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Building strong institutions for sustainable development in conflict-affected countries

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Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee member Paul Jackson.

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Building strong institutions for sustainable development in conflict-affected countries

Summary

While evidence of the effects of the pandemic is still being generated, it is clear that, in many areas of vulnerability and where populations live in conflict-affected areas, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) creates new challenges and makes existing ones worse. In acting as a multiplier, the pandemic directly affects the health, economic well-being and exclusion of millions of people already existing in vulnerable states. It also creates conditions in which those seeking to take advantage of the specific pandemic conditions are emboldened, which places populations at risk from violence from non-State actors, increasingly repressive government security institutions and transnational terrorist and criminal organizations.

The evidence that currently exists suggests that many people are suffering from an increase in sexual and gender-based violence as well as ongoing conflicts, strains on social cohesion and exposure to armed groups and organized crime. The evidence is clear that both opportunities and threats exist in all of those areas but, while there has been some success, for example in peace negotiations, levels of violence overall have returned to, or are even surpassing, pre-pandemic levels. In some cases, the popular protests happening as a result of the pandemic may lead to wider violent movements.

Public administration and government are critical in managing violence and conflict during the pandemic. However, where that has not been successful, there have been situations in which insensitivity and a lack of inclusive approaches have exacerbated questions of government legitimacy and growing mistrust between populations and governments, sometimes leading to violence.

Taking a conflict-sensitive approach, specifically not further exacerbating the exclusion or alienation of specific groups that may already be marginalized and whose conditions may have worsened during the pandemic, is therefore critical to successful public sector involvement. Building trust between government and citizen, which will also be critical in rolling out mass vaccination programmes and reducing future grievances, is central to conflict sensitivity.

Building trust in conflict-affected areas is something that has been featured in previous reports of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration and, in the present paper, the discussions around local government and other local actors that took place during the nineteenth session of the Committee remain relevant. Recent experiences with other health crises, such as the Ebola epidemic in West and Central Africa, have shown that local populations may be mistrustful of centralized government programmes, while local community partnerships have been critical in developing trust in the safety of vaccines and health care. The development of local governance networks and community partnerships is therefore likely to be central to any successful exit from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Partnerships are also needed at the international level. The development and administration of vaccines require multilateral frameworks, approaches and policies, as well as significant logistical support for distribution. However, there are still some core problems with multilateral approaches, notably that coordination among all stakeholders is more easily organized than executed. The United Nations has a critical role to play in bringing countries together to reach a consensus on coordination.

Public administration and governance are at the core of the global response to the pandemic. The technical ability of public officials is a necessary but insufficient condition for high-quality public administration. To be truly effective, government has to be both competent and perceived to be competent. Information is an area in which governments can play a key role. The pandemic has accelerated trends in mistrust of government and the use of "fake news" to provide alternative narratives to established facts. Clear, verified information backed up by evidence is the key to overcoming that particular set of challenges. Attention to the politics of communicating evidence about vaccination programmes and the need for such programmes is critical, especially in conflict-affected situations in which levels of trust are low.

I. Re-establishing public institutions after conflict

1. At its seventeenth session, the Committee considered the question of stakeholder engagement in post-conflict countries. It concluded, inter alia, that re-establishing legitimacy and trust were major challenges faced by post-conflict societies, in which certain groups might have been systematically excluded and military, police and other institutions might be associated with repressive or corrupt practices.

2. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the global pandemic of 2020/21 pose existential questions regarding government, State and societal capacity that are particularly acute in situations in which they are already weak and in which large proportions of the population may already be facing significant health and security issues.

3. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is recognized that building and sustaining peace is a vital element of achieving sustainable development. There is already a growing gap between those countries that have been directly affected by conflict and those that have not. Conflicts reduce gross domestic product by an average of 2 per cent per year and affected populations are less likely to be educated, have access to basic services and enjoy sustainable livelihoods. The 10 countries with lowest scores for maternal mortality and gender-based exclusion and violence have all been affected by conflict.[1]

4. The context of the pandemic combined with the post-conflict context suggests that the post-pandemic world will require stronger, more resilient institutions that can not only cope with but also help contribute to rebuilding a post-pandemic institutional landscape. Such institutions are not only post-pandemic but also post-conflict and are referred to in the present paper as “post-COVID institutions”. In addition, the term “government” is used to refer to formal State systems, including subnational authorities; “public administration” to refer to the work of civil servants; “governance” to refer to broader mechanisms of government, including State and non-State, as well as the non-codified systems of governing “ways of doing things” within institutions; and “institutions” as the vehicles through which people govern, including ministries, local government and courts, among others. The contention is that post-COVID institutions incorporate a wide range of actors, structures and norms that determine the nature of how people exercise government.

5. At its nineteenth session, held in May 2020, the Committee discussed critical governance issues that make effective public administration difficult to achieve in conflict-affected areas (E/2020/44–E/C.16/2020/8, chap. III.C). All of the concluding observations of that session remain valid. An increased emphasis on the management of the pandemic should not detract from the fact that such areas are inherently difficult to govern and that government may also lack significant capacity to cope. Despite that, public administration and institutions play an important role in developing integrated approaches to long-term development objectives amid the multiple challenges that countries emerging from conflict face, not least in balancing short-term needs for security with the longer-term requirements of sustainable development. Indeed, government, public administration and governance of public

[1] “Realizing the SDGs in post-conflict situations: challenges for the State”, in *Working Together: Integration, Institutions and the Sustainable Development Goals – World Public Sector Report 2018* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.II.H.1). See also *Reconstructing Public Administration after Conflict: Challenges, Practices and Lessons Learned – World Public Sector Report 2010* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.10.II.H.1), which concentrated specifically on conflict.

institutions is more complex in conflict-affected countries than in peaceful ones, and that is precisely where the lack of capacity remains acute.

