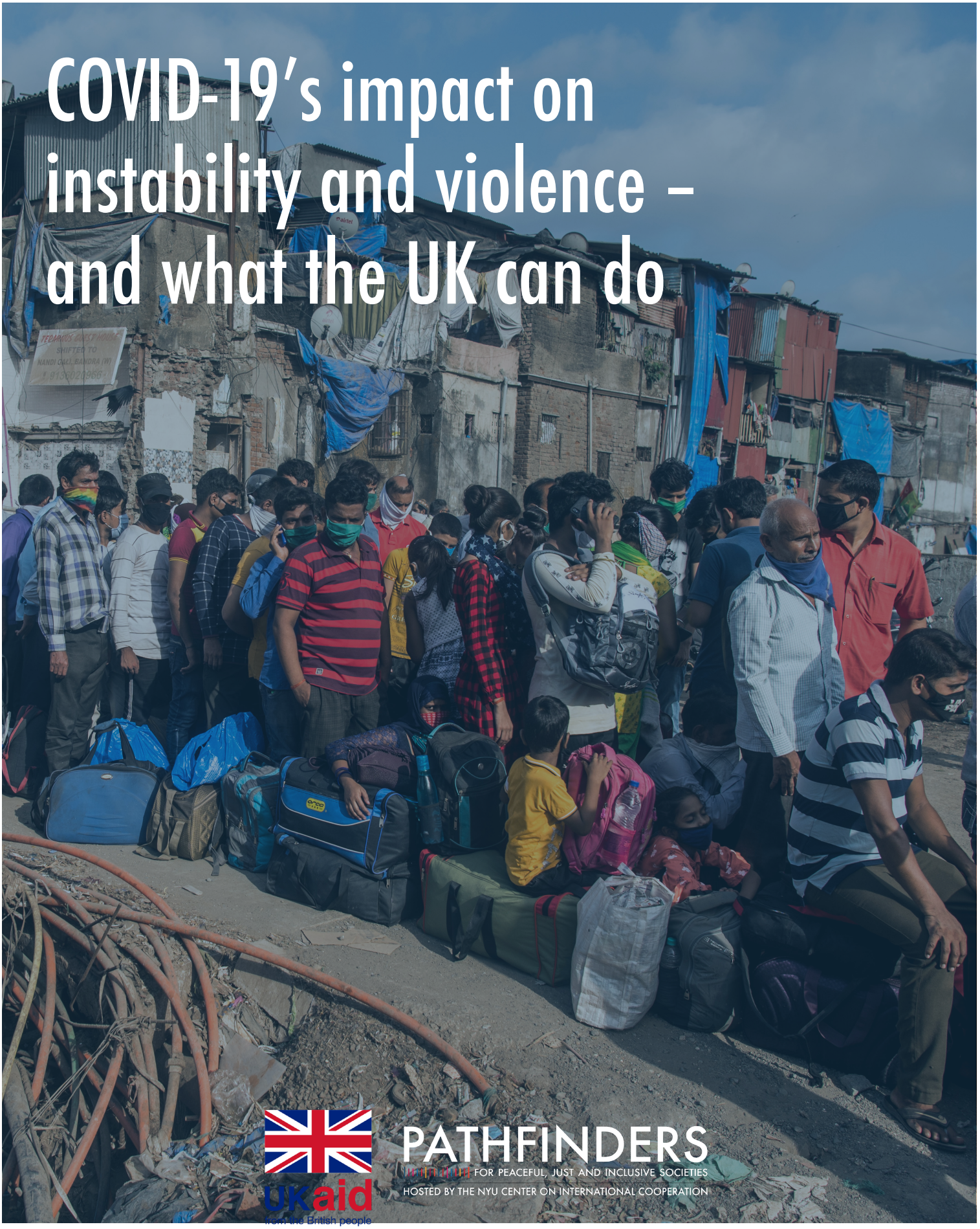
# COVID-19's impact on instability and violence – and what the UK can do



