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Overcoming the Setbacks: Understanding the Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Fragile and Conflict-affected Contexts

by Gregory Connor¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fragility across high and low-income countries. Yet its impacts have reminded the policy community that not all countries are equal in their ability to withstand the pandemic's shocks. Fragile and conflict-affected countries are generally more vulnerable to shocks from crises and less able to address critical impacts. Such impacts of the pandemic have exposed some of the toughest setbacks to peace and development in decades. This policy brief lays out recent findings on how the pandemic's secondary impacts are affecting the economic, social, human, political, security and environmental dimensions of fragility to inform ongoing mitigation and recovery efforts.

One year after the WHO declared the global pandemic, COVID-19 has killed over two-and-a-half million people. But countries are being affected by the virus far beyond human mortality. The secondary impacts of the pandemic — notably on social cohesion, economic and human development, political stability, community security and the environment — are acute in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where they are impeding pathways to peace and development. The unrelenting crisis has raised a red flag to the international development community on the need to understand and address the policy implications of the pandemic's secondary impacts on fragility.

Data gathered by UNDP through its on-the-ground assessments beginning in mid-March 2020 uncovered emerging trends in the pandemic's severe impact on peace and development across the economic, social, human, political, security and environmental dimensions of fragility. Tens of millions of people in fragile contexts are expected to fall into extreme poverty due to the secondary impacts of the pandemic. COVID-19 has unleashed a human development crisis, underpinned by rising food insecurity and violence. Social cohesion is being stretched thin by the pandemic; riots, protests and mob violence have increased. Attacks against health and aid workers continue to rise alongside

the pandemic, raising concern that violence might accompany vaccine rollout and that fragile and conflict-affected contexts may be left behind, again.

This Policy Brief is a synthesis of findings from a UNDP paper, *Understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on peace and development in fragile and conflict-affected contexts*, which draws on primary source data, including from UNDP’s Socio-economic Impact Assessments,

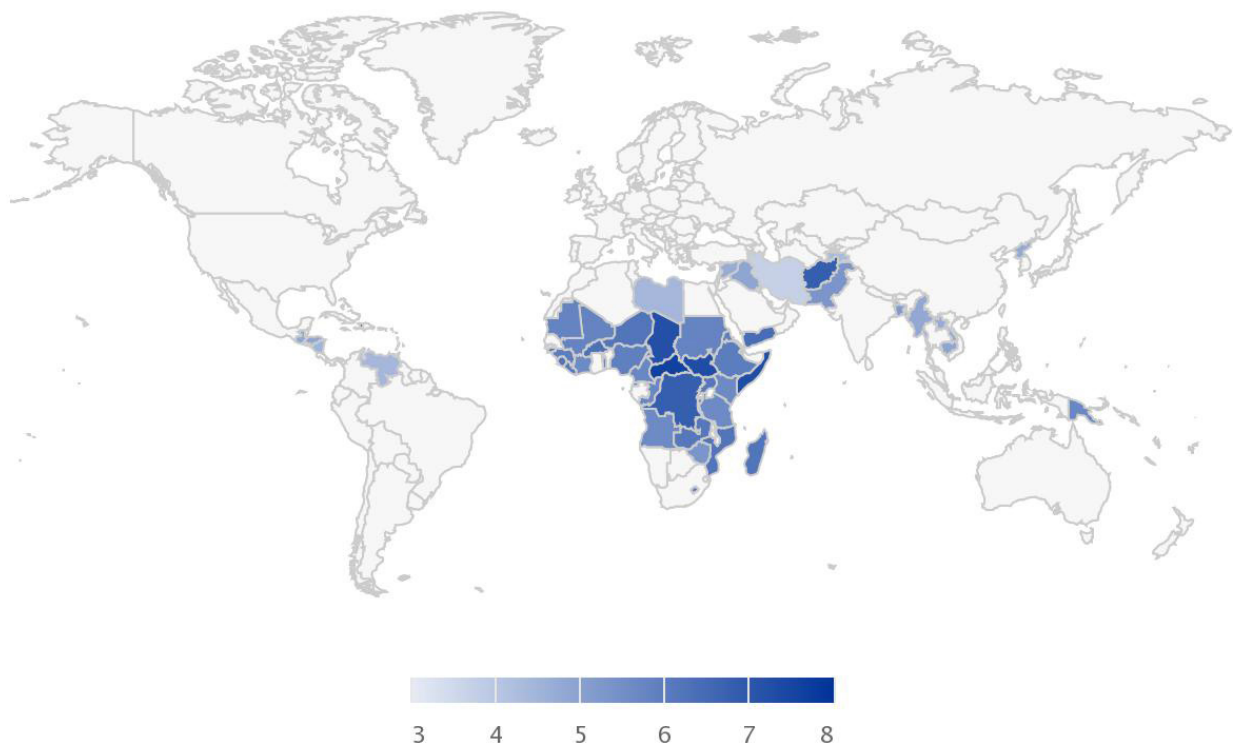
United Nations Socio-economic Recovery Plans, and results-based reporting from UNDP’s presence in all 57 fragile and conflict-affected contexts included in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s 2020 States of Fragility Report.²