6. Competent public administration, governance and institutions are necessary for the coordination of policies in areas of competing priority. Considerable power exists in structures that can reconfigure governance and the finance that goes with it, and the exercise of that power in the absence of legitimacy or contested sovereignty can be problematic if coalition-building, diplomatic or other political skills are weak. Building a long-term vision beyond merely improving effectiveness and directly addressing the Sustainable Development Goals is a political process that affects existing power structures. Political considerations remain critical in all approaches to governance.

7. It is also important to note that there remain tensions between State-building and peacebuilding on the one hand, and bottom-up and top-down approaches to institutions and policies on the other. In reality, all of those perspectives are needed, but they exist in a permanent tension that requires a balance between them – a profoundly political act.

II. Challenges arising from the coronavirus disease pandemic

8. On 9 April 2020, the Secretary-General addressed the Security Council on the subject of the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that "the pandemic also poses a significant threat to the maintenance of international peace and security – potentially leading to an increase in social unrest and violence that would greatly undermine our ability to fight the disease".[2] He went on to add that the pandemic threatens to further erode trust in public institutions, creates inequality, noting specifically gender as an issue, and potentially creates or heightens drivers of conflict in conflict-prone societies and fragile States.

9. In the same statement, the Secretary-General outlined how the pandemic provided an opportunity for transnational terrorist and violent groups to undermine international State-building and conflict resolution efforts. In his statement to the Nobel Peace Prize Forum on 11 December 2020, he highlighted the need for global solidarity and greater international cooperation in the face of a global threat bringing other global threats in its wake.[3]

10. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted economic, social and political life and poses significant threats to human security. The multilayered and complex nature of many conflict-affected situations means that an additional COVID-19 dimension could undermine the priorities and resources of regional and local governments, as well as stretching their capabilities to the limit. Given the impact on national budgets, the pandemic could also seriously affect the underlying financial capabilities of multilateral and bilateral actors to assist with complex conflict-related issues when requested.

11. Violent conflict itself tends to exacerbate the spread of infectious diseases in the absence of medical service provision, in contexts in which sanitation is often difficult and there may be rapid movement of displaced persons. That has been the case with cholera in Yemen, with Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and with polio in the Syrian Arab Republic, among other outbreaks. Such outbreaks severely threaten

[2] António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, "World faces 'gravest test' since founding of United Nations, Secretary-General tells Security Council, calling for unity to address COVID-19 pandemic", SG/SM/20041, 9 April 2020.

[3] United Nations News, "COVID-19 shows 'urgent need' for solidarity, UN chief tells Nobel forum", 11 December 2020.

already stretched public services, affect some of the poorest and most vulnerable populations and may reverse hard-won development gains.

12. Combating COVID-19 in countries that are already fragile and have weak State systems and public governance is extremely hard. Conflict-affected countries tend to have weak governance, poor-quality or partial institutions, contested sovereignty or violent conflict, as well as mistrust of governments that have frequently failed to deliver high-quality – or sometimes any – services. Yet, one of the lessons of the pandemic so far has been that the public provision of health care backed up by multilateral efforts to find solutions is the only way out of the current situation.

13. The problem facing most conflict-affected countries is the potential for a growing gap between those that have effective public institutions that are able to deal with the pandemic and those that do not have access to such public capacity. In that way, conflict-affected States face a situation in which COVID-19 potentially exacerbates existing fragilities and underlying drivers of conflict.

14. The United Nations has taken a three-pronged approach to short-, medium- and longer-term interventions. The Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 is aimed at fighting the virus in the world's poorest countries and addressing the humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable people. The United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund supports low- and middle-income countries in overcoming the health and development crisis caused by the virus. The Peacebuilding Fund also continues to provide support in preventing and mitigating conflict risks exacerbated by the pandemic.

15. Such programming is based on a view developed within the joint United Nations-World Bank study entitled *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, which, in turn, has a set of core principles that have been further developed in *World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020–2025* and that are useful to bear in mind.

16. First, conflict sensitivity is important. The pandemic is likely to exacerbate underlying drivers of conflict and interact with existing inequalities to increase pressure on already struggling institutions. Sustainable Development Goal 16 is important in that context, since mitigating actions are likely to exacerbate the situations of already vulnerable or marginalized groups. Building resilient institutions to ensure access to security and justice for all therefore becomes even more difficult in a degrading context with institutions that are even weaker.

17. Second, trust and inclusion remain critical to making progress towards achieving Goal 16. The provision of basic services, including health, security and justice, remains the main way in which people interact with the State. As observed by the Committee, local government is critical in determining service provision and therefore the legitimacy of the State itself and is a primary vehicle for ensuring inclusion and equality of access, thereby minimizing grievances that may lead to conflict.