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# Key messages

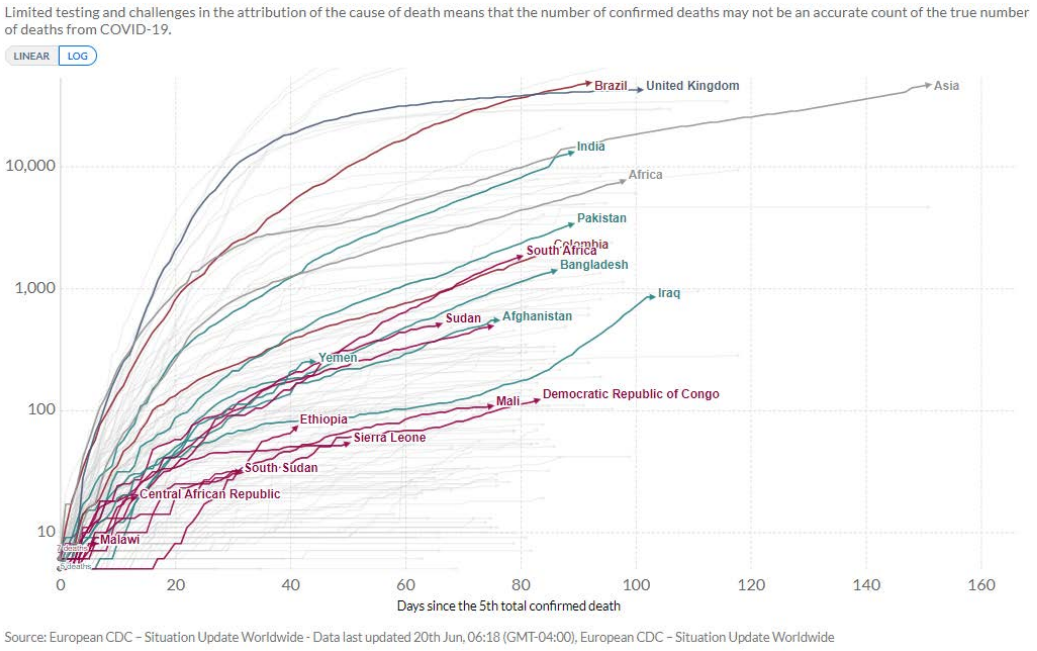
- There is still considerable uncertainty associated with COVID-19, the impact of lockdowns on social unrest, and the ways in which the disease and responses to it could exacerbate violence and conflict;
- Nevertheless, a major preoccupation is that the major powers are distracted by COVID-19 and that this could both reduce support for peace agreements, peacekeeping and development aid and lead to its uneven delivery;
- The decline in aid will occur against a backdrop of deepening geopolitical tension, with unevenly administered assistance unintentionally fuelling a combination of backlash, scapegoating and grievance, and potentially instability and insecurity;
- After short-term declines, conflict, extremist and criminal forms of violence are rising, especially in fragile countries and cities;
- Pandemic containment and lock-down measures reduced some forms of interpersonal violence, yet reinforced sexual and gender-based violence;
- The secondary effects of the COVD-19 pandemic—deepening inequality, rising unemployment, and food insecurity—could exacerbate insecurity and unrest;
- Weak and uneven service delivery and state repression could intensify instability and consolidate the authority of non-state armed groups;
- The UK could help lead a global coalition to halve violence by 2030 in partnership with like-minded governments, agencies and non-governmental organizations.
- Such an effort could involve setting-up a global fund to protect women and children affected by violence and real-time and multi-system analytics to track underlying risks, monitor grievances and signal unrest before they escalate into collective or organized violence; and
- Other priorities for the UK include mitigating secondary risks that will be even more disruptive and dangerous; supporting fair and proportionate health responses that do not exacerbate violence, ensure assistance generates co-benefits, including violence reduction, and engage with local governments and partners on the front-line.

## A disorderly and uncertain world

The primary effects of pandemics are devastating and often include soaring levels of morbidity and mortality. The secondary impacts of infectious disease outbreaks are often even more deadly. Pandemics not only lead to considerable excess deaths, they can deepen poverty, inequality, desperation and grievances. Spiralling death tolls and prolonged lock-down measures can undermine trust in government, disrupt formal and informal labour markets, deepen polarization and shift incentives for violence entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, premature openings of countries and cities can unintentionally precipitate new shocks and stresses with international and domestic implications. While all countries are vulnerable, these risks are amplified in fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings.