I. Sources of fragility: the pre-existing risks facing fragile and conflict-affected contexts

Although the pandemic has exposed fragility across high and low-income countries, its impacts have reminded the policy community that not all countries are equal in their ability to withstand shocks and kickstart recovery. Fragile and conflict-affected countries are generally more vulnerable to shocks of crisis and therefore less able to address the critical components of the pandemic’s impacts. These include low governance and health-system capacities. Even before the shock of COVID-19, most fragile contexts were on track to meet just

one SDG — SDG 13 on climate action — and progress was particularly challenged on SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (health) and SDG 5 (gender equality). The World Bank notes that health systems are under-resourced in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where expenditures are 1.2 per cent of GDP compared to 5.9 per cent of GDP globally. The severity of this underlying risk against national response capacities is high in several fragile contexts, as detailed below.

Figure 1: Severity of risk against national response capacity for managing COVID-19 (with 8 as most severe risk)

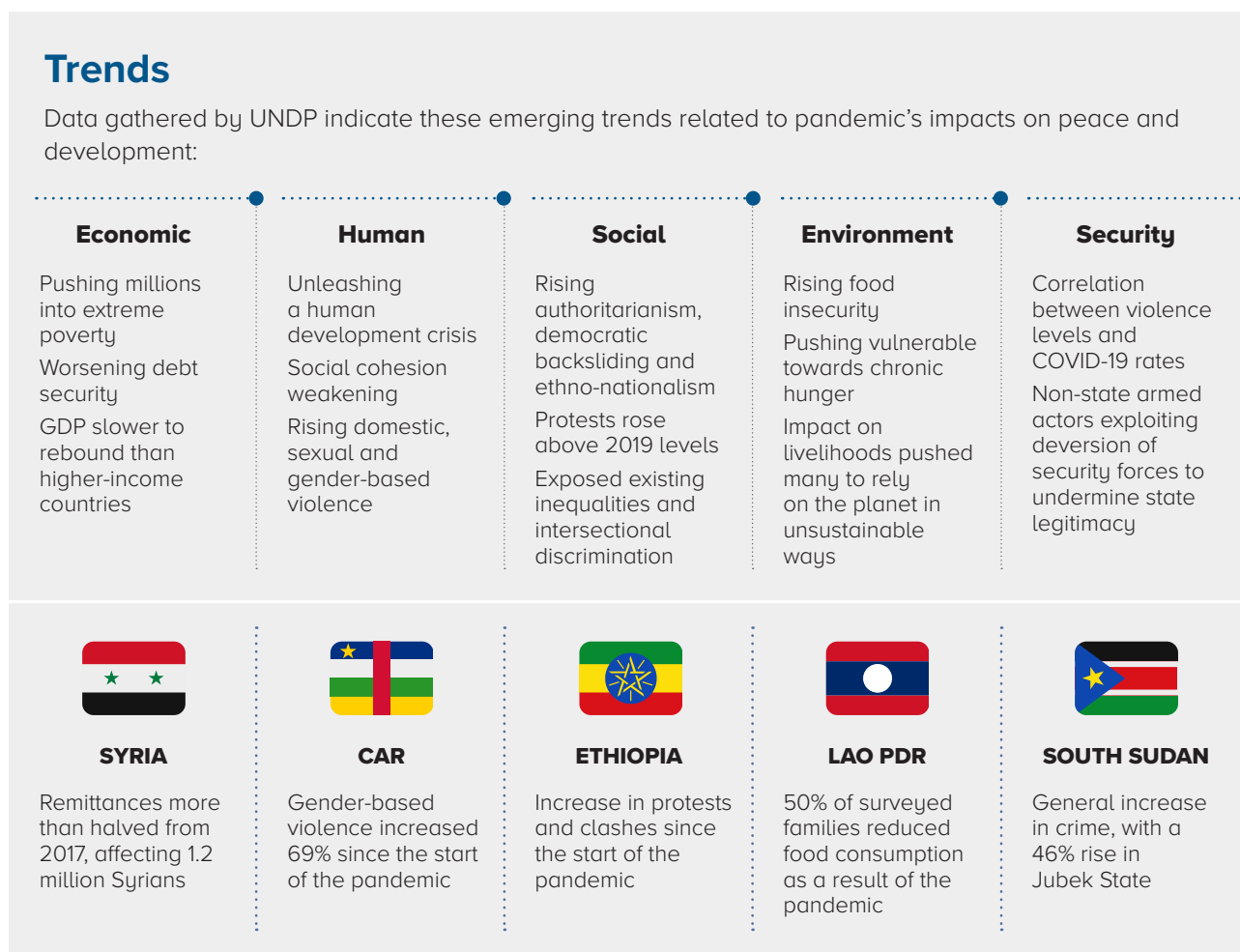


Source: INFORM (2020).

II. Key findings: The impacts of COVID-19 across six dimensions of fragility

The COVID-19 crisis is more than a global health emergency. UNDP has found that the secondary impacts of the pandemic are hitting fragile contexts hard across the six OECD dimensions of fragility — economic, social, human, political, security and environmental.

Figure 2: Impact of COVID-19 on peace and development in fragile and crisis-affected contexts



Source: UNDP report Understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on peace and development in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (2021).

Economic