18. Third, an extension of the renewed emphasis on local government is community engagement. Government needs support to deal with health and other emergencies, which requires the cooperation and active partnership of local communities in designing, implementing and evaluating programmes. The recent experience of West Africa during the Ebola outbreak showed that top-down, externally-imposed solutions were frequently mistrusted by local populations and that local community-led initiatives were more effective in bringing cases down and in spreading information that was trusted. Community involvement is also key to post-emergency recovery and resilience.

19. Fourth, partnership is not just between programmes and communities; it also needs to take place between international institutions themselves and between international and national institutions. A key issue in dealing with crises globally has been the core problem that everyone agrees that coordination is a good thing, but no one wants to be coordinated themselves. International governance, the role of multilateral institutions and the convening power of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, such as the World Health Organization, are therefore critical, as the Secretary-General stated in his remarks to the special session of the General Assembly, held on 3 December 2020, in which he emphasized multilateral cooperation as key to dealing with the pandemic.[4]

20. For conflict-affected States and populations, the COVID-19 pandemic worsens some of the longer-term underlying issues that they are facing. In particular, long-term recovery requires economic growth with increased employment, as well as increased social and political cohesion that will lead to stronger institutions. The advantage that government and public administration has, but needs to take advantage of, is its capacity for long-term planning in order to "build back better" in the aftermath of the pandemic. The key to building back better is the development of better public health infrastructure at the national and global levels.[5]

III. Evidence for key changes

21. Key changes in the patterns of conflict and violence that have been directly affected by the pandemic will require significant intervention by government and they represent examples of situations in which the pandemic has worsened or changed conditions for many people. However, the evidence of exactly how the pandemic is directly affecting conflict and violence is mixed and limited. What is clear is that COVID-19 exposes the importance of human security and the vulnerability of some parts of the population globally.[6]

22. COVID-19, global crises and epidemics are widely considered to be threat multipliers that are capable of exacerbating already fragile situations, and much of the current response is based on that assumption.[7] Evidence therefore tends to focus on how the pandemic increases specific incidents of conflict, including sexual and gender-based violence, the reduction of social cohesion, a weak State, misinformation and mistrust of information, popular protest and violence, and the effects on armed groups and non-State actors.[8]

A. Political violence and protest

23. The evidence of incidents of political violence and protest varies across regions and, given the difficulty in collecting data during a pandemic, should be treated with some caution. However, there are some significant trends that can be picked out from the data. In general, incidents of political violence have not changed significantly,

[4] António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, remarks to the special session of the General Assembly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 3 December 2020.

[5] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Recovering from COVID-19: the importance of investing in global public goods for health", Policy Brief, No. 83 (July 2020).

[6] See for example, Siân Herbert, "COVID-19, conflict, and governance", Evidence Summary, No. 27 (January 2020).

[7] World Bank, *World Bank Group COVID-19 Crisis Response Approach Paper: Saving Lives, Scaling-Up Impact and Getting Back on Track* (Washington, D.C., 2020).

[8] Lisa Inks and Adam Lichtenheld, "Advancing peace in a changed world: COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond", Mercy Corps, September 2020.

with the exception of a decline in popular protest – chiefly peaceful protest – and a small decline in conflict.[9] The data do record a small increase in the number of protests towards the end of 2020 that may relate to the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions.

24. Using aggregate data across different contexts shows that the global incidence of battles has declined in 2020. Data from both before and after the onset of the pandemic do not take into account the context of the conflict or non-COVID-19 factors.[10] Detailed econometric analysis factoring in contextual data shows that, at the regional level, government lockdowns have increased direct conflict in the Middle East, while direct conflicts have decreased in South-East Asia, Europe and the Caucasus during the pandemic.[11]

25. Armed groups have not uniformly decided to take advantage of State weakness in exploiting the COVID-19 situation, and some may even have taken strategic decisions to account for COVID-19-related logistical limitations or to increase their popular support by helping people to cope with the pandemic.

26. Popular protests have been the most variable category in the data provided by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. While several existing patterns of popular protest have been curtailed owing to the pandemic, they have partly been replaced by protests against the pandemic and the measures introduced to combat COVID-19. State responses to COVID-19 have been the subject of protests in every region and in every type of political system, with more than 30 major protests in 26 countries targeting COVID-19 restrictions between March and October 2020, mostly aimed at lockdowns, economic hardship and protests against the use of force in COVID-19 responses.[12]

27. Most popular protests have followed a continual pattern from before the pandemic, stressing a general mistrust of government and a breakdown in State-citizen relations. During the pandemic, that has been exacerbated by protests against mass vaccination programmes and State-centred approaches to lockdown where populations do not trust government. For example, as had been the case during the Ebola outbreak, protests have been carried out against testing centres in the current pandemic in cases where low levels of trust in the government have left residents worried that the testing centres were placed there to spread the disease among the community rather than to reduce the incidence of it.

28. Such protests emphasize again the importance of community engagement and partnership as part of good governance approaches to working through the pandemic. Trust remains a critical element of any meaningful response and should be at the heart of government responses. In addition, government needs to recognize that lockdown measures that restrict civil and political liberties, and deepen economic hardship, may exacerbate inequalities within societies, in particular when those who are engaged in marginal work become unemployed while those in secure employment may benefit. Prolonged lockdown may lead to longer-term consequences for the marginalized and excluded, leading to a deterioration in social cohesion.

[9] See the data collected by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, available at https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard.

[10] S. Herbert and H. Marquette, “COVID-19, governance and conflict: emerging impacts and future evidence needs”, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, discussion paper, January 2021.