There is emerging scientific consensus that the COVID19 crisis will persist for years. Within just five months of being discovered, more than 5 million people have been infected and 300,000 people have died in 188 countries. Another 2.4 billion people are experiencing some form of lock-down. After ravaging some of the world's wealthiest countries, the pandemic's epicentre is shifting from the northern to the southern hemisphere, with worrying implications for cities and informal settlements in Latin America, Africa and Asia.[1] While there is considerable uncertainty about what comes next, the geopolitical, economic, and developmental ramifications of the pandemic could contribute to greater disorder.

*Figure 1. COVID-19 deaths in selected countries (June 20, 2020)*




Source: European CDC - Situation Update Worldwide

## Short-term impacts on violence

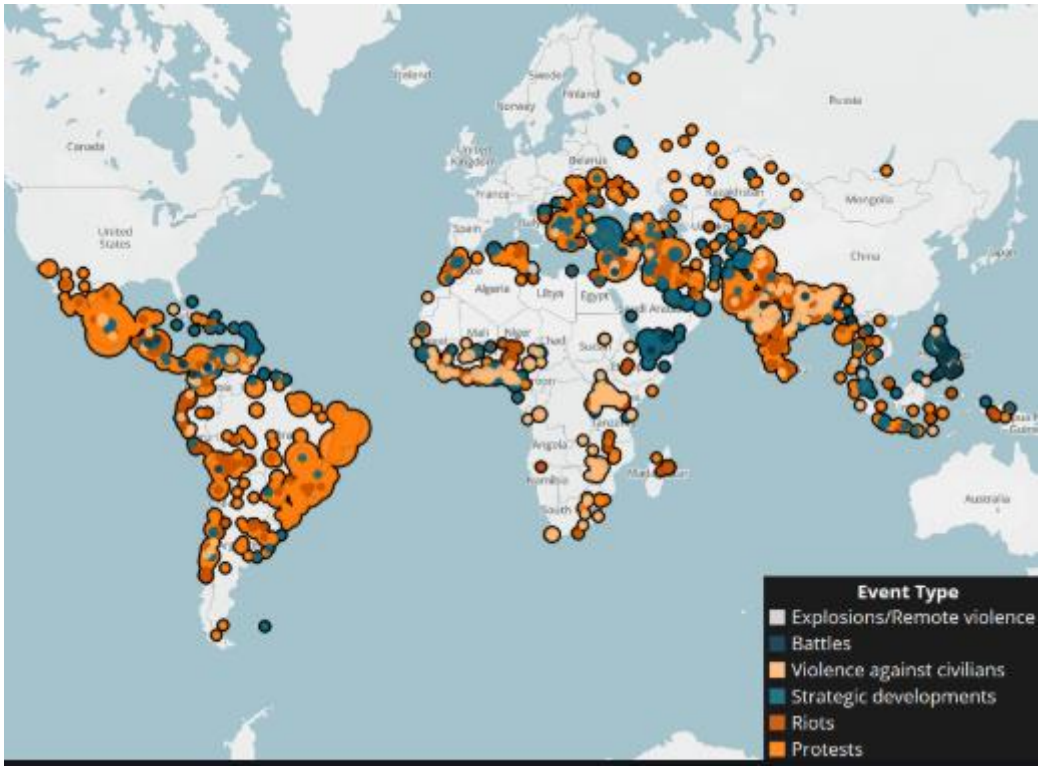
The COVID-19 pandemic—including state and non-state measures to contain and control it—will have mixed effects on fragility, conflict and violence.[2] Before discussing some possible outcomes, it is important to acknowledge that major data gaps persist when it comes to statistics on COVID-19 related infections, hospitalizations, fatalities and the incidence of violence. There are multiple reporting biases, time-lags and

categorization errors. What is more, there are also theoretical gaps: much is known about how violence can affect the spread of infectious diseases such as cholera or Ebola, but less is known about how pandemics affect violence in general, and organized violence in particular. Finally, despite major advances in forecasting conflict and violence and developments in artificial intelligence and machine learning, the field is still difficult and fraught. A measure of caution is called for when making predictions and projections.