Tens of millions of people are expected to fall into extreme poverty due to the secondary impacts of the pandemic in fragile contexts. Although the average drop of 2020 GDP among fragile contexts is roughly the same as the overall global average of four per cent, fragile and conflict-affected settings are not expected to rebound as quickly as their higher-income peers. Domestic resource mobilization has declined in most contexts, as tax and non-tax revenue decline as a result of the crisis. Debt sustainability in fragile contexts is worsening

the outlook for macroeconomic stability and straining the levers governments have for stimulus and recovery. In fragile contexts, UNDP has found that rising commodity prices and loss of livelihoods are threatening the purchasing power of the most vulnerable and shrinking their savings. The rise in the cost of goods and services is being exacerbated in some fragile settings by currency depreciation. The rise in the cost of inputs is severely impacting firms and consumers, too. As the pandemic affects businesses in fragile contexts, workers, particularly

women, have been hit especially hard. The decrease in remittances sent to fragile contexts is also pushing people into poverty.

Human

The COVID-19 pandemic is unleashing a human development crisis in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. UNDP’s 2020 *Human Development Report* has found current conditions of some dimensions of human development to be equivalent to levels of deprivation last seen in the mid-1980s. The crisis is hitting all aspects of human development hard — from health to education to gender equality. UNDP has also gathered data on less visible indirect effects, including worsening health outcomes and increased gender-based and domestic violence. The pandemic is adversely impacting health and behaviour, with consequences for women, children and youth, including increases in mortality and violence and decreases in access to services, creating worrying patterns and precedents that may inhibit successful vaccine rollouts in fragile settings. The impact of the digital divide on education and learning has widened as institutions transition to distance-learning. The pandemic is also negatively impacting human mobility and has already started leaving populations in fragile contexts behind.