[11] M. Mehrl and P. Thurner, “The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on global armed conflict: early evidence”, *Political Studies Review* (2020).

[12] Herbert and Marquette, “COVID-19, governance and conflict”.

B. Sexual and gender-based violence

29. The most frequently reported form of violence related directly to COVID-19 is rapidly increasing sexual and gender-based violence. That “shadow pandemic” has been heavily reported across all continents. Accurate data on sexual and gender-based violence are notoriously difficult to generate because of the nature of the crime, but emergency call and police reporting data from countries show a rapid rise in such violence. What is clear is that sexual and gender-based violence has increased by as much as 30 per cent during the pandemic in some countries.[13]

30. Sexual and gender-based violence tends to increase during every kind of crisis and remains likely to spike during periods of uncertainty, such as in the immediate aftermath of conflict. While sexual and gender-based violence can affect all groups in society, there are some factors that may exacerbate the problem, including a lack of housing or services, physical or mental health issues, parenting pressures and financial hardship. The most important source of sexual and gender-based violence is domestic (i.e. intimate partners or family members), and it can be worsened by external pressure on the family from outside the home, such as work pressures.

31. Post-conflict contexts can exacerbate all of those factors, while also creating a context in which security forces are empowered and have the opportunity to abuse their position. Instances of transactional or coerced sex, for example, tend to increase as part of an overall increase in gender harassment, undermining trust in State institutions, in particular the police and the military, and further contributing to an unwillingness of women to report sexual violence. For example, it has been reported that guards enforcing lockdown measures have accepted sexual favours in return for permission to collect household goods, leading to an increase in teenage pregnancies, as girls are not in school.

32. Key drivers of sexual and gender-based violence under COVID-19 conditions include: forced isolation with abusers; curfews; lack of spaces for children who are out of school; prolonged confinement; substance abuse; increased violence against health workers; loss of income forcing people into sexual work or abuse; and lack of access to service provision or support mechanisms. Lack of access to support services is greatly affected by both a lack of funding and the digital divide that effectively excludes some households, in particular children and women.

C. Conflict, social cohesion and non-State armed groups

33. With regard to political violence and armed groups, the reaction has varied between alarmist voices speculating about groups taking advantage of weak States through to more circumspect analysts urging caution. The evidence is limited in that area and there are very few data on any direct relationship between COVID-19 and armed conflict. Given that, a sensible approach may be to concentrate on potential threats related to the underlying drivers of conflict, in particular those that can be directly affected by better governance, which would include inequality, exclusion and gender discrimination – in other words, the core aspects of Goal 16.

34. While there has been much discussion about COVID-19 affecting social cohesion, the actual evidence is not that clear. A survey carried out by Mercy Corps of its staff across 40 countries between April and September 2020 revealed that 22 teams felt that social cohesion had decreased, whereas 4 felt that it had actually

[13] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress: a statistical perspective”, Policy Brief, No. 81 (August 2020).

improved.[14] Much of the reduction in social cohesion derives from scapegoating and the blaming of strangers for the spread of COVID-19, which can be exacerbated in societies that are already divided in terms of attitudes, but also from access to service provision and health support and in terms of different lifestyles. The Mercy Corps report highlights that COVID-19 restrictions on movement in some areas have compounded already existing tensions between herders and farmers over land and water as the semi-nomadic herders have been unable to move as normal. Violence has been justified with the statement that "people are here to spread COVID-19".

35. In fragile situations in which there could be additional stresses as a result of weak public institutions or structures, the public sector remains vulnerable to external pressures, including corruption and repressive behaviour by regimes seeking to enhance their own power. The pandemic places extreme pressure on effective and inclusive governance and, importantly, on the relationship between State and people. Legitimacy and legitimate government action are even more critical during a pandemic and they provide a potential way out of the crisis. Yet, there are examples of violence escalating as a direct result of COVID-19-related protests that turn into wider conflicts or opportunism, or the excessive use of force by government in enforcing anti-COVID-19 measures increasing the animosity between State and citizen.

36. Wider literature on service provision rejects a direct linear relationship between service provision and legitimacy, but it does stress the relationship between legitimacy and the way in which services are delivered. In other words, the technical provision of services is sometimes far less important than the perceived norms around them, including ideas of fairness, corruption, exclusion and accountability. In societies with existing fault lines, perceptions of State motive may be critical in hampering or encouraging the spread of vaccination during the pandemic.

37. In addition, where there are areas of contested sovereignty and active non-State armed groups, the increased attention of the State to COVID-19 may result in decreased attention elsewhere, including in those areas where conflicts continue. An increase in violent deaths may be the result of COVID-19, providing opportunities for non-State armed groups to consolidate their territorial control by enforcing lockdowns and curfews, while many social leaders have been in lockdown without bodyguards or other forms of protection.

38. In line with the approach taken by multilateral institutions, conflict sensitivity remains critical in evaluating the effects of actions taken to address COVID-19 on existing or potentially fragile situations. While the evidence remains somewhat unclear, it is clear that there are opportunities on one side for authorities and security services to become more oppressive, while at the same time, on the other side, there may be opportunities for non-State armed groups to take advantage of reduced attention or capability on behalf of government forces. For example, the closure of border crossings during lockdowns may provide a chance for governments to increase control in fragile border areas, but at the same time, it may provide an opportunity for informal border crossings controlled by non-State groups.

