

# Fragile states need support to fight COVID-19

by Nematullah Bizhan

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Daily Life in Herat, Afghanistan (Credit: United Nations Photo/Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Governments in fragile and conflict-affected countries, in contrast to many developed country governments, imposed stringent measures, such as locking down cities and preventing travel, at the very early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, James Marape, for instance, declared a state of emergency on 24 March after the country's first case of COVID-19 was confirmed. The perception is that if an outbreak can create a human tragedy in developed countries with advanced health systems – such as in the US, Italy and the UK – the consequences in fragile and conflict-affected societies will be far more dire.

While the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in fragile and conflict-affected countries is not high as yet, in part because of lack of testing and perhaps because of their proactive approach to contain the virus, these countries have already plunged into a deep economic crisis. **COVID-19 is likely to cause the first increase in global poverty** since 1998, when the Asian Financial Crisis hit.

Conflict has made an effective fight against COVID-19 unlikely. Countries afflicted with conflict lack state capacity to deliver adequate health services leaving the sector underdeveloped, poorly resourced and lacking skills and equipment. Conflict has increased the risk for medical personnel and support staff to deliver health services. Insurgents and rebels often block the delivery of health services in areas under their control. All this means that, for many, access to health services, even where they exist, can be problematic.

Calls for a humanitarian ceasefire to enable health services to address COVID-19 have not been honoured. For instance, the Taliban, which fights against the government in Afghanistan, has refused desperate calls by Afghan citizens, the Afghan government, the UN and other humanitarian organisations to agree on a ceasefire to facilitate the fight against COVID-19. On 12 May 2020, militants stormed a maternity hospital in **Kabul killing 24 people, including mothers, nurses and two babies** – a tragedy that shook Afghanistan. Likewise, despite the

announcement of an extension of a month-long unilateral ceasefire by the Saudi-led Coalition on 24 April to contain the pandemic, Houthi rebels, who control much of Yemen, also have refused to agree to a humanitarian ceasefire.

Unfortunately, containment strategies, such as lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus, have serious implications. They have limited economic interactions essential to employment and trade, leading to economic collapse, undermining livelihoods and increasing extreme poverty and hunger. When [Adila, a widow who looks after her three children](#), lost her job due to the lockdown in Kabul, she was advised by a colleague to be careful not to get sick. Her response was: 'Before the virus kills us, we will be killed by hunger.'

The pandemic is not over yet. It started in developed economies, and yet its long-run trajectory in fragile and conflict-affected countries is unknown. To mitigate the risks, fragile and conflict-affected countries still need smart containment strategies, including appropriate health and economic strategies. Support for vulnerable households is crucial. At this stage, as some economies are easing restrictions, recovery strategies are crucial. However, these countries have limited fiscal space and many of their existing resources are already diverted from development to emergency responses. This process can have adverse implications for development and stability as more people lose jobs, access to food and basic services, a situation which could be exacerbated if health crises and lockdowns in developed economies and donor countries are either prolonged or reintroduced.

Developed countries have become preoccupied by tackling the pandemic at home. A sharp decline in the flow of foreign aid to fragile and conflict-affected societies is likely. But international cooperation is needed more than ever, not only through aid, but also debt relief, and arrangements to make sure that any vaccine is made available to all as a global public good.

The world, more than at any other time, is in need of cooperation and collaboration to contain the pandemic. Fragile and conflict-affected countries need comprehensive programs of support in the form of direct assistance to health systems and support to failing economies. Given that these countries have limited fiscal space, this situation makes the role of foreign aid crucial in these countries in the fight against COVID-19.

*This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and international development](#) series.*

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