Social

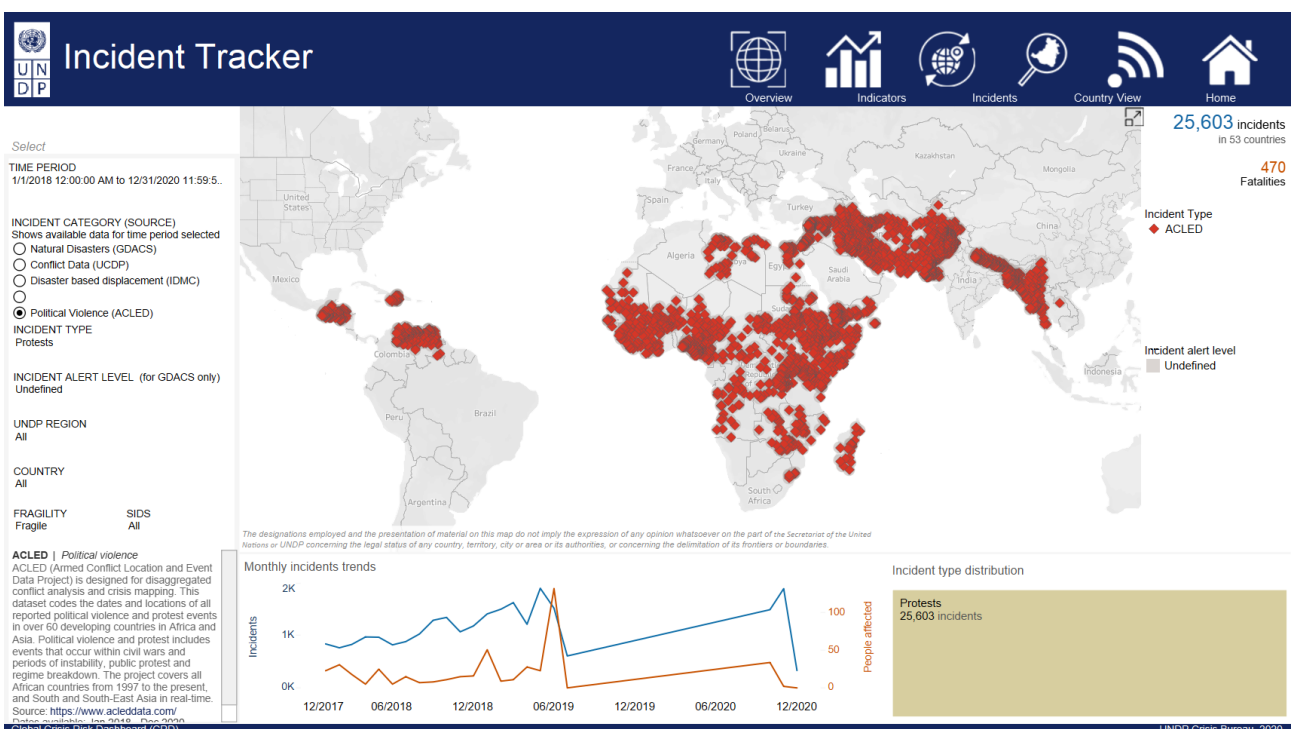
Although the COVID-19 virus does not discriminate, its impacts do. The pandemic is hitting the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people hardest,

with significant implications for marginalised groups, including women and girls. COVID-19 has affected certain groups disproportionately and exposed underlying vulnerability to both the virus and its secondary impacts. UNDP has found that gender inequality has been exacerbated during the pandemic in fragile contexts. Social cohesion is being stretched thin during the pandemic; riots, political and mob violence have increased substantially. As the pandemic drags on, people’s appetite for risk and tolerance towards government measures and social norms change. Some actions have been found to produce unintended results, such as radicalization or recruitment of persons into criminal groups or violent extremist organizations.

Political

In fragile contexts, where COVID-19 has shone a harsh light on existing structural inequalities and intersectional discrimination, protests have surpassed heights set in 2019. Concerns related to privacy, freedom of expression, corruption and police brutality have spilled onto the streets and, in some cases, turned violent. UNDP and the African Union found that in the six fragile and conflict-affected countries in the Horn of Africa that implemented lockdown and movement restrictions, there were multiple incidents of extrajudicial killings by police in the enforcement of restrictions. COVID-19 has accelerated trends in authoritarianism, democratic backsliding and ethno-nationalism in fragile settings.

Figure 3: Incidents of political violence in fragile settings before and during the pandemic



Source: UNDP Crisis Risk Dashboard/ACLED.

Security

In fragile contexts, the highest rates of COVID-19 infections have been found in countries that — in most cases — also have the highest burden of violence, including Syria, Nigeria, DRC, Yemen, Cameroon, Somalia, Burundi, Mali, South Sudan and Iraq. UNDP and the African Union have found clashes and crime to have increased in several fragile contexts. Some non-state armed groups have used the diversion of security forces to the pandemic to recruit and step-up attacks and undermine the legitimacy of the state. All of the major UN-designated terrorist groups in Africa recorded an increase in activities in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. Attacks against health and aid workers, both of which already set records

in 2019, continue to rise alongside the pandemic, raising concern that vaccine roll-outs may be marred by violence.