39. In that context, in March 2020, the Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire to halt conflict. Despite some initial success in the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, where short-term unilateral ceasefires were declared, it has not been entirely successful, with several conflicts continuing and peace efforts being hampered by COVID-19. The limited success of the call by the Secretary-General is partly the result of the unilateralism of some of the ceasefires, but also the lack of

[14] Inks and Lichtenheld, "Advancing peace in a changed world".

security architecture, the lack of clear guidance from the Security Council and the general reduction in conflict victims reducing incentives.

40. In addition, international security actors also face stigma and disinformation regarding their perceived role in spreading the virus and, as outsiders, they are frequently blamed for bringing COVID-19 into the country and for spreading it. Information and the prevention of false information will be critical to any mass vaccination programme in such areas.

41. With regard to existing peace processes, as personal interaction is critical in developing trust, the central aspect of developing any progress in peace negotiations, its absence during the pandemic will create challenges. In some peace talks, as well as in peacebuilding in general, a lack of trust-building through regular face-to-face meetings, local courts and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms could prove harmful.

42. Finally, the United Nations suspended troop rotations for part of the pandemic and reduced patrolling, which may have created a space for non-State armed actors to fill, and one major continuing worry is that an overall reduction in funding as a result of the economic hardship brought on by COVID-19 coupled with measures to protect local populations, including lack of deployment or patrolling once deployed, could lead to a vacuum that could be filled by conflict entrepreneurs or others who seek to gain from increasing conflict.

D. Organized crime and criminal networks

43. Organized crime is responsible for a significant amount of violence, yet it is rarely included in development policy. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that criminal activity causes more deaths than other conflicts and terrorism combined, with some 65,000 killings and about 19 per cent of all homicides. COVID-19 had an initial negative effect on such violence, with numbers rapidly decreasing, but since the early period of the pandemic, crime-related violence has again been increasing in line with long-term trends. It should be noted that the phrase “organized crime” tends to impose some idea of uniformity, whereas the reality is variable across a wide range of activities and organizations. Difficulties in data collection should also be recognized in making general comments about organized crime.

44. Weak State institutions combined with pressures on markets have allowed gangs increased space to compete for territory and business. Supply chain issues, in particular in transnational trade, such as the drug trade, are likely to lead to intensified competition. A combination of police shortages and market changes have contributed to an increase in drug gang activity in the Latin American region, among others, where it has been exacerbated by the early release of some prisoners that has contributed to rising violence some countries.

45. Evidence may also show, however, that some criminal gangs are exercising “soft power” by providing basic governance and goods and services, ranging from the enforcement of curfews in shanty towns to the provision of perishable goods and toilet paper. Such gang altruism should not be overestimated, however, and civil society organizations have largely been the main service provider to some vulnerable populations. Gang involvement may, in part, be attributable to a forced change in circumstances owing to a collapse in markets for some products, such as drugs, coupled with a strategy of developing legitimacy with local populations.

46. Militant groups have long been involved in providing basic services, but it needs to be recognized that such activities are not without cost, and the historical example

of organized crime syndicates shows clearly how such groups combine altruism with violence to gain and exercise power over populations and markets. The profit orientation of criminal gangs has led to an adaptability of organizations and their resilience during the pandemic, largely through diversification. Organized crime may also, of course, be one of the few areas that is capable of offering employment in areas of the shadow economy or more sophisticated areas, such as money-laundering.

47. Finally, organized crime groups are seeking to expand their range through the diversification of their business portfolios. The vulnerability of some small businesses and farms, for example, leaves them open to offers of financial rescue from criminal groups that result in their control by those criminal organizations, which may end up as financial beneficiaries of government rescue programmes. The vulnerability of some parts of the economy and the comparable flexibility of organized crime form a recipe for criminal growth following the pandemic unless they are combated effectively. For the State, that amounts to effective policing, but also critically effective public policy in keeping legitimate business legitimate.

IV. Implications for institution-building in conflict-affected countries

48. There are several ways in which COVID-19 has had an impact on conflict-affected countries. First, the pandemic itself has hit communities very unevenly, with those who are already excluded or alienated from service provision, in particular the provision of health services, suffering the most. Second, local and international conflict entrepreneurs and non-State armed groups and, in some cases, repressive regimes have been quick to seek advantage during the pandemic, in particular in the wake of policy responses relating to either the reduction or the overuse of security forces. Third, the economic impact of the pandemic cannot be underestimated. It may degrade already weak institutions and reduce the capability of international actors, while at the same time reducing legitimate economic opportunities for many people.

49. While the pandemic may create opportunities for those who wish to engage in conflict, the international community must not forget about ceasefires or continued negotiations for peace. While the call of the Secretary-General for a global ceasefire had a more reduced effect than that hoped for, it did show that short-term targeted ceasefires for humanitarian reasons are possible. As the pandemic begins to affect more people and spreads to armed groups themselves, there may be an opportunity to develop ceasefires and the international community needs to be prepared for that eventuality.

50. A key casualty of the pandemic thus far has been the reduction in effectiveness of local peace approaches, including inclusive approaches to conflict resolution and justice. However, the restrictions on international travel and movement brought about by the pandemic create the need for better and more effectively supported local management of peace processes. Local leaders and civil society organizations on the ground remain critical partners both in terms of peacebuilding and in terms of aiding vaccination programmes that rely on trust and legitimacy.

