

Peacebuilding and COVID-19: Addressing Humanitarian Needs and Sustaining Peace Amidst a Global Health Pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic raises questions that are relevant both for those living in fragile and conflict-affected situations and for international and local peacebuilders continuously working on the ground to assist them. Local communities transitioning from war are more vulnerable and often unable to sustain their basic livelihood due to failing social and administrative systems. In this article, several experts collaborating with JICA Ogata Research Institute project, “*Contextualizing International Cooperation for Sustaining Peace: Adaptive Peacebuilding Pathways*,” share their views on how the COVID-19 pandemic may impact peacebuilding activities across the globe. They highlight additional elements of complexity and instability that hinder peacebuilding and humanitarian responses to each case where the pandemic meets an armed conflict.

Akihisa Matsuno, Professor at Osaka University, Japan, states that “as the UN Secretary General António Guterres says, COVID-19 is threatening global peace and security. I want to underline, in particular, his warning that ‘this is not a time for political opportunism.’ He called for a global ceasefire. Some warring parties have laid down their weapons, but temptations to see this as ‘an opportunity to strike’ remain strong. COVID-19 is a test of our humanity. Desire for peace must be maintained.”

Cedric de Coning, Senior Research Fellow at Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Norway, notes that “the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to contain it will exacerbate existing tensions and conflicts and disrupt peacebuilding efforts. In some cases, this may lead to social unrest and violent conflict; in others, it may create new opportunities for cease-fire agreements. It is also important to keep in mind that many previous public health worst-case scenarios have not materialized because social and community resilience are often more robust than anticipated.”

Yasuhiro Takeda, Professor at the National Defense Academy of Japan, highlights that “the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic urges us to face a difficult trade-off between security and freedom. Although these are both indispensable values, we have no choice but to temporarily sacrifice freedom for security under the state of emergency, enforcing self-isolation and social distance. As a result, the fight against COVID-19 would not only contradict the democratic logic behind liberal peacebuilding, but also it would impede inclusive approaches to sustaining peace.”

Researchers working with JICA Ogata Research Institute’s abovementioned project reflected on the impact of the pandemic in the context of their respective case studies. Ako Muto, Senior Research Fellow at JICA Ogata Research Institute, considers that “despite many ceasefire agreements, violence has resurfaced and there have been no signs that the COVID-19 epidemic will lead the nine-year Syrian conflict to an end. While the reported number of infected people remains low, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the outbreak, as the health sector in the country has been devastated. Syrian people, including the displaced, live under curfew since March

2020. Yet, to respond to this epidemic under the conflict-affected situation; some people have distributed homemade masks, daily necessities and bread free of charge to their fellow residents.”

Kohei Imai, Research Fellow at the Institute of Developing Economies – Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), considers that “non-state armed actors are heavily affected by COVID-19 infections. In this context, looking at the case of Turkey, the media refers that captured member of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) became infected with the Coronavirus in March. Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency reports that the PKK members from Iran have brought the virus.ⁱ The Turkish government and PKK have battled since 1984. Hence, members of PKK can’t get the medical support. This implies that the risk of spreading COVID-19 among PKK members is high and they also serve as vectors of the virus, spreading it from one country to another.

Ryoji Tateyama, Professor Emeritus at the National Defense Academy of Japan, underlines that “long before the worldwide lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Gaza Strip has been under siege imposed by Israel and partially by Egypt since 2007. Even so, the first cases of the infection were confirmed in March 2020, in the overcrowded enclave with a population of 2 million. Gaza lacks everything, including electricity and clean water as well as medical staff, facilities and equipment. Although the Coronavirus is a common enemy for conflicting parties, the risk of an explosive spread of the virus is very high because of no direct communication channel between Israel and Hamas, a de facto ruler of Gaza, and the prolonged siege.”

Miwa Hirono, Associate Professor at Ritsumeikan University, Japan, highlights that “South Sudan is bracing itself as it faces the looming possibility of the devastating impact of a COVID-19 outbreak. People’s lives are in extreme danger due to a severe lack of health facilities, basic infrastructure such as water systems and social safety nets, particularly in rural areas and refugee camps, and medicines, health professionals and medical equipment. Inter-communal and tribal distrust built up over the years may intensify if misinformation and hate speech related to the virus cannot be managed effectively.”

Rui Saraiva, Research Fellow at JICA Ogata Research Institute, notes that “despite the small number of people infected with COVID-19, Mozambique has been in a state of emergency since April 1, 2020. At the same time, in the northern region of Cabo Delgado, more than 120,000 people have been displaced due to recent attacks by Islamic insurgents. The mass movement of people provides a fertile ground for the transmission of the COVID-19 virus, while many Mozambicans do not have the luxury of social distancing or working from home. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis presents an additional challenge for the Mozambican people, the Mozambican government, and Humanitarian-Development-Peace actors working for a pathway for peace in Mozambique.”

Lina Penagos, Ph.D. candidate at University of Paris-Est, France, highlights that “the Covid-19 outbreak in Colombia increases vulnerabilities and hampers peacebuilding efforts on structural issues. The national and local strategies have shown a lack of coordination; the national budget is currently focused on pressing health and economic measures. There are important delays in the implementation of the policy of reincorporating former combatants of the FARC to the society. The rise of violence

against the former FARC and communal leaders (mostly in regions where violent non-state actors obtained the control over territories) does not reach the radar of the authorities. Additionally, the situation of Venezuelan refugees and migrants is worsening as many of the structures created to attend their needs have been closed indefinitely.”

Miyoko Taniguchi, Senior Advisor at JICA, examines the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). She notes that “as a product of peace processes over the last few decades, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led transition authority, which was newly created in February 2019 has been able to manage COVID-19 and its impact following national guidelines. However, loss of faith or political legitimacy in the BARMM due to an ineffective COVID-19 response could lead to destabilizing the transition and pave the way to strengthen IS affiliated violent extremist groups and creating security gaps by the impact of the crisis. Thus, it can be foreseen that the way the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) handles the crisis is crucial in bringing about unity among the Bangsamoro and ultimately leading to sustainable peace.”

Think Tanks bridging academic research and data-driven policymaking have a significant role to play in addressing the different challenges that the pandemic entails. In this context, Koji Sakane, Senior Director at the Office for Peacebuilding, JICA, underlines that “while most of the COVID-19 infected cases are currently reported in developed countries, it would soon spread throughout the world and may cause serious damage to developing countries, especially conflict-affected countries, due to the fragility of their respective governments and social structures. The COVID-19 crisis reveals that the world is closely inter-connected and vulnerable to emerging threats. Durable measures and systems have to be created, even in the fields of peace and development, in order to cope with such emerging challenges. Ogata Research Institute is a long-awaited organization, established at the right time, for leading practical researches and producing detailed solutions by connecting research with development activities.”

Disclaimer: Statements of fact or opinion are made on the responsibility of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the view of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

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ⁱ “Turkey: Neutralized terrorist tests COVID-19 positive”, *Anadolu Agency*, 29 March 2020.