

# COVID-19 AND INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING: FIRST PERCEPTIONS

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### Introduction

The Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR) conducted an online survey on the impact of Covid-19 and related policy-responses in the fields of peacebuilding and peacekeeping. We were interested in the broad strokes: how is the crisis impacting the wider peacebuilding realm and what trends are respondents concerned about?

127 people from 48 countries answered the questionnaire, all of them alumni of ASPR professional training courses. Their assessment gives nothing more than a first impression of peacebuilding – and the broader prospects of peace and conflict – in light of the current crisis. The most important insight from the responses is that they do not deliver a clear picture. Perceptions are diverse and strongly shaped by contextual experiences. Given the high variability of responses and the methodical constraints of our low-key trend perception monitoring, this aspect translates into the main conclusion our study has to offer: Covid-19 will have a significant impact on peacebuilding, yet how this impact will play out is predominantly determined by contextual factors.

### Covid-19 and Peacebuilding/Peacekeeping:

#### General Trends

The vast majority of respondents expects Covid-19 and the global responses to the disease to have a significant impact on the field. The most likely developments perceived are a decrease in peacebuilding activities and peacekeeping going along with decreased funding and – probably related – institutional structures. This perception is not unanimous, however, as a relevant portion of respondents (roughly a fifth, mainly with expertise on West Africa and South-

Eastern Europe) expects an increase in activities and funding.

The vision of United Nations Secretary General Guterres, whereby the current crisis should trigger a global ceasefire, is seen with wide scepticism. Roughly three-quarters of the respondents observe trends in relation with the pandemic and state-led response measures that result in the escalation of violence rather than its mitigation. The three most prevalent observations in this respect are the increased power of the national executive leadership, especially in countries with a non-democratic or populist government, the decline in multilateralism, and a reduced capacity for monitoring and oversight by national and international bodies. Moreover, respondents overwhelmingly see it as unlikely that the current crisis will trigger peace processes and comprehensive peace agreements in countries with ongoing armed conflict.

However, about the half of the respondents also observe possible positive trends that could support fostering peacebuilding efforts. Mainly solidarity and cooperation are raised as possible factors, at the international as well as the national and local level. Such awareness of interconnectedness and sense of community may indeed help to bring about ceasefires as well, as it is observable in some countries like Colombia or the Ukraine. Another positive factor might be the strengthening of community resilience mechanisms, which are also highlighted as a pivotal factor in countering the pandemic in places without a well-functioning public health system. Nevertheless, some respondents also raised that the pandemic might as well lead to an increase of public response capacities that could spill over from fighting the pandemic to sensibly responding to armed violence.

### Noteworthy Observations

When assessing the specific responses, one remark by a respondent appears as especially striking for a number of situations: 'Covid-19 may change the dynamics of some conflict and peace drivers and actors will need to be (pre) positioned to respond to these.' Indeed, actors position themselves towards the disease. The Taliban in Afghanistan used the crisis for a public relation campaign. They joined the country-wide efforts of reducing the impact of the pandemic through social measures – yet, without agreeing on a ceasefire with the government. Colombia's ELN guerrilla, in contrast, has declared such a ceasefire because of the disease.

In some contexts, respondents are concerned that the pandemic can be used as cover that enables an escalation of the conflict under the radar of the international community, or even many national stakeholders: Colombia and South Sudan were mentioned in that respect. In the latter case, there already was an escalation of fighting in the Central Equatoria region in recent weeks, which occurred in breach of an existing ceasefire and the involvement of government troops. In the MENA region, respondents expect a continuation of the violent status quo in countries like Yemen or Syria, with the pandemic having little to no impact on conflict dynamics.

The restriction on travel and the need for social distancing are considered as particularly challenging factors for peacebuilding efforts. Besides their problematic social implications – the potential spill-over from physical distancing to social distancing in the true sense of the word, which, in light of the current border closures, could also appear as national distancing, these measures provide a number of concrete issues. Most peacebuilding and peacekeeping agencies have travel restrictions in place, which hamper their efforts to rotate personnel, meet, train, or perform in-country tasks. These restrictions, thus, could result in a severe decline in peacebuilding actions in the short to medium term.

Moreover, the international role of the European Union has come under increased pressure by the pandemic. The projection of a vision of peace through integration was undermined by predominantly nationalist, unilateralist approaches by the member states. The high costs of

mitigating the social and economic consequences of the pandemic will likely translate into decreased financing of peacebuilding activities.

### Implications

From the diversity of responses, three sentiments appear repeatedly and can be assumed to be the main takeaways of this trend perception survey.

First and foremost, it is safe to assume that Covid-19 will have a major impact on all efforts of peacebuilding and peacekeeping. However, it is too early to assess how this impact will look like, especially since the crisis and its responses are highly diverse and, hence, its consequences will become noticeable in a contextualised way.

Second, it is widely perceived that Covid-19 and the related responses will result in a funding challenge for peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts. This challenge emphasises the need to make the arguments for peacebuilding and peacekeeping better and to link them to the current crisis. Especially in the global North, the pandemic is going to force practitioners and academics to creatively rethink how to argue for peacebuilding engagement in times of economic crisis and severe shortage – and, thus, increased competition – for funds.



Third, these arguments could be linked with the new perspectives this crisis opens on contextualised efforts at the community level. Over years, community-led responses are seen as crucial for successful peacebuilding interventions only to become substituted for 'comprehensive' efforts at the national level when peace negotiations loom. The importance of the community level might indeed turn into one of the major takeaways of the current crisis.

As one respondent highlighted: 'There is a grave need for collaboration among the national and international peacebuilding organisations to work jointly to promote peace among people, cultures and nations. So that there is no discrimination or blame game. It will be great if all peacebuilding NGOs enhance each other and thus bring a great impact and positive change in the world to bring harmony, respects and end religious or politically motivated violence or discrimination.'

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