51. In an era in which there is discussion about the limitation of international financial aid, never has the need for significant aid been greater. Well-managed and specifically targeted aid can work to mitigate the situation for a lot of people and to lessen the effects of COVID-19 on conflict by addressing such underlying factors as unemployment and alienation, as well as exclusion from service provision. Financial aid is also critical to maintaining the public sector, which sits at the very hub of activities to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The Secretary-General is surely right to emphasize the multilateral aspects of post-pandemic governance, but it needs to be

supported. International support must reduce rather than encourage conflict and must therefore be carried out in a conflict-sensitive way.

52. Finally, the public sector has the power of knowledge. Rumours, lies and misperceptions can derail any process during the pandemic and reduce the efficacy of government. Successful knowledge management must include significant partnerships with trusted local actors and cannot be a purely top-down exercise. Taking a technical-medical approach is also not feasible in a situation in which some people may not respond to technocratic means of communication or in which there is mistrust of those delivering the message. In a pandemic, for which the solution of a vaccine is almost the ultimate technical approach, reaching the majority of the population will require significant political skill both to navigate potential conflict and to reach those who do not trust the solution.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

53. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the need for concerted government action, both nationally and internationally, as well as for global cooperation under the banner of peace, the de-escalation of violence and the fostering of development under the principles of the rule of law and leaving no one behind. The message of the Secretary-General regarding multilateral responses to global threats remains important at a time when it is easy to withdraw into unilateralism.

54. COVID-19 poses threats across a wide range of areas, including the exacerbation of existing fragilities, the worsening of the overall position of vulnerable populations, including refugees, the creation of opportunities for transnational security threats and the provision of a more conducive context for the misuse of force by conflict entrepreneurs, whether non-State actors or repressive governments. In many conflict-affected countries, conditions for populations are already fragile and the pandemic has acted as a multiplier for existing problems.

55. Effective government responses to the pandemic are constructed around the public sector. The proactive leadership of governments is the way out of the pandemic, from the enforcement of restrictions on movement to the provision of health care, economic support and the development of vaccines. The public sector and publicly funded initiatives have been at the heart of the response. In conflict-affected areas, government is the only institution capable of addressing the long-term challenges of economic shocks, declining health outcomes and social friction made worse by the pandemic. Governments have become critical again and they need to equip themselves for post-pandemic contexts.

56. COVID-19 has further exposed and, in some cases, accelerated exclusion from service provision, economic opportunities and good health. One lesson of the pandemic has been that people are only healthy when all of them are healthy. The core messages of inclusion and leaving no one behind have never been as apt. Inclusion, however, will require that the long-term underlying causes of conflict and exclusion, including State legitimacy, the misuse of power, inequality and poverty, be addressed. Governments and multilateral institutions are capable of the long-term policy changes that are required in development approaches to facilitate inclusion.

57. A key element of COVID-19 policy approaches and the relative successes and failures has been the quality of public administration. The technical ability of public servants remains important, and their training and capacity to carry out their roles in challenging circumstances has been key in pandemic responses.

58. However, the pandemic has also shown that the technical ability of public officials is a necessary but not sufficient condition for high-quality public

administration. In order to be truly effective, government has to be seen to be good and information has become an important area in which governments can play a pivotal role. The pandemic has accelerated trends in mistrust of government and the use of “fake news” to provide alternative narratives to established facts. Clear, verified information backed up by evidence is the key to overcoming that particular set of challenges and, where the way out of the pandemic is to take a technical approach through the use of vaccination, technical data are not enough. The politics of communicating evidence about vaccinations and the need for them is critical.

Annex

Application of the principles of effective governance for sustainable development in conflict-affected countries in the context of the coronavirus disease pandemic

Principle	*Rebuilding public administration*	*Example*
Competence	Competence requirements are very broad in post-conflict situations and they have broadened even more during the pandemic. Civil servants are required to take political and technical decisions in difficult circumstances, with a wide variety of trade-offs between decisions. They are also required to work with international and regional agencies and local partners and provide a key link between the government and local context and populations. Hiring and retaining competent civil servants is difficult during and after conflicts and, in a pandemic, it is even more difficult.	Developing long-term competence in public service is a long-term undertaking and the ability to hire in short-term solutions from the private sector has been brought under scrutiny, with a rush to provide private contracts and a reduced time frame to develop and scrutinize the conditions. Combined management and capacity-building programmes allow core competence to be developed while also delivering a service, and the pandemic has created a number of opportunities to develop partnerships with civil society organizations at the local level. Policy Brief No. 79 of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, entitled “The role of public service and public servants during the COVID-19 pandemic”, sets out nine key roles for public servants.
Sound policymaking	The multiple trade-offs affecting development at the local level are complicated by the pandemic. Balancing economic and health concerns, for example, involves extremely difficult decisions, as well as arrangements for care and support to be delivered to fragile populations that are unable to fend for themselves or that are unable to gain employment. Inclusive service delivery is increasingly important in order to make conflict-sensitive policy decisions in a context in which COVID-19 may hit communities unevenly.	Long-term planning cannot be contracted out, and yet, public administration needs to weigh short-term pressures against long-term aims in national development plans. Several post-conflict countries (Chad, Colombia and Sierra Leone) have used the Sustainable Development Goals as a way to link their own pillars of national development to long-term underlying Sustainable Development Goal targets. To enhance that practice, the United Nations has called for the coordination of external actors through multi-donor approaches that combine different sectors and different actors into one overarching plan. It might be possible to add to that the call of the Secretary-General for multilateral approaches to tackling the pandemic and finding a way out of it. The Policy Brief No. 84 of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, entitled “Achieving SDGs in the wake of COVID-19: scenarios for policymakers”, includes useful guidance in that regard.

