption of international supply chains affects the economy, small-scale firms can be supported to produce essential equipment, such as gowns, masks and head coverings.

▶ Local businesses can be incentivized to train and hire young people who are particularly at risk of engaging in illicit activities or being recruited into violent or extremist groups.

▶ Decent jobs and livelihoods can be created along the vaccine distribution chain in a conflict-sensitive manner.

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Promoting emergency cash transfers in a conflict-sensitive manner while reinforcing national social protection systems

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▶ Emergency cash transfers should be built on existing social protection systems, contributing to lay the foundations for expanded national social protection policy and delivery.

▶ Social protection schemes can serve as opportunities to address inequalities and improve perceptions of the government's response and trust in the authorities.

▶ Social protection measures need to be designed and implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner. The selection of beneficiaries for new or extended allowances must be based on clear equitable criteria and a sound understanding of the needs and expectations of the targeted communities, in particular women and youth as well as people with disabilities, refugees, internally displaced people and migrants.

▶ Government and social partners can work together with associations and cooperatives of informal economy workers, as well as unemployed, to develop innovative strategies for social protection to reach and be tailored to those excluded from formal systems.

Ensuring inclusive and conflict-sensitive access to health services, including mental health

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▶ State health agencies can conduct inclusive participatory health needs assessments to determine inequalities and strengthen service delivery, helping to build trust in authorities.

▶ Designing appropriate and locally-led responses to the pandemic can bring about more wide-ranging health sector reforms aimed at universal health coverage. Such reforms should focus on breaking down economic, geographic and epidemiological barriers to access to health, and tackling obstacles resulting from a lack of sensitivity to specific cultural and social norms and practices. Providing a safe space for inclusion, participation and decision-making of people and communities in the design or reform of health systems can improve perceptions and rebuild positive ties with the authorities.

Promoting crossline cooperation in health governance

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▶ Crossline cooperation can help lessen mistrust among parties and provide fertile ground for future negotiation and peacebuilding. Health is often viewed as a superordinate goal for all sides of a conflict, allowing health initiatives to serve as a neutral starting point to bring together rival parties. Health organizations and practitioners can use their networks and influence to negotiate access with opposing groups to carry out coronavirus testing and community-based prevention.