Environment

In many fragile settings, the pandemic has led to compromises, lost opportunities and setbacks on the environment. In low resource settings, the primary impacts of the pandemic often usurped capacity to address the secondary impacts, with the environment often falling by the wayside. The pandemic's impact on the livelihoods of people in fragile settings has pushed many to rely on the planet in unsustainable ways. Food insecurity is rising in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, pushing vulnerable people towards chronic hunger.

III. Looking ahead: the future of development in fragile contexts

Although the health and demographic aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic are of enormous concern, its impacts on peace and development may prove to be even more pernicious. For most fragile settings, the biggest impact to date has been neither the health effects of COVID-19 nor the worsening humanitarian situation. Rather, the safety measures and the economic downturn have pushed more people into vulnerability, including food insecurity, displacement and violence. That vulnerability demands immediate assistance and

will also require targeted development interventions to recover and build resilience for future crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated to development policymakers and practitioners that wave-upon-wave of responses do not fit in with linear planning or idealized theories of change. They have, in most cases, been hammered out through iterative experience, much of which is highlighted below.

IV. Policy Insights

- **Agility is the antidote to fragility.** The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all dimensions of fragility. It has reinforced the need to integrate multidimensional crisis analysis, including on emerging risks into development planning. On their own, several of the emerging challenges facing fragile and conflict-affected contexts are daunting. When aggregated, they appear insurmountable. Overcoming these challenges will require a whole-of-systems approach from the UN and its partners across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and a new and better way of building agility.
- **Fragility is more than the sum of economic, social, human, political, environmental, and security indicators.**

Development interventions require a clear understanding of the multidimensional drivers of fragility and the complexity of the impacts of shocks and crisis. Understanding and addressing the secondary impacts of the pandemic must be at the heart of all recovery strategies and programmes, alongside health and humanitarian efforts.

- **New approaches are needed.** Addressing these risks and seizing opportunities to build forward better requires new approaches and innovation to re-calibrate the dimensions of development assistance in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The role of new technologies, data, and digitization must be at the forefront of these efforts and pivot multidimensional fragility and crisis analysis, including on

emerging risks and vulnerability, into a way of working, future-proofing development interventions.

- **Crisis and fragility can be overcome only through integrated development solutions.** This includes using a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach and promoting area-based programming to address the multidimensional aspects of the crisis and the cross-sector needs for recovery. Financial partnerships, including with the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, must be fostered to deliver multidimensional development dividends while reducing costs, especially in middle-income countries affected by fragility or conflict.
- **The importance of the Leave No One Behind agenda has never been clearer.** The pandemic has underscored the need for solutions that are based on social inclusion, with a focus on reaching the furthest behind first. Such efforts should move beyond a traditional macroeconomic efficiency perspective and focus on multidimensional dividends, including how the economic foundation can help overcome fragility in other dimensions whilst recovering from the pandemic. Development actors must foster a more enabling environment for civil society to play its vital role, including by helping develop and implement government policies, upholding accountability measures and reaching those furthest behind.

- **Investments are needed to strengthen the social contract.** The social contract has been put to test in all societies during the pandemic, and severely damaged in some as the result of government failure in the response to the pandemic and public communications around it. There is a need to invest more broadly in social cohesion, strengthening democratic institutions and in countering hate speech and misinformation to address some of the conflict and security risks arising in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- **Reversed gains on the Sustainable Development Goals remind us that some past approaches have been misplaced.** Policymakers and practitioners must ask hard questions to recognize past errors, understand current crises, and lay stronger foundations to reduce or end fragility, inequality and marginalization. We must also recognize the measures taken during COVID-19 that worked. For UNDP, this means leveraging its upcoming Framework for Development Solutions in Crises and Fragile Contexts and capitalising on its unique perspective as partner, convener, implementer, integrator and advisor to strengthen partnerships, data-driven solutions, and greater investment in preparedness and prevention, with a consistent eye on the ultimate goal of leaving no one behind.

Endnotes

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² OECD (2020), States of Fragility 2020, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ba7c22e7-en>.