Principle	*Rebuilding public administration*	*Example*
Collaboration	The pandemic increases the pressure for public administrators to collaborate with each other, with external development agencies, with external security agencies and with the non-State sector. In line with the comments of the Secretary-General, working globally and across several sectors is the only way to deal with a global phenomenon and to recover from the pandemic in the medium term. What the pandemic has emphasized is the interlinkages between public and private, local and national, national and international and citizen and State.	The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the world has now become so integrated that the public health of one country easily affects the public health of other countries. As the Secretary-General states, for the world as a whole, the public health-care system can therefore be only as strong as it is in the country where it is the weakest. Building a resilient public health-care system in countries that lack one is the responsibility not only of the respective country but also of the global community. It is a multilateral solution that requires the construction of coalitions and partnerships to deliver health care to everyone. Greater partnership is necessary to deal with the pandemic and to plan for future public health crises.[a]
Integrity	Corruption can be a difficult and intractable problem in post-conflict environments and, during the pandemic, there have been opportunities for those seeking to profit from the misfortune of others. A massive increase in public procurement represents an opportunity, but also a risk, in environments that are insufficiently policed.	Integrity is one of the key ingredients in repairing the relationship between government and citizen, and yet, the pandemic, unfortunately, does represent an opportunity for those who wish to engage in corrupt practices. The increase in government procurement, in particular in States with already weak institutions, coupled with extended payment systems for relief, means that partnerships between State, civil society and citizens are critical in monitoring and taking action on corruption. An excellent example of that in action is from Sri Lanka, where the combination of government, an international non-governmental organization, Transparency International, and a group of villagers has been combating corruption in relief payments.[b]
Transparency	Rumours, lies and misperceptions can derail any process during the pandemic and reduce the efficacy of government. Successful knowledge management must include significant partnerships with trusted local actors and cannot be a purely top-down exercise. Taking a technical-medical approach is also not feasible in a situation in which some people may not respond to technocratic means of communication or in which there is mistrust of those delivering the message. In a pandemic, for which the solution of a vaccine is almost the ultimate technical approach, reaching the majority of	Policy Brief No. 75 of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, entitled “COVID-19: reaffirming State-people governance relationships”, draws directly on the principles of effective governance for sustainable development of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration and outlines five core principles related to State-citizen relations during the pandemic, including: taking advantage of opportunities; providing services to all; social protection for all; providing credible and trusted leadership; and government aimed at unification rather than division.

Principle	*Rebuilding public administration*	*Example*
	the population will require significant political skill both to navigate potential conflict and to reach those who do not trust the solution.	One positive example of it in action is Timor-Leste, which is not immune to the pandemic but also enjoys a high popularity rating for its trusted response, as detailed by the Asia Foundation.[c]
Independent oversight	In many post-conflict societies, oversight from outside government is frequently weak, with civil society organizations either no longer existing or concentrating on immediate issues, such as transitional justice. In many contexts, independent oversight can be carried out by the international community, which also gets involved in creating public service commissions, for example. It is much more difficult in contexts in which people cannot travel or meet.	Travel restrictions have severely affected the ability of international organizations to exercise effective oversight, but in terms of corruption, as detailed above, the example of Transparency International and its ability to use its network of local partners has been effective in forming partnerships with local people in seeking redress for corruption and in exercising oversight.[b]
Leaving no one behind	Available evidence suggests that the pandemic has worsened the position of those who were already disadvantaged in post-conflict environments. While much post-conflict reconstruction is frequently focused on rebuilding institutions and structures, any response to the pandemic within such contexts must be focused on the human aspects, including political, social, economic and health. Mental health is likely to be a key area for further intervention, as people come to terms with the pandemic generally and with high numbers of people affected by the stress of work or life and the loss of people in their immediate family or friends.	The economic effects of the pandemic are likely to push a significant number of people into vulnerable categories even in places that are currently not identified as fragile but that may be subject to significant economic risk. The further risk in such places is that, for example, rapid increases in unemployment may result in protests and violence, as well as pushing people into criminal activity. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in *Recovering from COVID-19: Lessons from Past Disasters in Asia and the Pacific*, reports that, in Bangladesh, the extended lockdown has disproportionately affected small and medium-sized enterprises, which account for about 25 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, but between 10 per cent and 80 per cent of non-agricultural employment, 30 per cent of the labour force and 40 per cent of manufacturing output.[d] With poor financial depth and access to funding, those small and medium-sized enterprises and, with them, one of the major sources of income and employment in the country, are at risk of disappearing, significantly increasing vulnerability among the population.
Non-discrimination	There is some evidence to show that discrimination could become worse during severe medical emergencies, such as the pandemic, as blame is focused on particular entities or groups as the immediate cause of the problem. That could potentially further marginalize groups that are already subject	Iraq, for example, is a very diverse country that has long-term, historical issues with social cohesion, including discrimination constructed partly along ethnic and partly along sectarian lines. Evidence suggests that youth activism may be challenging some of the traditional cleavages during the