At the outset, there are signs that COVID-19—and government attempts to contain it—contributed to declines in many types of **violent crime.** Specifically, during the first few months of the pandemic in early 2020, many countries actually registered declines of some various types of criminal violence after the imposition of physical distancing, quarantining measures and lockdowns to slow the virus.[3] In much of North America and Western Europe, for example, reported murder and many other violent crimes plummeted as people stayed at home. On the other hand, reported **domestic abuse and sexual violence** exploded.[4] There are currently signs that levels of criminal violence are climbing once more.[5] After experiencing a temporary lull, homicidal violence has started climbing in countries such as Brazil, El Salvador and South Africa.

There is also evidence that the pandemic is having limited effect on diminishing the frequency or intensity of **armed conflict**. Despite a recent call for a global ceasefire by the UN Secretary-General[6], political violence did not significantly decline between January and May 2020, even in countries that appeared initially receptive.[7] With some exceptions[8], conflict violence actually increased in most conflict-affected countries following the call for a ceasefire. Groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and the Taliban appear to have taken the opportunity to ramp-up disinformation campaigns and accelerate attacks against government and civilian targets. Likewise, drug cartels, criminal groups and gangs are also using the pandemic as an excuse to expand their influence and diversify into new markets.[9] Unsurprisingly, many non-state armed groups are not prepared to let a good crisis go to waste.

*Figure 2. Tracking COVID-19 related disorder*




Source: ACLED COVID-19 Disorder Tracker

The COVID19 pandemic, including government responses to it, is transforming the opportunity structure for states, non-state actors and individuals. For example, there are indications that **state repression** is rising, including efforts to enforce quarantine and shelter-in-place orders.[10] Prominent examples include Brazil, China, El Salvador, India, the Philippines and South Africa. The deployment of military and police personnel has the potential to undermine trust, escalate social unrest, and strengthen the power and influence of criminal groups, especially in lower- and middle-income settings. Likewise, organised crime groups such as cartels and gangs are facing increased competition owing to supply and demand shocks, and disputes over trade routes and distribution points are also contributing to explosive violence, not least in Mexico.[11]

## Longer-term impacts on security and stability

In the longer-term, there are risks that COVID-19 will accelerate organized and interpersonal violence. Part of the reason for this is the considerable **economic slowdown** that is expected later in 2020 and 2021.[12] The risks of rapidly escalating violence are especially acute in countries already affected by conflict or that are emerging from conflict.[13] This is due on the one hand to severe economic stress, especially low per capita income, unemployment and inequality that can deepen resentment and lower the opportunity costs of joining armed groups.[14] When economies are under stress, societies are more prone to predatory activities, including from local elites. It also opens space for armed groups—from rebels to cartels, gangs, and militia—to assert greater control and influence.[15] These risks are particularly destabilizing in countries where governments are heavily reliant on systems of patronage and are dependent on commodities such as oil.

Another factor that could rapidly exacerbate fragility, conflict and violence are **food supply shortages and associated food insecurity**. While supply chains have generally held in the first wave of COVID-19, there are likely major disruptions ahead in lower- and middle-income settings. These risks are exacerbated by climate-related threats. The World Food Program estimates that the pandemic could almost double the number of people suffering acute hunger and that over 265 million people could hence face acute food shortages by the end of 2020, most of them in countries already affected by conflict.[16] There are correlates between food insecurity[17], food price shocks[18] and social unrest and violence. COVID-19 has powerfully revealed the vulnerability of global supply chains, and the way their fragmentation can potentially exacerbate insecurity.