Principle	*Rebuilding public administration*	*Example*
	to discrimination and it could also add new groups. Discrimination is a frequently cited source of conflict, which makes inclusion a critical element of public administration, in particular if public administration is seen as a microcosm of the society it serves. Institutions should be inclusive, accessible and contain staff that are representative of their populations. In addition, public institutions should be seen to be non-discriminatory in behaviour towards users. Promotion and performance management based should be on merit.	pandemic, but the sectarian divide still appears to be damaging social cohesion in different parts of the country, although the impact of COVID-19 also appears to be somewhat mixed. The overarching concern is that existing systems of discrimination could be worsened by the pandemic in ways that are, as yet, not evidenced. However, it is feasible that COVID-19 has fostered a common narrative that could unite the population, in a way similar to the country's response to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.[e]
Participation	Participation is important in environments where groups have not felt represented in public service. Non-State actors and civil society groups, in particular, can play an important role in overcoming underlying conflict drivers, but also in promoting dialogue and even economic development and justice. Participation at the local level in civil society organizations and community groups is critical in developing trusted solutions to COVID-19, rebuilding State-citizen relationships and preventing further conflict.	While vaccines are regarded as the most likely way out of the pandemic, mistrust in vaccines is part of a general dissatisfaction with government that is particularly acute in areas where people's experience of the State has been shaped by violence. "Vaccine hesitancy" could be a risk factor that affects the vulnerability of populations that are already mistrustful and subject to alienation. There is an assumption that such reticence is primarily driven by people's exposure to misinformation and that that can be countered by "inoculating" the public with facts, but evidence shows that vaccine hesitancy is broader than just misinformation.[f] The policy conclusions from that evidence emphasize that local partnerships between a very wide range of actors are necessary to boost confidence in COVID-19 vaccines.
Subsidiarity	In keeping with participation, above, subsidiarity is critical in managing the end of the pandemic. Centralized solutions are generally less effective than solutions developed in partnership with local providers and mass vaccinations are a key example of that. The spread of information and the countering of fake news and misinformation are also very effective when such efforts originate not just from a central government source, but when they are carried out in tandem with evidence and approaches that are understood by local people.	There are clear lessons from previous epidemics that can be applied to responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.[g] At the global level, progress has been slow. Sustainable Development Goal 3 covers "good health and well-being", with an emphasis on "early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks". The Paris Agreement and the assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlight the fact that climate change exacerbates health risks, including the risk of pandemics. In 2015, States Members of the United Nations extended the definition of risk to include biological hazards when they adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, partly as a result of the

Principle	*Rebuilding public administration*	*Example*
		experience of Ebola, Middle East respiratory syndrome and severe acute respiratory syndrome. However, UNDP emphasizes that such plans that have been produced to date are inadequate. The main lesson from previous epidemics has been the need to partner with local populations and community groups and to take an approach with subsidiarity at its core. During the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, an initial and highly mistrusted approach of centrally controlled mass care was replaced by a network of community care centres that proved highly effective in improving trust and health outcomes.[h]
Intergenerational equity	Exclusionary public administrations are not only frequently subject to unequal gender balance but also tend to be dominated by some generations, with only limited access for other qualified staff. Inclusion also addresses intergenerational inequality by creating opportunities and career development paths for younger staff members. In addition, while the pandemic may have affected the very old (the average age of death from COVID-19 in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is 82), the real inequality comes with the difference between the salaried middle-aged population and those who are invariably younger who are just entering the job market, have little access to networks or are unable to work in industries hit particularly hard by the pandemic (for example, the hospitality industry).	The pandemic is likely to exacerbate issues in countries that are already struggling with weak institutional structures, and inequality between States is at risk of escalating. However, internally, difficulties of food distribution could exacerbate the vulnerability of older persons and the very young through increasing food scarcity. Afghanistan, for example, is the third most food insecure country in the world and closing borders to deal with the pandemic risks both deepening a food crisis and hampering humanitarian activity. It will disproportionately affect Afghanistan nationally but will hit children and older persons within the country, who are already badly affected, hardest. In that way, the pandemic creates a context in which more people could be left behind, which could, in turn, contribute to increases in conflict and fragility, as dissatisfaction mixes with longer-term drivers of conflict and the pool of potential recruits for conflict entrepreneurs increases.[i]

[a] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Achieving SDGs in the wake of COVID-19: scenarios for policymakers”, Policy Brief, No. 84 (August 2020).
[b] Transparency International, “Ensuring COVID-19 relief reaches Sri Lanka’s people”, 10 December 2020.
[c] Paul Tweedie and Carmen Soares, “And now, a bright spot: Timor-Leste weathers a pandemic”, Asia Foundation, 14 October 2020.
[d] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Recovering from COVID-19: Lessons from Past Disasters in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 2020).
[e] International Organization for Migration and UNDP, *Impact of COVID-19 on Social Cohesion in Iraq* (Baghdad, 2020).
[f] T. Hrynick, S. Ripoll and M. Schmidt-Sane, “Rapid review: vaccine hesitancy and building confidence in COVID-19 vaccination”, Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform, November 2020.
[g] See www.who.int/features/2014/community-stories-ebola/en/.
[h] Ibid.
[i] UNDP, *Recovering from COVID-19*.