A major preoccupation is that the **major powers are distracted** by COVID-19. Notwithstanding debt relief and credit made available by the IMF and World Bank[19], it is likely that development assistance will shrink owing to austerity concerns. The diminished aid available may also be exposed to misallocation and diversion, not least due to more limited oversight, further exacerbating local grievances. The international aid community will be delivering assistance in areas with comparatively limited presence, some of which could be appropriated or manipulated by local elites and armed groups. That the decline in aid will occur against a backdrop of deepening geopolitical tension virtually guarantees that development cooperation will be even more fraught. The risk of nationalist and protectionist backlashes—on issues ranging from the export of food to the movement of migrants—is real.[20]

## An agenda for the UK

What the international community does in the coming years to prevent and reduce violence has monumental implications. The UK has a critical role to play in fostering **global cooperation** and reinforcing the value of multilateral approaches to stability.[21] Moreover, given its extensive experience in fragile settings, the UK could endorse a proactive and positive violence prevention and reduction agenda. A strong commitment to data-driven and evidence-based measures to comprehensively diminish violence in the short-term could yield major savings over the medium- to long-term.

The UK has an opportunity to assume a leadership role in the violence prevention and reduction agenda, including delivering on SDG16. Among the types of actions the UK could support is more robust endorsement of the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire and reductions in sexual and domestic violence which have yet to full take off.[22] Likewise, the UK could accelerate World Bank and IMF efforts to reduce debt payments and increase access to credit for IDA-eligible countries.[23] The UK could also help rally support both in the G7 and the G20, and other fora.[24] The UK would thus be a first mover in signalling and mitigating the rising threats that the pandemic poses to global peace and security.[25]

At a minimum, the UK and other partners should adopt a fragility, conflict and violence lens to infectious disease outbreaks. If they do not, they risk potentially deepening the risks of insecurity in areas where they operate. Such a perspective needs to be integrated at all stages from emergency response to recovery and rebuilding. This means ensuring that program interventions and resource allocations do not exacerbate existing tensions and cleavages or create new threats. Ideally, investments focused on COVID-19 should generate co-benefits – both in terms of strengthening health capacities while minimizing the vulnerabilities associated with collective and interpersonal violent outcomes. Indeed, mitigating the secondary effects of the pandemic could prove worthwhile investments in the longer-term. Building back better, requires designing-in measures and potentially even redundancies to comprehensively diminish violence in the short- and long-term.

Early and targeted measures can generate enormous savings in the long-term owing to the compounding effects of interpersonal and collective violence. For example, research produced by Pathfinders suggests even nominally successful interventions to prevent conflict and reduce violence can reduce the likelihood of war onset, while also saving hundreds of billions, even trillions, over the coming decade. Moreover, if the longer-term social and economic spill-over effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are to be avoided, cost-effective spending on 'what works' is more essential than ever. Achieving measurable reductions in violence requires sustained political leadership at the highest levels. National and subnational governments need to prioritize clear targets and metrics in their agendas, plans, and budgets to accelerate implementation.

Pathfinders has identified **several strategies** that help prevent and reduce violence.[26] It is urging governments, international agencies, non-governmental organizations, business actors and philanthropic groups to set a high-level goal to halve violence by 2030. This is an attainable goal. In recent decades, a combination of peace support operations and peacebuilding has helped deter armed groups and avoid the descent of some societies into organized political violence. Deaths associated with violent conflict have plummeted, especially in Africa. The mobilization of crime prevention measures such as focused deterrence and community policing, targeted investment in areas experiencing concentrated disadvantage, and youth programming have also led to sharp declines in homicide in parts of Latin America. Many countries achieved rapid reductions in violence against children, especially through early childhood intervention, after-school programs and even conditional cash-transfer schemes.[27]

Measures to support countries respond, recover and rebuild in the wake of COVID-19 must not exacerbate violence. There is a risk that efforts to assist might unintentionally empower political and criminal actors with a vested interest in sustaining violence. There is also evidence that strategies designed to minimize the risks of infection—including prolonged shelter in place and self-isolation measures—can have the effect of endangering women and children, in particular, who are forced to rely on abusive partners for social and economic support. Moreover, just as important as knowing what works is recognizing what does not. Aggressive, zero-tolerance policing, mandatory sentencing, so-called scared-straight interventions exposing young children to prisons and inmates, firearm buybacks, and slum clearance programs are either ineffective or make things worse.

## Strategic priorities to minimize violence

The UK is stepping-up to address the international threats and challenges raised by COVID-19. The UK has announced its intention to ramp-up relief and development support to 'vulnerable countries' and will take the lead in the G7 to ensure continued support. The focus of the UK on sustained humanitarian action, multilateral cooperation and country-level social protection is essential. Given the extensive experience of the UK in relation to conflict prevention and humanitarian response, there is much more it can do.

At the global and strategic level, the UK could:

**Assume a lead in driving multilateral cooperation on violence reduction.** In addition to support health systems and economic recovery, the UK could help lead an international agenda to halve violence by 2030 in partnership with like-minded governments, agencies and non-governmental organizations.[28] Leading such an agenda could entail setting-out an ambitious yet achievable goal such as halving violence by 2030; developing a set of basic metrics defining specific violence types (e.g. conflict-related violence and sexual and gender-based violence); and outlining best practices of what works to prevent and reduce violence at the regional, national and subnational scale.

**Consider establishing a global fund for universal social protection for the most vulnerable —including women and children affected by violence—targeting countries and cities most at risk.** The world needs to commit to massively ramping-up programs to prevent and respond to violence against women and children in particular. The UN Secretary-General has called for urgent action to protect women and children during the pandemic. The evidence for how to respond to this call is compelling.[29] Working with like-minded partners, the UK could accelerate these efforts by convening countries to contribute to a global fund.

**Develop real-time and multi-system analytics to detect risks of social unrest.** The international system needs a global insecurity monitoring system to track underlying risks, monitor grievances and signal unrest before they escalate into collective or organized violence. A shared platform drawing on machine learning, multiple data sources, and advanced forecasting techniques for analysing conflict risk has long been promised but not delivered.[30] The UK could support efforts to mobilize real-time mapping, remote sensing and digital data to assess emerging risks and hot spots. With the UK taking the lead, the monitor could inform early-warning systems, especially those for food insecurity and hunger, so that they become more sensitive to triggers such as spiralling unemployment, rising mistrust of government, unrest in prisons and more.

**Support the most violence-affected cities globally with rapid response advice and assessments and mobilize city actors for wider engagement on mitigating risks of instability.** Violence is often hyper-concentrated in cities and strategies to mitigate are often hyper-local. What is more, city leaders are also becoming increasing important actors in the multilateral system. The UK could scale-up technical support to front-line cities and could help mobilize them for positive collective action, including by leveraging city networks such as Peace in Our Cities and the Global Parliament of Mayors together with a range of international agencies operating in this space ranging from UN-Habitat to the World Bank.[31]

At the operational level, the UK can:

**Focus on the health emergency while mitigating secondary risks that will be even more disruptive and dangerous.** COVID-19 will overwhelm some health systems in lower- and middle-income settings – we have already seen this in Brazil, India and Nigeria. But the political, economic and social fall-out from the pandemic will be worse and longer-lasting. This means acting in the short-term and already designing in and preparing for risk mitigation in the long-term.

**Support approaches to contact tracing, isolation and quarantine that are proportionate and fair.** Government actions to contain COVID-19 will fall short of expectations in many parts of the world. Where services are perceived to be uneven or arbitrary, they can trigger grievances. Where support is wanting, they can unleash unrest. While they need to act fast and with determination, the UK must avoid supporting top-down moves that result in discrimination, especially in the most vulnerable low-income communities.

**Make violence reduction and stability a more deliberate objective of programming – or at very least minimize risk.** Big subsidies and movement of supplies can be exploited by political elites, armed groups and criminal actors. Isolation and shelter-in-place measures can unintentionally expand the vulnerability of women and children to intimate partner abuse and domestic violence. The UK must support balanced health responses, work closely with local governments, and engage fulsomely with civil society.

**Engage not just national, but also local governments and partners on the front-line.** City mayors, faith-based leaders and civic groups, and not centralized governments, have potentially more influence in shaping COVID-19 responses and violence reduction. They're key to initiating pro-health and pro-social changes in behaviour. They are also essential to building the architecture of lasting peace and stability.

**Recognize the power and influence of non-state actors involved in pandemic response but avoid laying the seeds of longer-term instability.** Many of the most vulnerable areas to COVID-19 are those with the most limited state capacity. This means working with front-line civic leaders and community-driven responses early. It may also mean engaging with rebels, gangs and militia, some of whom are active in the "relief" response. Finding ways to empower civil society, without exposing them or beneficiaries to risk, is both essential and challenging.

**Seize the opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.** Notwithstanding the tremendous pain and suffering generated by the outbreak, there are also entry-points for violence prevention and reduction. A good example are ceasefires, though as is widely apparent, these are difficult to sustain. Other possibilities include renegotiating elite pacts and expanding government legitimacy through service delivery.

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# Endnotes

[1] See https://theconversation.com/megacity-slums-are-incubators-of-disease-but-coronavirus-response-isnt-helping-the-billion-people-who-live-in-them-138092.

[2] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sV-ZCA30AU0 for a review of these impacts at the 2020 SIPRI Forum on Peace and Development.

[3] See https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/14/we-can-make-the-post-coronavirus-world-much-less-violent/.

[4] Criminologists theorize that restricted mobility and less street contact translates into fewer opportunities for interpersonal or property crime. Predictably, the confinement of people to their homes increases exposure to abusive partners.

[5] See https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/08/coronavirus-drug-cartels-violence-smuggling/.

[6] See https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20032.doc.htm and https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052.

[7] According to ACLED, participants in the ceasefire plea included parties in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Syria, Ukraine and India.

[8] ACLED reports that conflict violence decreased in the West Papua region of Indonesia. Likewise, conflict incidents associated with the ELN in Colombia remained stable during a one month unilateral ceasefire, but appear to be rising once more.

[9] See https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/covid-19-and-organized-crime-latin-american-governments-are-in-a-state-making-competition-with-crime/.

[10] See, for example, ACLED's COVID-19 Disorder map a https://acleddata.com/analysis/covid-19-disorder-tracker/

[11] See https://www.ft.com/content/99ca023c-c9d2-4263-a4ac-400d44568147

[12] See https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020

[13] See https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/covid-19-fragile-settings-ensuring-conflict-sensitive-response

[14] See Pierskalla and Roth (2020) COVID-19 and Conflict: A Literature Review, World Bank Background Paper.

[15] See https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/violent-disorder-is-on-the-rise-is-inequality-to-blame/

[16] See https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken.

[17] See Bruck, T. and D'Errico, M. 2019 "Food Security and Violent Conflict", World Development 117, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X19300130

[18] See de Winne, J. and Peersman, G. 2019 "The Impact of Food Prices on Conflict Revisited", Journal of Business and Economic Statistics, 31, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X19300130. See also https://www.ifpri.org/blog/do-high-food-prices-and-droughts-fuel-conflict.

[19] See https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/17/pr20168-world-bank-group-and-imf-mobilize-partners-in-the-fight-against-covid-19-in-africa.

[20] See https://www.ft.com/content/ed78b09c-80a3-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84.

[21] See https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/we-need-major-cooperation-on-global-security-in-the-covid-19-era/

[22] See https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972.

[23] See https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-world-bank-needs-to-make-fragility-a-central-priority-in-the-covid-19-era-97064.

[24] See http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2020/2020-g20-statement-0326.html.

[25] See https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/we-need-major-cooperation-on-global-security-in-the-covid-19-era/.

[26] See https://530cfd94-d934-468b-a1c7-c67a84734064.filesusr.com/ugd/6c192f_d6e85d11ce7d48d394d2a9e5c332c409.pdf.

[27] See http://www.knowviolenceinchildhood.org/announcement/flagship-report-launch.html.

[28] Guidance is already set-out in SDG16, and is strongly aligned with OECD and conventional multilateral and bilateral programming.

[29] Indeed, WHO, UNICEF, UN Women, the World Bank, ILO, ITUC and others are already united behind a common set of strategies and are working with governments on their implementation including the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children.

[30] The World Bank and UN have agreed in principle to undertake shared analysis of conflict risks. Groups such as ACLED and GREVD are providing crucial new insights.

[31] See https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/how-reducing-inequality-will-make-our-cities-safer.

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